Brewing A Plot Press

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## Wander Forbade

Fairy or no, friend or foe  
And the one with the bow in hand.

Bluebells, broken telltales of the wood.  
In the moonlight’s glimmer, wander forbade.

In the glade, horror awaits.  
Stay the hand that desecrates.

Because you could,  
Doesn’t mean that you should

Watch the fairies in the night’s dead.  
Watch them sacrifice in the cold moonlight.

Fairy or no, friend or foe  
And the one with the bow in hand.

# Part One Whispering Woods

## Chapter

I spotted a teen a few years younger than me doing keepy uppies with a football on her empty driveway. She looked up, distracted, and the ball rolled out onto the pavement. I went for it without thinking, missed, and it slipped through my legs.

“Hi,” she called out, sprinting past me, her blue neon streaks in her hair bobbing along when she ran. An open red coat flapped behind her.

“Sorry,” I shouted, mortified. I hid a lame bunch of bluebells behind my back. People thought I was odd for liking plants.

She leapt on the ball in the nick of time, just before it disappeared under a parked car. “It’s OK.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Sports isn’t your thing?”

“No,” I agreed. “But I can see it’s yours. Are you in a team?”

“Yeah, two actually, school and the club, not that I’m bragging.” She kicked the ball super lightly in my direction. Shoot! I wasn’t that bad, was I? This time I stopped it easily.

“Yeah, you are,” I joked, as she nodded for me to pass her the ball back.

“OK. Maybe.” She smiled wickedly, returning to her keepy uppies. I wasn’t worried about hiding the flowers anymore. “Are you one of the new family in number six?” she asked.

“How did you guess?”

“Newbie vibes. I’m Miya, she/her. That’s my house, obvs.” She gestured to one of the posh clone houses on the estate, which looked too prim and proper. “Stacy, is it?”

“Yeah. She/her too.”

“Have you been into the woods?” she asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “It’s fun.”

She pointed to the flowers in my hand. “I don’t think you’re supposed to pick bluebells.”

“Oh,” I said.

“They’re under conservation.”

“Opps. My bad,” I said.

“That wood is always in my dreams. It’s super creepy,” Miya said. “Be careful.”

“Why?”

She hesitated, her lips smacking together. She gave up, saying nothing. What was she afraid of? A sting on my leg screamed for attention. I bent to scratch it. “Are you going to St Mary’s in September?” Miya asked instead.

I nodded, as crushing weight settled on my chest.

“I go there. ’S not bad,” she said. “Are you OK?”

I wiped my blurry, teary eyes and showed her the sting I’d just gotten. “I should probably go,” I said.

“See you around,” she replied.

At home, my leg itched like crazy and no amount of scratching helped. I yanked at the locked door of the medicine cabinet. Mum had hidden the key again, her paranoia at its finest. I phoned her. It rang forever before she answered.

“Stacy? What’s wrong?”

“Where’s the key to the medicine cabinet? I stung myself.”

“How?” Mum asked.

“Stinging nettles. I was exploring,” I said, wincing as I scratched my calf until it bled.

“Exploring, huh? That sounds better than moping around. Where did you go?” said Mum.

I glanced at the bluebells I’d stuffed in a tumbler on the bathroom sill. An icy breeze, sharp as winter, brushed my face from their petals, carrying a faint scent of ash. I shivered, heart racing. Flowers don’t do that, right? “A local wood,” I said. “It’s not far. Actually, it’s –”

“Stacy. Er,” she paused apologetically. “Sorry, to cut it short, I’ve a meeting. Just don’t touch the paracetamol, yeah?” she said.

“Not this again,” I snapped, rolling my eyes. “Where’s the key?” Mum’s been paranoid since my friend Jasmine, who we all called Jas for short, overdosed last year. “I’m serious,” said Mum, her voice tight.

“I’m serious too, Mum, it’s old news and I’m not Jas,” I said. Things had moved on. Didn’t she know Jas wasn’t even talking to me? She was supposed to *know* these things. She was my mum.

“I know you’re not Jas,” Mum interrupted, irritably.

“So what’s the problem? I’m not going to overdose. I’m your daughter, Stacy, remember?” She’d been so busy lately at work. My life was just a fade burn on a screen and she wasn’t helping.

“Bedroom drawer, under the socks. I’ll be late home tonight, okay?”

“Whatever.”

“Bye,” Mum said, already distracted.

The line went dead. I sighed. Where was her head at these days?

I grabbed the key from her sock drawer and opened the medicine cabinet. I eyed the paracetamol. This week was a nightmare, a new house, no friends, just me drowning in anxiety. Jas and Anjali ghosted me like I was trash. Did Mum even see how much I was falling apart? If ever there was a time for the paracetamol…no, it was no joke. In the wake of Jas’s near-death experience, both Anjali and I often thought about it, but I choked up just thinking about how cut up it’d make my parents and my friends feel if I did that to them.

Instead, I seized the cardboard carton containing cream and rubbed it into my sting. Ah! So soothing. Better already.

I glimpsed my pale reflection in the bathroom mirror and wondered, not for the first time, who I was. Black streaks ran through my blonde hair dye. Should I grow it back to black and look a bit more like Mum?

I passed the spare room, soon to be my parents” office-slash-gym, and stopped. Its sunny yellow walls mocked my ugly bedroom. Another reason they loved this stupid house, along with its shorter commute.

Downstairs, there was no milk in the fridge. Toast stuck to the roof of my mouth. A few mouthfuls, and I threw the rest away, my stomach churning.

No way was I staying in that puke-green bedroom, either. I flopped onto the living room sofa, scrolling through my phone. Zero texts, not even a snap from Jas or Anjali. My throat tightened as I swiped past their Insta stories, smiling without me. Jas used to spam me with memes when I was down. Now? Nothing. I tossed my phone aside, heart sinking.

Her words still rang in my ears from days ago. “Unbelievable! You’re such a selfish cow! How can we possibly be friends?”

Anjali, ever concerned for her, ran after Jas, leaving me there, wishing the ground would open up. Could I have put it to her more gently? Probably. The move sucked.

As yet, Jas hadn’t forgiven me. I’d texted her and Anjali. Anjali had answered, but only the once:

Sorry, I can’t deal with this.

What kind of response was that? I hadn’t asked to move schools. It wasn’t my fault. It was my parents” decision. I added in our group chat, *three amigos*:

Guess I’m invisible now, huh?

My phone vibrated, and I answered it. It was Jas.

“Hello? Jas?”

She hung up almost instantly. I phoned her back a few times, but it went straight to voicemail. Was she having second thoughts?

## Chapter

At seven, Dad’s car hummed into the drive. He collapsed onto a kitchen stool, mopping his brow.

“Hi, Stace. Good day?”

“No,” I mumbled.

“No?” He smiled, eyes wide. “This place is great. There’s a family a few doors down. Their daughter is a couple of years younger than you, Miya, I think. Why not introduce yourself?”

“We’ve met,” I said. “You’d like her. She’s into footie.”

“Oh, someone after my own heart,” he joked. “I’m sure you’d be good at footie if you just applied yourself.”

“’S not happening,” I said. I pulled a face of disgust, but he wasn’t paying attention. He shuffled through some paint swatches before he stood up. I left him to get on with making his dinner.

Mum stormed in at nine and staccatoed straight into the kitchen with her work high-heels. She had nagged about marks on the parquet flooring only yesterday.

Dad was watching a repeat on telly and I mooched into the kitchen. Mum, I don’t know why she was crying, had cracked open a weird egg, where the yoke and the egg white were red with blood.

Yuck! Our science teacher had told us that a chicken’s egg was equivalent to its period, but the egg Mum was staring at had been fertilised. It had held on to the possibility of life for some time, maybe with a tiny, unseen foetus inside.

Mum brushed away her tears and drew her straggling hair behind her ears. Sniffing, she threw the egg away. She washed the frying pan before she rooted around, I guess to find a spatula in some of the moving-in boxes around the dining room table. In the end, she gave up and settled for a soup spoon. She cracked the shell of two new eggs into the pan.

“Um, yum,” I muttered.

Mum looked up. Had she not wanted me to see she was crying? “How’s your sting?” she said, brushing her lips against my cheek with a quick kiss. She couldn’t look me in the eye.

Our new kitchen was clinical and bare. My eyes roamed from surface-to-surface. “Mum? Our chat earlier, it wasn’t great. Can you please not talk about Jas overdosing anymore? It was ages ago.” I wondered if this was a bad time.

She gestured for me to show her my sting, and I obliged, twisting round to give her a better view of my calf.

“Mum? Are you listening?”

“Uh-huh.” She nodded and when she saw my expression, she said, “I’m listening.”

“No one at school talks about it and I don’t want to keep thinking about it. Jas’s not talking to –”

“And what about all the parents? Are they just meant to ignore it? Pretend it didn’t happen? It’s not that easy.”

I couldn’t believe what she was saying, and I didn’t know how to respond.

“You’d better put some more ointment on the sting tonight before you go to bed.”

“OK. I’ll do that if you stop hiding the key to the medicine cabinet. I’m not a baby, you know.” I glanced at the expansive white of the fridge door. Normally, Mum and Dad kept artworks of mine there. It was like I’d been erased.

“I know. Have you started any revision yet?” Mum asked.

“No. I’ll do it when I’ve unpacked.”

“When will that be?”

“Soon,” I mumbled.

“Soon? You haven’t spent a day in bed again? You said you were out exploring, or did you get that sting another way?”

“No, I wasn’t in bed, but so what?” I said, shrugging.

A breeze whipped in through the open window and I shivered, the ash swirling like coiled snakes around us. A voice whispered, “Come to the wood.”

What was that? “Did you hear something?” I asked.

“No. Stop dodging,” Mum snapped, her voice sharp.

“You don’t care. You never cared!” I spat, my voice cracking as Mum’s silence stabbed deeper than any words could. Her gobsmacked glare only fuelled my rage. The ash stung my eyes like bitter tears. How could she not see it? “You ripped me from my life, my friends, and didn’t even ask me if I wanted to come to this hellhole!”

“Hellhole? Hang on a minute.” She looked confused. “What?” Her eyes flickered, not with anger, but something softer, like guilt. Then it was gone. “Stacy, that’s not–”

I watched, distracted, as the ash streaked behind me and out towards the rest of the house. The kitchen door slammed shut on the breeze’s exit. We both jumped.

“What was that?” Dad opened the door.

Mum turned away and pressed the tips of her fingers into one side of her worried brow. Her eggs were hissing, totally burnt. The fire alarm jolted us all out of our skins. “What now!” Mum shouted. She threw her utensil to the kitchen counter and buried her hands in her hair.

Dad quickly lifted the utensil from the counter, bounded out of the room, and hushed the fire alarm. On his return, he strolled right past me to Mum’s side, turned off the cooker, and placed her utensil back on the counter. He squeezed one of her shoulders with his hand and her posture visibly relaxed. She attempted to scrape her eggs off the bottom of the pan with the soup spoon. What was wrong with Mum? With them? The soup spoon was useless.

“Mum, it’s not going to work. Try a knife,” I suggested.

“Ryan,” she mumbled, as though I wasn’t there. I could still hear the alarm ringing, an echo siren in my ears. “I can’t deal with this. Tell her.”

“What, right now? Don’t you think she needs to calm down?”

“No. Next week,” said Mum, sarcastically. She threw the soup spoon to the counter and he grabbed a knife from the draw.

“Here,” he said, handing it to her.

“Of course right now,” she said, attacking the bottom of the pan with the knife. “If she wants to be treated like an adult, then she can flaming well hear us out.” Steely undertones were creeping into her voice.

“Fine. You don’t have to be sarcastic, Clara. I get it.” Then he said to me, “We asked you. Don’t you remember? We asked how you would feel if we moved to a town with better train links between work,” Dad said in a placating voice.

“And I said it was OK. But not to here.” I could hear the whining in my voice, and I tried to speak more calmly. “You didn’t ask me if I wanted to move here. You did it all in secret.”

“Don’t be silly, you were at school,” Mum said.

“Didn’t you think I’d want to have a say? You hardly care that I now can’t go to the same school.”

“Come on. That’s not fair,” said Dad. “We weren’t sure. It wasn’t until we’d decided–”

“You decided,” I interrupted him.

“It’s a long way to go daily to Deanview,” said Dad. “And we’ve already accepted the offer to St. Mary’s Academy. It would be a shame to find another school.”

“I don’t want another school. Don’t you get it? I don’t care how far away it is. I just want to go to Deanview with my old friends, and live in our old house. You two are *so* selfish!” I stormed out.

## Chapter

I pounded up the stairs and banged my bedroom door shut. It wasn’t *my* door or *my* bedroom. It had been a dog’s den before we’d moved in. Literally! I wrinkled my nose as the rank smell of urine filled my senses.

I flopped down on my bed, taking in the unfamiliar olive carpet, the vomit green wallpaper. It was like the room was sick of itself.

I shut my eyes, trying to block out memories of my old bedroom, but they lingered. A stray tear escaped my eyes and my chest filled with longing.

My gaze fell to the side of the door frame, which was missing a make-shift height chart that Dad had drawn on, year after year, for as long as I could remember.

Because my parents didn’t want the new owners to be stared at by students, I spent two hours removing faces from the walls of my old bedroom. It was an art assignment from school. Closeups of Jas’s and Anjali’s face were in multiple shots.

That room, my bedroom, had been mauve and beautifully lit, with a string of tiny fairy-figure lights draped high against the walls. The fairy obsession had left long ago, but I still kept several professional artists” illustrations of them in my collection. They focused on realistic and interesting blemishes that made the images appealing. More like people I wanted to inspire me, than the retouched, picture-perfect models in lifestyle magazines that Anjali’s stepmum left everywhere around their house. Jas raved endlessly about the mainstream mags too, even though they were less than representational, with hardly any women of colour like Jas. The mags favoured lighter skin, straight hair, and slim figures. This differed from Jas; who had a frizzy hair and darker skin tone. She wasn’t slim, but she wasn’t fat either. Neither Jas nor Anjali needed to diet and Anjali, who came from an Indian family, was already as thin as a lollipop-stick, but she was stuck in a loop of calorie counting, copying her white stepmum’s “dieting journey” on social media. I clicked on her stepmum’s social. It was no carbs today. Brutal. Poor Anjali.

Jas was a trend-setter; I was just a follower. Why had I echoed her? My parents were selfish, but they didn’t get it. I hadn’t told them my friends had ditched me. Starting a new school at fourteen felt like a punch to the gut. Everyone else would have their cliques. I’d be the odd one out, stared at, whispered about. Loser.

Angrily, I turned on my music from my paired phone and amped up the volume on my Bluetooth speakers.

One of my parents banged on the ceiling below with a broom handle, urging me to keep it down.I pretended I hadn’t heard and cranked it up. I half danced, half unpacked, but it wasn’t easy. Most of my things were still in boxes. Boxes in the box room, as if they were Russian dolls, keeping my heart inside and my memories from spilling out. Opening a box, I was confronted by a bestie bear, a gift from Jas and Anjali, a few years ago. I couldn’t even look at it without my stomach knotting. Was I naïve to think our friendship would last forever? Angrily, I flung it into the bin.

“Keep it down!” My dad knocked on my bedroom door. I ignored him. “Stacy! Hey! Stacy, can I come in?”

“No!” I shouted, but he came in.

“Look, I’m busy unpacking,” I said, pointing at the boxes by the wall.

“That’s fine, but keep it down. Can I talk to you for a minute? Turn the volume down, yeah?”

I turned it down. “What is it?” I asked.

He sat on the end of my bed and I quit unpacking. “Come on, Stacy. It’s not fair what you said to your mum. You know she only wants the best for you, right?”

I sighed and nodded, though I was aching inside, and a small part of me doubted it.

“She’s having a hard time right now.”

“She’s having a hard time! What about me? I’m not listening to this.” I stood up, preparing to do more unpacking, cranking up my speakers.

“Do you want me to take them away?” he shouted over the noise.

“No! Get lost!”

“Excuse me?”

I ground my teeth and growled, “I said get lost.”

“Right!” he declared, rising to his feet. “That’s it. No daughter of mine is speaking to me like that.”

He went for my speakers, ripping the plug from the wall.

“No!” I wailed. “You can’t do that!” Suddenly, the room was sharply silent as the speakers lost their Bluetooth connection.

“What do you want from me? Go away!” I demanded.

“You don’t have to be so melodramatic. I figured you’d be receptive and mature enough to grasp some things. Maybe I was wrong.” He paused. “Why don’t you do some painting or something else? You’re clearly not going to get much unpacking done tonight. You used to enjoy painting.”

“What am I, five?” I grunted.

“Fine. Whatever.” He left the room with my speakers in his hand.

I lobbed some of my belongings from a box at the closed door. I upturned another box and hurled the contents straight on to the floor. They crashed and spilled together as they fell out at once.

What on earth could Dad mean? I wanted to run down the stairs and ask him, tell him I was mature. But I was also annoyed. No way was I going to go crawling to him. Parents weren’t supposed to get problems. They were supposed to fix them.

In the pile, I discovered my paints and a couple of brushes. I didn’t want to admit that Dad was right, but I used to enjoy painting. It calmed me. I looked around briefly, but couldn’t find my painting pad.

A peeling piece of wallpaper beckoned to me, and I had an idea. Gripping the rough-edged paper in line with my eyes, I peeled it off as it crackled and fuzzed. I was fed up with putrid green. Mum and Dad had both promised they’d help me re-decorate, but I had a feeling it wouldn’t be soon.

After I stopped removing the wallpaper, most of the wall was covered in yellow lining paper, although parts revealed the blue paint underneath.

I painted thin brushstrokes on the wall, forming the image of a cliff. In a few places, the paint bled and spread outwards. At the bottom of the cliff, I dotted jagged rocks and coloured the outline of dark waves washing over them. Below that, the rest of the wall gave way to blue. On the edge of the cliff, I painted a tiny figure, looking out at the birds, their wings and bodies formed with m shapes in the sky. The figures arms were outstretched, ready to fall or fly.

I stared at my painting through tear-filled eyes and then turned off the light. Exhausted, I collapsed into bed, the wood’s strange whispers haunting my dreams.

## Chapter

A cold moon hung like a judgmental eye over unfamiliar houses, its light slicing through my restless heart. I soared through a star-strewn night, drawn to the wood I’d wandered through earlier that day, a pull I couldn’t name. Inside its shadowed embrace, I drifted down beside the stream, its icy water shimmering with secrets. I could taste its pulse, wild and ancient, like the breath of a thousand unseen wings.

Across the stream, tiny fairies flickered into view, their golden glow pulsing like living embers. Why hadn’t I seen them earlier today? Chills ran through me, despite the warm lamps dangling from the tree boughs. I wanted to cross, but fear rooted me in place. Then, a clearing opened ahead, a massive table gleamed with crystal glasses and plates heaped with strange, blood-red fruits. The air reeked of sweet berries. I coughed, but I didn’t care.

“Come to the wood,” the air whispered. I stepped toward the stream, but it surged into a roaring river. Dread hit me hard. Pebbles turned to massive rocks, water crashing against them. My excitement to swim across dwindled. Even for the best of swimmers, it was a daunting challenge. And my skills sucked. Although I projected an image of confidence, I was terrified of swimming more than a few strokes. It was mortifying.

Maybe I wouldn’t have to swim. No, all I had to do was fly. It was easy. The fairies could do it. I had flown here after all. But how had I managed that without wings?

I calmed myself, taking a deep breath. All I had to do was believe. Jumping high into the air, I was flying. I really was. Even as I thought about it, my body plummeted, stealing the scream from my lips.

I broke the surface a few seconds later, kicking to stay afloat, but exhaustion set in as I fought to remain above water. I gasped and sputtered, sinking again into the icy, bottomless chasm. The frigid cold bit into my skin, muscles, and heart. I ached all over.

Something brushed against me in the dark. Something freezing and wet. Wait, was it a rock? A powerful current overwhelmed me, and I swam frantically.

Smack! A searing pain shot through my back and lungs as I hit the rock anyway. Nobody would grieve for me. No one would know how I died.

I needed air! I had to fight it!

My mind soared, but my body stayed rooted. My legs felt numb. Motionless. I needed those stupid limbs to kick. Why weren’t they working? Why!

Then, grasping on to every thought and emotion I had ever experienced, I tugged against my sinking body. I wanted to live. I needed to live.

Light radiated from within me as I broke free from my physical body. I was rising out of the shimmering water. No, the water wasn’t shimmering. I was! My hands were not my hands as I had known them, but were tendrils of light and my legs spread as if they were infinite magical ribbons.

My old body drifted below and I didn’t understand what was happening. I was beautiful, happy, loved. Suddenly, I knew who I was, and there was no more searching.

## Chapter

The shimmering light in me vanished. The sweaty darkness of my lumpy, stale pillow suffocated me, and I coughed. It was a dream, that was all. It wasn’t real. So why did I feel so choked up?

My calf wouldn’t stop itching, no matter how hard I scratched. I was a prisoner in my flesh. My awkward body felt like a cage, preventing me from expressing or experiencing the potential I knew I had, a feeling I’d had before. My mind longed to break free of it. Was this what being a teenager was all about, or was this something more?

I fumbled in the dark for my bedside lamp, but couldn’t find it. Nor my phone. Where were they?

I stood up, hitting my head on a shelf. My head seared with sharp pain and I reeled dizzily.

Of course! I hadn’t found my bedside light in the moving boxes yet, and I’d left my phone on charge. It typically sat on my bedside cabinet, yet the closest plug socket was now far away. Not only that, but I had fallen asleep crying. Oh, no! The arguments, frustrations, and fear of not being heard all came flooding back. Mum and Dad still hadn’t apologised. They left me to simmer in my own juices.

There was a faint light between my bedroom door and its frame. I walked over to it, found the light switch, and flicked on the light.

While my eyes adjusted to the light of the harsh bare ceiling bulb, I glimpsed my calf. The rash was returning with a vengeance, and I desperately wanted to scratch it again. Was it a delayed reaction to the ointment?

This house was empty, just pain and no escape. I stared at my cliff painting; the figure teetering on the edge. That was me, ready to fall or fly. I couldn’t keep living like this. *If* there really were fairies in the wood, *if* my dream were true, then I would find them.

My trainers and coat were downstairs, close to the front door. Before leaving my room, I gathered my keys, my phone and a torch. The torch battery was low, and the light faint. However, this proved helpful in navigating past my parents” room, whose door was usually open while they slept. Mum quietly murmured in her sleep, but it was drowned out by Dad’s snoring, as loud as a pneumatic drill. Through the open window, their nets were flying outwards into the night, beckoning me outside. My dream had felt so real. I had to find out.

## Chapter

My torchlight danced over bluebells, their neon glow screaming otherworldly. Other than the trees creaking and the stream trickling, there was no other sound but my own footsteps. The wood was eerily still, but I wasn’t backing down.

I stopped and stood next to the stream, pointing my torch towards the opposite bank. There was nothing there in the darkness. Obviously, there were trees, but nothing unexpected. I guided my light up and down the length of the stream. Still nothing. It was disappointing.

Faint voices stopped me from turning back. I eyed the stream, too wide for one jump. I backed up, ran, and leapt, landing on the soft bank. My trainer caught the water, soaking my leg.

In the distance were beings I’d not seen before. Were they fairies? It was so strange that they’d not been visible until I’d crossed over the stream. Magic? It had to be.

To get near them, I struggled through the dark, wading through the knee-high ferns and brambles. I nearly fell, yet upon looking up, I saw they hadn’t left.

These fairies differed from the ones in my dream. These had wings, but their bodies weren’t as delicate or small as how I had dreamt them. They were as tall as children and they looked like children, except for their wings.

I switched off my torch, careful not to attract their attention. I continued past some trees, then took cover behind one to observe the incredible scene.

In a clearing ahead, lanterns swinging from branches illuminated fairies dressed in the colours of autumn. They were assembled around a mound, roughly two-meters wide, by half a meter high.

An illuminated globe zipped over my head with a buzzing sound, and I dodged. Many more of them were seen flying about in every direction. What were they? Heads ducked in the row of fairies, as another globe dived towards them.

Even stranger looking than the rest, a fairy stood next to an altar on the mound. Her legs and wings were hazy, pale. A ghost fairy?

Yet, from her stomach up to her head and her arms, she looked solid. Long black locks fell from her head and curled above her bosom, which was clothed in a scarlet red corset. Her purple skirt, like a wave, shifted into shades of what may have been gold, now yellowed with age. She was taller than the others too and older.

As the ghostly fairy flung out her arms, a sliver of something silver flashed sharply against a big low moon. It was a dagger in her hand. Beneath her, a young girl was tied up to a huge rock altar. The girl writhed in dirty clothes, her hair a tangled mess.

With trembling hands, the ghostly fairy gripped the dagger above the girl as she proclaimed, “My fairies! The hour has come!” Everything stilled. Even the girl froze, turning pale and limp. The ghostly fairy continued. “This trespassing human, this child of axe-men, must be erased to cleanse our woods!”

“Yes!” responded the crowd of fairies. Even from here, some had cheeks of baby fat that one would normally only see on the face of a child. My stomach twisted. Were they brainwashed?

“My fairies, we will not be lost. We will stand until the end of eternity!” she shouted like a battle cry, throwing her arms up high. Then she lowered the dagger, heart bound, ready at any moment to kill the girl.

The girl’s face widened with terror. I held my breath, urging the fairy not to go through with it. I wanted to help the girl, but I was a trespasser too. They could do the same to me.

I fumbled for my phone to call emergency services, but I had no signal. Sick to my stomach, I turned my back on this horrible spectacle, my heart pounding. What could I do?

When I next turned and looked into the glade, the fairies were dancing round her at speed, a blurred flurry of wings encircling the girl.

I couldn’t just stand there. She was like me, scared, alone. I grabbed a stick, my hands shaking, and whispered to myself, “Come on, Stacy, you can do it!” If I could distract them, maybe she’d have a chance. I mean, fairies? Seriously?

As I charged forwards, I spotted a lone man in brown robes by the side of the group of fairies. He looked straight at me, and I froze, his eyes cutting through the dark. It was as if we were the only two conscious of one another in this disgusting display of fairy supremacy. I’m sure a frown of recognition split across his forehead, then it was gone. How did he know me? Unexpectedly, he rushed towards me, in a blur of movement, unnaturally fast. What the–

I bolted, hearing the words he hissed, ringing in my ears, “Stay away or you’ll be next!”

## Chapter

I slept till noon, stomach growling. Downstairs, a note on the kitchen island read:

Sorry, Stacy. Wanted to talk, but you were asleep. Check my voicemail. Forgive us? Let’s go to Pi’s Pizzas soon. Money’s here for dinner. Mum. x

Pi’s Pizzas was my favourite restaurant, but I wasn’t ready to forgive them, not by a long shot. Nor to forgive the fact that Dad had so easily taken Mum’s side over mine.

I’d hunted for my phone before going to bed last night, suspecting I had lost it somewhere in the wood. I couldn’t listen to Mum’s voicemail even if I wanted to. Had any of last night been real? Only the dirt on my PJs and coat made me think it was more than a dream. I had to get my phone back.

In the afternoon, I psyched myself up, but couldn’t bring myself to visit the wood to search for my phone. I went for a short walk instead, to stretch my legs and clear my head. Soon enough, I saw a pair of missing children posters attached to lampposts. I stopped dead in my tracks. Perhaps they were strolling down the street just like me. A chill shot down my spine. I rushed home, checking over my shoulder. No way was I letting some creep kidnap me. Who does that to kids?

I was staring at today’s chat, curled up at the foot of my bed. I angrily flipped Dad’s laptop lid down, hiding the words I had left Jas and Anjali:

Can we talk, please?

They had both seen it, but neither had responded. Was I looking too needy? I didn’t care.

My fingers typed furiously:

Stop acting as though I don’t exist!

They saw, but didn’t react.

I typed:

Now I know what real friends are and you’re not it.

The curser flashed and my hand hovered over the “enter” key. No. After pressing the “back” key, I typed instead:

I thought we were friends.

Neither Jas nor Anjali said anything in response.

Bathed in orange and pink, the setting sun dipped below the horizon, leaving a dark grey sky. My stomach rumbled. The house smelled strongly of garlic and chili after my online food order (placed using Dad’s laptop), yet I couldn’t eat. The delivery guy had given me a puzzled look, as I sized him up for kidnapper vibes before I took the box. It was still sitting unopened on my bed.

I felt a shiver as the evening air, cool from the window I’d left open, touched my shoulders. A sharp smell of ash forced me to press my elbow against my nose. Where was that scent coming from? Was it the wood? I rushed over to the window and shut it along with the curtains.

Returning to the floor by my bed, I pondered the man and the fairies. Was there a link between the missing children and the fairies? Was I losing my mind? The fairies seemed so real. Where had the sacrificed girl come from? Was she going about her life as usual, when they took her?

If I still had Jas and Anjali as friends, I might have talked it over with them, but all I had were my parents who, even when they were here, were both as emotionally distant as two polar bears on an icy tundra.

I turned to online help, finding a video of a man in a hoodie talking about the same wood, saying, “I’ve seen ghosts. Children go missing all the time. Coincidence? I think not.” I scrolled through the comments.

“Get a life, loser.”

“Come on man, it’s just a wood.”

“Whatever you’ve been tripping on, it’s good stuff!”

Not exactly reliable. I dropped the lid down on the laptop. No more searching tonight. My TV wasn’t set up, so I trudged downstairs and found the box set of *Gilmore Girls*, which Mum and I used to binge together. I put the pizza away in the fridge. Perhaps I’d get an appetite back before the evening was through.

\* \* \*

I awoke to the wonderful smell of a full English breakfast, which Mum had prepared and placed on a lap tray in my bed. As I tucked in, a nervous smile played on her lips.

I was starving after skipping dinner last night, and I had no memory of going to bed. I must have nodded off in front of the telly, and then Dad, I think, carried me to my room.

As Mum spoke, she stroked my hair and shoulder. “So, um, I had a chat with Ester. You know how understanding she is. I explained you were having a tough time.” Ester was Mum’s boss.

“Mum!” I moaned.

“I know. Anyway, she agreed I could take the day off. I was thinking maybe we’d spend some time together. Only if you want to.”

She waited in silence as I chewed my food. Together we gazed at the sunflowers on the windowsill. Surely, they were a few inches taller than yesterday.

“Oh, my goodness!” Your sunflowers look fantastic! Would you like to get some plants for the garden, or some seeds soon?”

I nodded as I swallowed. A guilty pang rose like bile in my throat for the plants I’d abandoned in our old garden. There just wasn’t the room for them in the removal van and Mum didn’t want to go back.

“We could buy paint to redecorate your bedroom, pick out some new clothes, along with your new school uniform…”

I didn’t hear the rest of what she was saying and held my tongue. I still didn’t want to go to the new school, but I wouldn’t mention it just as we were getting along.

“What’s this doing in the bin?” she reached out and pulled out my bestie bear from my trash. “You used to love it.”

“Yeah, well,” I said. “It’s just a dumb bear.”

“Oh,” she said, “Don’t let him hear that.” She briefly covered its ears. She expected me to smile, so I gave her one. I didn’t want her to see how much I was struggling with everything. I didn’t know if it was true and she had a lot on her plate right now, as Dad mentioned. She placed the bear on my table before leaving.

## Chapter

Mum and I waited for our lunch order to arrive in the food court of a shopping centre near Deanview, my soon-to-be former school. I could almost imagine nothing had changed. The shopping centre was where Jas, Anjali and I often visited for fun shopping excursions together at weekends.

“Do you know there are children missing?” I asked. Could she hear me over the hubbub of the busy shopping centre? I was squashed on a bench next to the five or six bags all filled with clothing, including the dreaded school uniform, which Mum had been so keen to buy.

“No, I don’t. What about missing children?” She frowned, sitting on the opposite bench.

“There were posters for missing children when I was out for a walk yesterday.”

“Were there?”

“Yeah.”

“That doesn’t sound great. Maybe they’ve been found since. Someone just forgot to take the posters down.”

“Maybe. I don’t know. They looked new to me.”

“If you decide to go for a walk again, take your phone with you, and please call me the first instance of trouble.”

I nodded, unable to tell her I’d lost my phone. I’d only lost one a couple of months before when we were out shopping. She’d been so disappointed in me. She was right. I was a child, but I didn’t want to hear it from her again. I was never enough.

Would I have ventured into the woods this morning to find my phone, if Mum hadn’t sprung a day of shopping with me? Maybe. Now the oppressiveness of being alone yesterday and last night had passed, I’d doubted what I’d witnessed. Fairies in the wood. Get real!

A lady strutted out of the kitchen, explaining they had no more macaroni cheese and what else on the menu did I want?

I blinked as I spotted Jas’s frizzy brown inverted ponytail and Anjali’s designer handbag in the distance. Linking arms with Anjali and another girl, who I couldn’t yet make out, Jas skipped in between them.

Back in infants” school, after Anjali and I’d had a big fight, was the first time Jas had linked arms with us. When we’d fallen out, Jas was the new girl we both wanted to be with, but when we had made-up, Jas was also the glue between us.

I struggled to watch them through the lady’s teapot handle arm and past her apron strings dangling down the middle of her belly. Wasn”t that Jenny, the quiet girl of the class, on Jas’s right arm? The nerve! She had taken my place. They smiled and laughed as they performed a synchronised ninety-degree turn, before promenading towards Primark as clear as day. I had already been replaced. They couldn’t see me and their backs were now turned, but, instinctively, I sunk lower in the seat and hid my face with my free hand.

“A burger, please,” I mumbled.

“Stacy?”

“A burger, please,” I mumbled again.

“Sorry, she isn’t normally like this,” Mum said. “I don’t know what’s got into her. Stacy, speak up, darling.”

I swore. Then I shouted “Burger, PLEASE!” as I stood up. The bench scraped across the floor and half the shopping kamikazed on to the sticky floor. The food court tore into a deathly silence as everyone watched me.

Jas, who had also heard, looked at me, her large brown eyes looking into my soul. She grimaced, her full lips jutting out in a pout.

With her oversized bag sagging from shoulder to elbow, Anjali looked over her shoulder. She detached herself from Jas’s arm, then repositioned her bag, clamping it between her thumb and finger. She smoothed her straightened hair, which she *never ever* left her house without straightening first.

By the time Jenny started lamely looking over too, I was burning up, hot and ashamed.

“You don’t have to be so rude! And don’t swear,” said Mum, totally clueless, as she picked up the fallen clothes. She hadn’t even noticed the girls watching me coolly.

Everyone returned to what they were doing and the normal sounds resumed. Jas and the others looked away and sauntered off. How easy it was for them to shut me out of their world.

## Chapter

Feeling a breeze through my pyjamas, I shivered, wishing I had my coat or dressing gown. It was after midnight. I was all alone in the wood. I’d escaped after my parents had fallen asleep.

The moonlight barely reached the wood’s floor, creating an intensely silent, shadowy world. My torch cast a powerful beam of light in front of me. In the dark, my pyjama trousers snagged against a bramble and I nearly tripped. I kept going until a blowing sound became audible. Was the wind to blame once more? No, it was too regular. I sensed someone or something was breathing close by.

I swept the trees with my torch as panic set in. Dark, twisted tree trunks surrounded me. Although I saw nobody, I knew it was a perfect hiding place.

To muffle my ragged, anxious breaths, I covered my mouth with my hand. I embraced the silence, my senses heightened, eyes closed.

Snap! A branch broke. Where was it coming from? I opened my eyes, searching again with the torchlight, but I couldn’t find anyone. Someone was definitely here, though. An unsettling smell of ash burnt in my nostrils.

Instinctively, I raced back the way I had come, but a tall sinister figure leapt out of the darkness towards me. I bashed straight into them, my torch flying on to the ground as a heavy hand grasped my shoulder.

“Let go,” I cried, struggling to fight off their clenched grip. Another big hand flew over my mouth, as they moved behind me, muffling my surprised scream. What would my parents say, when they found me gone in the morning? Oh, I shouldn’t have come!

“Quiet. Turn that off,” said a man’s voice, deep and low, as if emanating from the hollow of a tree.

He quickly whispered a chant:

“Quiet as an owl. Silent as the grave.

Silence the howl, the laugh, the talk, the deceptions of a knave.”

He removed his hand, my shouts squeaking until they were inaudible. What was happening? What had he done?

“Turn it off,” he repeated. As his grip faltered, I picked up the torch and tried to escape, but he pulled me back.

He took the torch, turning it off himself, and he pocketed it.

“Wait!” I tried to say, but nothing came out. I wanted my torch back.

Pushing me forward, he lead me until we reached the outskirts of the glade, the same place where the sacrifice had happened. I shivered, looking at the altar up ahead. Was I next?

The stranger bowed down on one knee, bringing himself closer to my eye level. In the moonlight, I gazed up at him. Two globes of light passed by in the air in the distance. I still didn’t know what they were.

He was the man among the fairies, and older than I first thought. A couple of wrinkles graced his rough skin, yet he had an enduring face, weathered and old, but still many traces of youth were about him. It was tricky to tell. I couldn’t place him in any distinct time of life. It was almost as if he had lived outside the normal aging process. Despite how he had scared me when I’d first laid eyes on him, seeing his face now, all my fears dissolved.

His grip was powerful, though it slackened as I stood still. I could have escaped. I tried to speak, but nothing happened. My lips moved silently as I struggled to understand the situation.

“I warned you to stay away. Why are you here? Whisper and I’ll listen,” he added.

I nodded.

He planted his hand over my mouth again and chanted,

“The voice of an angel, coward or devil.

Let them speak truth, lies or drivel.”

Words and noises which I had spoken before, stumbled out of my mouth, even though my lips weren’t moving.

“What have you done with my voice? Ah! What’s going on?”

“Shh!” he hissed, rising at double speed and covering my mouth with his big, hot hand. My breath steamed into it, unable to escape. My voice sounded muffled and far away, but I could still hear the rest of my frantic questions.

“Why are you doing this? Who are you? What do you want?”

“Have you finished?” he whispered.

I nodded. He removed his hand, just as another few questions blurted out.

“What happened to the girl? Is she dead?”

He hadn’t time to shush them, and afterwards, he glanced around us warily into the dark. It was so silent.

“Come on, let’s get you back,” he said, with a sudden change of heart. He led me back the way I’d come.

“But I haven’t found my phone yet.”

“There’s no time! You need to go,” he said urgently.

“Why?”

I heard the hum of wings close by, growing louder.

Fairies appeared around us, luminous in the moonlight, and all like an assembly of winged trees closing in. Their clothes were decorated with a leafy tree theme, and they wore brown twigged hats.

The man quickly stepped away as they landed, a few of them alighting in the branches overhead and holding up lanterns, as they peered down at me. “You shouldn’t have come,” he said, “You’re one of the Queen’s prisoners now.”

“What?”

## Chapter

I ran. They weren’t armed. They were just silly pixies. I regretted the thought almost instantly. I rammed my way through a gap. I could have got a head start, but they surrounded me, blocking my path once more.

“What’s this? An overgrown child?” one of them jeered as he descended from the air, his big, mean smile showing a mouthful of shiny white teeth.

I turned around, but other fairies were already closing in. Wings flapped above, but I barely noticed, until someone tugged at my hair.

“Ow!” Glancing up, there was a female fairy above me, sneering from the bough of a tree. It was so unfair. Why did they have to have wings?

It wasn’t long till they were laughing and tossing me back and forth between them, like they were bullies in a playground. I knew of unfortunate children being dunked in the toilet at school, but being bandied about by fairies! My brain struggled with the impossible strangeness. None of them were bigger than me, but I was outnumbered.

I glanced at the man, but he remained motionless, his eyes glued senselessly to the ground. Why didn’t he help me? Anger and fear built up within me. But little by little, I became dizzy and tired as well.

Finally, when I was exhausted and staggered to the ground, they stormed at me, all at once. Roughly, one tied up my hands, and after, others hauled me to my feet. As I was led away, I tripped over something. A back pack. A few paces ahead I spotted an upturned bike, the spokes reflecting in the moonlight. How many children had they taken?

The man followed a short distance behind.

A few times, I tried to yank the fairy holding the rope down. I would not go without making a fuss, but it only made them tug at it in return.

“Ahh! Ow!” I shrieked as my knee hit a rock on the ground.

“Enough!” the man commanded. The fairies fell silent. He put a stop to their fun and games, but for how long? Though the man didn’t offer me any help in rising, he remained nearby, patiently waiting for me to pull myself to my feet. Through the rustle of leaves, I heard the occasional chuckle from the fairies, but other than that, I was forced to march along in silence.

High in the boughs of a tree, I noticed a tree house, the first of many. Light pierced through the planks of wood that formed the tree house’s walls and floor. Where a vast number of tree houses had been built further along, slivers of light poured through the canopy all around. Just how many tree houses were there?

Soon we came to a building, this one on the ground. It was as big as a town hall, framed by the moonlight.

A few of the fairies landed, the rest settling on the trees around. The few fairies at ground level, escorted me past the building. One of the moving globes of light, which I kept glimpsing sight of, lit up flower-covered sides of the wooden structure. What on earth were those globes of light? Was I going to die and never know?

In the building’s shadow, stood a second structure, perhaps just a single room. Again, it was fabricated of wood and its door latticed. I couldn’t see what was inside, though I could hear wailing.

“Run!” a voice cried out from inside. I looked around me, but there was nowhere I could escape. Even if I wasn’t tied up, I was surrounded. The man had slipped away too.

A fairy opened the wooden door and, as soon as he untied my ropes, he pushed me in. Cold bodies trembled in fear against my own, pressing against me and the ajar door in their rush to escape.

“Get back! Get back! If you make trouble for yourselves, you’ll all be sacrificed at the next offering. Now get back!” a male fairy shouted.

Afraid to do anything more, those inside stopped pushing, though I could still feel cold air against my neck and the brush of clothing close by.

I pushed against the door, alone, but another fairy or two pushed it and locked it from the other side.

As they fanned out, I could make out the outline of eight children, all much shorter and younger than me. Another two cowered close to the ground, though I didn’t know they were there, until I almost tripped over them.

“Hi there,” I squeaked nervously.

No one spoke.

“Hello?” I said again.

Still nothing. In the darkness, it was hard to guess their expressions. It would be easier in the morning.

Except for a slip of moonlight, there was nothing to see by. Now trapped inside, I knew the room was a prison.

When the children finally settled down to sleep, there was just enough room for us all, but it was cramped and stones constantly prodded into me. Though I lay on my front, as was usual for me, I kept my face turned out at the darkness and the night’s sky beyond the door. It was going to be a long night. A long few days.

## Chapter

I woke abruptly. There was a boy’s face close to mine. What the–no, I was still in the wood!

I leapt up. Already, half the children in the cell were awake.

The two child-like fairies guarding the prison possessed delicate wings, clear and laced with white veins. I was captivated by their tree-themed outfits and peculiar hat decorations too. The odd placement of the acorns, bark, leaves, and feathers on their hats suggested they’d been dragged through a bird’s nest. Only the eggs and the birds pecking at them to save their young were absent from the scene.

I wanted to laugh. It was ridiculous, them keeping us in here. “Hey!” I reached out with one of my arms through the latticed door, as I tried to catch their attention.

One of them, a male, glared at me. The female fairy next to him was surprised he’d even spare me any of his time. They both brandished sticks.

“I’m not your enemy,” I said.

“But you’re mine,” he declared stonily and looked away.

I had to try again. “Why are you keeping us in here?”

“So you can be sacrificed.” As he spoke, his back was to me, and I thought I detected a sneer.

I clung to the lattice bars of the door and shook it, testing its strength. It held solidly. Why was it so important to be kept for the sacrifice? If they hated us that much, why wait at all? Was it because they only sacrificed one child at a time, savouring their glee? If so, I could be in here forever. “Why don’t you kill me now?” I said.

In a flash, the male fairy lashed out, striking my exposed knuckles.

“Ow!” I retreated my aching, swollen hands back into the cell.

“Don’t tempt me,” scalded the male fairy. Did he have it in him to kill me? What if they all had the same bravado as their leader, the one I had only seen at a distance, with her flowing skirt and an unexplainable ghostliness? Ghostly or not, she was real and held the dagger destined for the girl’s chest.

What did they think we had done to their wood? I certainly hadn’t done anything, and the rest of these kids in with me looked far too young and docile to be junkies. It wasn’t them who were trashing woods with needles, drugs and rubbish.

The guards came and went, two at a time over the next couple of days. The latest, a female fairy guard jabbed me hard through the bars with her stick, when I tried to get her attention.

“Quit it, or I’ll ensure you’re sacrificed first.”

The children were just as talkative, the fight already out of most of them. None were keen to cause trouble.

If only I could get out and tell someone where all the missing children were. It was a crime, surely, to keep us here against our will. Could fairies be sent to jail? I wasn’t sure.

I dug quietly with my bare hands, catching my nails painfully, but I found that the wooden boards ran deep into the earth. They were super solid. I wouldn’t get out that way.

I could see through the knot holes in some planks. I looked through them all, but all I could see were trees and a few fairies in red, flitting about. My desperation to escape was amplified by the constant, harrowing fear and dread of waiting.

Twice a day, we received a meagre meal of berries, mushrooms, and little else. Food was distributed through the bars. Like some children, I also avoided eating any mushrooms. But seeing that the children who ate them were fine, I tried them. Water was given irregularly, and since the door was only opened then, escape was impossible.

Dressed in my striped pyjamas, I felt like a convict, but I was also one of the few wearing nightclothes. Those with coats were more comfortable sitting on the ground during the warm day than I was. I noticed a coat, half-occupied by a boy who was muttering to himself. I attempted to talk to him, but he ignored me, only glancing at me with a sharp look when I sat near him.

Did any of them witness a sacrifice, or were they merely intimidated by the fairies” threats? Their prisoner ethos was so palpable in their every move that I soon became just like them.

The night of the sacrifice, struck cold in my memory. My mind revisited the death, filling in the blanks and repeating the event countless times. Although I didn’t witness the tasks completion, the child’s horrific murder was clear.

Who would be the next sacrifice? With each heartbeat, we clung to the memory of life, even as it was now, lived in terror and fear.

## Chapter

A deep voice saying, “I need one of these children,” woke me. Dazzled by the sun, I couldn’t identify the visitor whose brown, dusty coloured clothes made them appear as if they had emerged from the earth.

The two fairy guards looked baffled. “Why?” one of them asked.

“I require a subject for my spell-casting. Unless one of you wish to volunteer?”

Aching everywhere, I rose to my feet. The visitor, I realised, was the man who’d warned me off and watched as the fairies took me.

This was the first time of seeing his face in daylight. Near the bone, a small bump showed where his nose had been misaligned from a previous break. Though his cheeks were thin and long, his forehead was rounded, and his features were gentle. More lines, previously softened by the moon’s glow, became noticeable. A twinkle in his eye and the dark brown colour of his hair, told a different story though. There wasn’t a single silver strand to be seen.

“But these children are to be sacrificed,” the female fairy commented, thrusting forward the stick in her hands, threating him with it. “The Queen–”

The man roughly grabbed hold of it and lifted it up, her included, as she refused to let go of her weapon.

“Ah!” she cried.

The man dropped the stick. She fell ungracefully to the ground.

“I’m doing this on the Queen’s authority,” the man’s voice boomed, as he towered above them. Six-foot something, he was taller than my dad at five foot eight.

“If she wants the spells, I have to make certain they work, don’t I? You wouldn’t want to disappoint the Queen, would you?” the man quizzed them.

The male fairy was helping his fellow guard to her feet. “No,” they chimed together.

“You can take that one, then,” the male fairy pointed at a small child, much younger than me. She had been wiping her nose on her grubby sleeve, but when they pointed at her, she stopped and stared, her eyes widening with terror. Tears fell down her muddied cheeks, making a line of white through the dirt.

“Don’t let it get loose,” the female fairy warned.

The man glanced at me, then back to the other girl.

“No, I can’t take that one. It’s too small and it’s probably sick.” It was as if he was looking at us for choice meat at a butcher’s shop. “You should look after it better. You don’t want it to die before the Queen–” He couldn’t say the word “sacrifice,” but he didn’t need to.

The little girl moaned in anguish. The unspoken word alone was enough to upset her. I wanted to offer her comfort, a hand squeeze and words of reassurance, partly to help myself too. What a way to go! It wasn’t fair. We were just children. Did we deserve to abused, unloved and uncared for? How come nobody knew we were here?

“I’ll take that one.” The man pointed at me. “She looks healthy.”

“Take her. Please don’t tell the Queen about the sick one. Please!” begged the male fairy, as he dropped on the floor and grabbed hold of the man’s leg.

“Get off me!” the man shouted, kicking the fairy off his leg, his trousers peeking under his robe as he did so. “Get up and do the Queen’s bidding!” His voice sent shivers down my spine and my heart quickened. Was he as dangerous as the Queen?

Frantically, I ran to the back of the cell with the rest of the children. He had stopped my voice. Who knows what else he was capable of? All my worst TV nightmares of torture came to life and combined with the Queen’s wish for our deaths. I imagined spells, which would find the most painful way to die, a new deranged way for the Queen to enjoy killing us. And just how many ways were there to suffocate someone? Each death could be worse than a quick stab to the heart. And with magic at his disposal, who was to say that he wouldn’t bring me back and start the agony all over again?

I gripped my fingers through the knots in the planks of the wood, determined not to go. I shivered as strong arms reached in and grabbed hold of me. Was he in the cell too? I dared not look. The other children, eyes wide with panic, now pressed against the opposite walls, cowering in fear of him.

“Child!” the man roared from the depths. “Let go!”

I shook my head. “No!” I cried.

“Let go,” he said again. “Come on, I haven’t got all day.”

I refused.

“Fine,” he said, then chanted:

“Friend or foe, unbind, let go.

Hero, villain, unfasten, let go.”

My shivers instantly stilled. I jolted once with fear and froze. I held on, fighting what seemed to be my will, but ever so slowly, my fingers lost their grip on the knotted wood. How was he doing it?

Dragging me out, a hand under one of my armpits, he violently slammed the door of the prison cell shut behind us. My squeals and kicks went unnoticed by him. As soon as I landed, he pulled me along, forcing me to stumble beside him.

“No!” I attempted to repel him, but his strength was superior to mine.

Away from prying fairy eyes and ears, he released me and stood a short distance away.

Now was my chance to make a dash for it, but he held up both his hands in a placating fashion and confided, quietly, “It was only an act. Please don’t be alarmed, you’re safe. I know this is confusing, but I’m not trying to hurt you.” He smiled a small, wry smile and raised his brown eyebrows, before his face dissolved into frustration. I don’t know why, but I was sure it had something to do with me.

Had he really been acting? What about his magical experiments? Had he made that up too?

“You want answers, right?” He seemed to read my mind.

I nodded.

“Then come with me.” I hesitated, looking in the other direction. “If you want to run, I’m not stopping you, but good luck to you getting past the fairies on your own.”

Maybe he’d realised what a sleazebag he’d been, just letting the fairies capture me and was willing to help now. That was a lot of hope to ride on, but that was all I had.

## Chapter

I was beat and famished, but I followed that fast-moving stranger anyway. After a fifteen-minute walk, we got to this old, beat-up lodge in the woods. Thriving green ivy embraced the old, misshapen wooden walls of the lodge, as if nature itself was supporting it. Broken areas of the walls and roof were patched with wood and corrugated iron. What a shambles!

Hidden from prying fairy eyes by the distance, he still went in cautiously.

I trailed closely behind, unsure of what awaited me. I needn’t have worried. A snug, warm room welcomed us.

A stone hearth was on the left side of the room, where it met the wooden flooring. Embers glowed faintly within the hearth. A wooden rocking chair, close by, swayed gently in the draught as I shut the door.

The rocking chair blocked my sight of a chest of drawers positioned to the right of the fireplace. Dominating the room was a large table, its red chequered cloth pooling on to the floor. A woven fruit basket and a dirty wooden bowl of leftover food sat amidst randomly scattered potions, dirt, dust, and soot.

An unmade bed and an ottoman, heaped with soft woollen blankets behind the table, starkly contrasted with my exhaustion from days of sleeping rough. They called me to sink into their warm, cosy comfort, but I didn’t dare.

A pile of wooden chests and containers, a few intricately carved, sat to the right of the lodge’s doorway. He got a storage box from under the pile, tipping the contents out onto the floor, then turning it over and placing it against the door.

“Sit down and try not to get in the way,” he said.

Despite his unexpected change in attitude, I took a seat. Could a little kindness hurt?

He ignored me as he cleared the table. Only now did I see a small window to my right; that’s where he tossed out the food scraps from.

He threw the filthy tablecloth into a basket by his bed. A second, equally large and long clean tablecloth was already in place beneath. The colour was a golden yellow, embroidered with a floral design.

Next to the hearth, he cleaned his bowl in a bucket of water; then, from a box, he retrieved a dusty wooden bowl. It looked like he hadn’t had guests in ages. Hermit!

I should have pitied him, but after the emotional games he played, even after his late confession, sympathy wasn’t an option. I clenched my fists, frustrated, but he was still unaware, facing away. I had mixed feelings, finding it difficult to figure out his agenda. Receiving neither comfort nor explanations from him, if this was his way of answering, he was painfully slow.

I couldn’t help but fidget. After all, I had been confined for days. I sprung up and peered out of the window at the garden I had yet to explore. Large dangling runner beans plants grew up a long run of poles outside and were heavy with fully grown crops. What! That wasn’t normal. Totally the wrong season.

He knew I had moved, but didn’t comment. Crouching by the fireplace, when he thought I was looking away, he muttered an incantation:

“Fire free, fire burn.

Fire melt, lick and turn.”

Suddenly, there was a spark which he blew into a flame. Wow! How had he done that!

Reaching into the fireplace’s shadowy depths, he took down a little cooking pot from a metal hook. He poured some dirty water from the bucket into it. Slowly, he stood, looking aged, his frame bent and diminished. He straightened up, appearing youthful once more. No actual transformation occurred. He was still the same man. Had my perceptions changed? Explaining it easily was impossible.

On the wall, above the fireplace, there was an engraved piece of bark. The word “Bower” and the outline of a bow and arrow had been carved into it.

What is it?” I asked.

“Oh. My name.”

“Bow–er? As in bow and arrow. That kind of bow?”

“Yes. It means to aim true.”

Grabbing an empty trug off the hearth, he swiftly crossed the room in four strides, upending the box near the door that was meant for me to sit on.

“Do you have any allergies?” he asked.

“No.”

“Good.”

“Aren’t you going to ask me my name?” I was almost going to add, “and my pronouns,” but I didn’t think he was of a generation that subscribed to that.

“What? Oh, yes. What’s your name?”

“Stacy,” I looked at him carefully as I spoke. He stood for a moment with a hand on the door handle, before opening the door. He shut it behind him, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

Inside the room, a short, high-pitched animal squeak was audible. Where was it was coming from? “Squeak!” came the sound once more. Was it… the table? No, of course not.

Upon lifting the tablecloth, I was astonished to find a baby animal nestled in a wicker cage. Curious, I knelt down to have a closer look. A baby deer curled up in a tight circle, its head tucked under its back legs, was a heartwarming sight. It was pure wintry white.

With a sweet, innocent whine, it looked up at me. My heart yearned to pet, love, and tame it, but a stronger part of me knew it longed to be free, to go back to its mother and the wild.

## Chapter

“What are you doing?” with my fingers on the cage latch, about to release the young deer, the man, Bower, growled. I was startled by his hand on my shoulder. I hadn’t realised he’d arrived. I released the latch. Why would he possibly want a baby deer?

“All it wants is freedom,” I begged, glancing up at him.

“How did you find it?”

“It made a noise.”

“You can hear it,” Bower exclaimed. “You heard it. You heard it,” he repeated to himself.

What a weirdo!

He replied, “It can be freed one day, but not now.”

“Why? What will you do with it? I dragged myself up from the floor and settled onto the ottoman.

He offered no response.

“Is it a deer? It’s all white. I’ve never seen a deer like that before.” When he didn’t speak, I asked again. “Come on, is it an albino? You’ve got to give me something.”

He sighed. “You ask a lot of questions. It’s a hart.” A hart like those in fables? It couldn’t be, could it?

Having gathered vegetables and herbs, Bower chopped them before putting them in the pot, which still held dirty water. A scattering of leaves was added to a mix of grubby potatoes and mushrooms. His mumbled words were unintelligible to me.

Was he kidding me? He wasn’t cooking anything in that, was he? Disgusting. Still, I knew that when it was ready to eat, if he offered me any, I would devour it. My stomach rumbled. I’d rather hoped for something more appetising.

“How come you can’t magic up food?” I asked.

“What?” It was like he’d been swept a hundred kilometres away.

“I mean you magicked up the fire,” I said slowly, wondering if this was something he didn’t want me to know about. “Why can’t you magic up food? Why did you have to go outside looking for it?”

“All you need for a fire is a spark. Most of the elements are here. But food takes more magic. There are many ways to magic up something. To move it here, you have to know what it looks like exactly, and where it was.”

I frowned at him.

He explained more. “Take a mushroom. Be specific, know where it was you saw it, what its shape was. Imagine it in your mind. Then you can move it here.”

“But there must be a mushroom that’s the same as any image you have in your head.”

“You’ve been around human culture for far too long. You’re only thinking of the clone food from shops and you have to know exactly where it came from too. There are thousands of shapes of mushrooms.”

“Is there something wrong with taking them from the shops?”

“All the shelves would be empty, if one ran away with their desires, don’t you think?”

“You could pay them.”

“With what, their own money? I have nothing except what I have here, in this place.” He laughed, but in a deeply heart-rending way.

He was silent for a while.

“It’s more difficult, but wizards can also change an object into something else. If an object’s changed to food, it always tastes of what it was previously,” he added.

I picked up the closest bowl on the table. “So, if you changed this wooden bowl into a loaf of bread, it would still taste of wood?”

“Yes.”

“Wicked,” I said, returning the bowl to its rightful place.

He frowned, not understanding my meaning. “Unless a permanent lasting potion or incantation was used, it would turn back into its original components within a few hours too.”

“Yuck!”

“Yes,” he said, grimacing. “Fragments of wood aren’t exactly nutritional.”

A strange collection of small animal skulls, feathers, and potions in teardrop-shaped vials sat atop the chest of drawers. More potions overflowed from drawers, flung open at unstable angles. I assumed making permanent potions required more effort. Despite that, he owned a large quantity. What did he do with them all?

He peered into the pot and stirred its contents.

So, that’s who you really are? A wizard?” I asked. He couldn’t be a fairy, not without wings. And could ordinary men do spells?

“Yes, I’m a wizard, magic to the bone,” Bower revealed. It was a shame I had no magic in me, but as I thought this, he uttered, “We rarely see older children your age here. Young children have an overactive imagination. But they lose it, bit by bit, until they can no longer see magic. If I were a mortal man, I would know nothing about magic, fairies, the Queen.” His sad voice resonated.

I’d planned to ask about the Queen, but he was serving lunch, a thick, lumpy dish topped with wilted nettles. It was nothing like the delicious feast I’d dreamt of, the dream that began this whole thing.

Bower offered me a bowl of his meagre vegetable soup. It had a pleasing aroma, but thoughts of water dirtied from a previous meal put me off. Was it even safe?

He seemed to know my thoughts, saying between bites, “The water’s clean.”

“How?” I hadn’t seen him do anything about it. Not even a futile attempt at picking out bits of old food with a spoon.

“With magic.” His stern face melted with a smile briefly. His face became stern once again, yet remained familiar and caring. “You have a lot to learn, Sta– Stacy,” he hesitated, halfway through calling me something similar. It couldn’t have been a simple slip of the tongue, could it? What else was he going to call me? Bower dug his spoon into his bowl, guiltily looking down. It was true there was a lot I needed to learn. It wasn’t as if fairy magic was on the curriculum at school. I wish. It would be so much more interesting.

I slurped the hot liquid from my spoon. Mm. It actually tasted good. I was so surprised!

“What’s with this Queen? I mean why do the guards seem so afraid of her?” I asked.

“She’s dangerous,” he replied.

After swallowing a mouthful, I asked, “What’s wrong with her body?”

“She’s halfway into becoming something else,” Bower uttered gravely. “Something that’s not meant to be, not in this world. Almost pure dust.”

I was at a loss for words.

“Let me explain.” He set his spoon down on the table beside his bowl. “Everything begins with dust, a certain amount of it used in the birth of any creature.”

I nodded, enjoying the unexpected flavours of the soup.

Bower carried on, “As children grow up, they lose the dust that inspired their so called ‘wild’ imaginations, but as fairies grow, they gain dust. Each new cell needs it. What you must understand too is that fairies weren’t designed to hate.” He picked up his spoon again and talked between mouthfuls. “The Queen’s hatred warped her body. The dust took over, atom by atom. What happens to a fairy when they hate, is beyond reason, beyond the normal realms of magic even, beyond time and space, life and death.” He poured the contents of his bowl down his gullet, finishing his bowl in one long measure.

I stared in surprise at him and looked down at mine. My mouth wasn’t big enough to do that, nor was the meal cool enough for me to try.

He choked a bit before he resumed, “There never was this intense hatred before and she was the first. Fairies used to live peacefully. The woods were plenty, the harvest was bountiful. Then humans started taking the trees for themselves, making matchwood of forests. I’m sure you know all this. It’s basic knowledge that you can create many things with wood. But the problem was that humans didn’t discriminate. They’d even cut down ancient trees for money, and most of the time, nothing new was planted to replace them. The woods and forests were decimated.” His brow knotted fiercely as his face flushed with anger. He talked with such vibrancy that it was clear he had been yearning to confide in someone for so long.

“Why can’t the fairies live outside the woods?” I asked, wondering if they could integrate with humans.

“It’s home. It has been since time began. Humans have always chopped wood for shelter, but back then there were so many trees, a few were hardly missed. You don’t yet understand what this home means to a fairy. It’s a part of them in a way that it can never be for humans,” he said.

“What do you mean?”

“Adults can’t see magic. Dust has no home in an unimaginative adult. Children can see it, though it depends on their age and their maturity. Trees and plants, natural living things that have no minds, connect directly to magic and to fairies. Plants are so sensitive to magic.”

“Is that why your vegetable garden looks so good?”

“You noticed that? Do you want some more soup?”

I nodded and Bower poured another helping into my bowl.

“This entire area is thriving. Magic gives the plants the extra energy to bloom all year around, without depleting the soil or hurting them.” He poured another helping into his bowl. “Long ago the fairies took children for the trees humans destroyed. They never hated humans. They just wanted reparation. Justice. To take what was most valuable to humans for what was most valuable to fairies. They never counted one human to one tree. Fairies had a bigger sense of values and they didn’t hold grudges, though to a fairy a tree means just as much as a human, regardless of the different levels of intelligence.”

What! How could a tree mean as much as a human? It made little sense. “What about the tree houses? They’re composed of wood.”

“Only dead trees that have died naturally. They would rarely cut down a living tree, unless it was absolutely necessary, and they were always replanted.”

We both resumed eating and he filled me in between mouthfuls.

“In some ways, fairies were more forgiving than people. A child was sacrificed once every one hundred years and it was followed by days of mourning. Now children are sacrificed all the time under the Queen’s hands. She’s nature’s instrument of revenge. That’s what she likes to think. She hates humans, though she has a funny way of showing it sometimes, especially to children.” He paused, before he carried on. Was he holding something back? “Children are lured here by magical dreams, tapping into their desires.” He gazed at me. “They’re free in their dreams to cross over into the physical fairy realm though they still see it from the perspective of their dreaming psyche. Dream spirits we call them. At night the woods are alive with them. We can see them, but they can’t see us.”

“The globes of light?”

“Yes. I guess they do look a bit like globes of light. If one of the dream spirits doesn’t leave by morning, the child doesn’t wake up, but that doesn’t happen often. Children come from all over in their waking hours, trying to get back to that dream. They again have the choice to cross into the fairy realm, to jump over or stay in the human world.” He nodded at me, expectantly.

My subconscious could have been warning me not to cross over, when the stream grew large and impassible, and I drowned in my dream. Yet here I was. I had paid no attention. Why did he say the children jumped over?

“I was dreaming of flying over.”

“Flying. Oh, yes. I suppose you would.” He smiled. Then he looked away and I knew he had something to tell me, but he wasn’t ready to say. My heart was beating frantically, hot and fast, as I slurped the last of my soup and set the bowl down. Ask him. Ask him. But I knew whatever it was, I wouldn’t be ready for it either.

I would never be ready for the extraordinary. I could accept I was in this magical realm, but I couldn’t be a part of it. It would be too far-fetched even for this world of fairies, but I still thought what if, obsessively, like when you think, what if I won the lottery? What if I was part of this world? What if I was a fairy myself? No. That was silly.

Disappointment flooded my thoughts. Of course I was ordinary. I was just Stacy of the human world and when I was old enough, the fairy world would disappear to the back of my imagination and slip away like the dying delicate petals of a flower.

## Chapter

A knock sounded on the lodge’s door and we both jumped out of our skins. Across the table, Bower’s gaze met mine, and we both anxiously jumped up. Who was it?

“Open up, Wizard,” a voice shouted from outside. I didn’t know what to do.

Bower seemed equally disturbed and whispered, “Hide! No wait! If you hide and they find you, it’ll be too suspicious. Don’t move unless I tell you to. Say nothing and stay behind me.”

As Bower opened the door, a male fairy fell into the lodge, as though he’d been leaning against the door. Had he been listening? The fairy righted himself quickly, perhaps afraid of what Bower might suspect.

“Yes, Spark?” Bower asked him coldly.

Spark wore the same clothes as the fairies that had been guarding the prison cell. By instinct, I trembled behind Bower, thinking of my recent incarceration. Those fairies outside the cell had been mean. I didn’t want to go back.

What set Spark apart from the other guards I’d seen, was instead of a bird’s-nest hat, he had long, standing-on-end hair, as if that would give him a few more centimetres of height, but he was still shorter than me.

Spark stared at Bower and then at me, before he announced loudly, “The Queen has heard you have taken someone to experiment on. She wants to see you.”

Bower stood stock still almost as though he hadn’t heard.

“Now!” the male fairy barked. He looked up at Bower’s face, as if daring him to make a false step.

“Oh, now. OK. I’ll be along shortly,” Bower replied mockingly, pretending to be courteous.

“I’ll escort you to the Queen’s court.”

“An escort will not be necessary,” replied Bower flatly.

Spark moved back, as if he was going to leave. Then having second thoughts, he edged closer. “Queen’s orders.”

“Orders!” Bower boomed, as if Spark had some audacity to dare say that word.

Spark’s brown hair bounced up, as he jumped back, hitting his elbow on the handle of the door. “Queen’s orders,” he said again, nervously, rubbing his elbow.

“Stay here,” Bower said to me.

“No, Wizard. She’s coming too.”

Bower’s face froze. “Her? Why?”

“She’s the one you’re experimenting on, isn’t she? Queen’s orders,” he repeated, like it was an earworm on his brain. As he went on ahead, he looked back expectantly at us to follow.

Silent, Bower held the door, his arm outstretched, waiting for me to walk past.

Stepping outside, I turned to speak to him quietly. “Here I am, still roaming the woods in my pyjamas. I wish I’d dressed in some other clothes or at least a different pattern.”

“What’s wrong with stripes?” Bower asked.

“I look like a prisoner.”

He replied, “Maybe that will work in our favour.” As Spark walked ahead of us, he hummed softly, almost to himself. The tune was familiar, a pop song I’d heard blaring from Jas’s phone last summer. My skin prickled. Why would a fairy know that song? I glanced at him, but his face was blank, his eyes distant, as if he didn’t even realise he was humming.

\* \* \*

Bower and I followed Spark back to the building next to where I’d been kept a prisoner. This was the first time I viewed the front of the building in daylight, having only glimpsed it the night I’d been captured. I was surprised to see a small space in front of it, blossoming with meadow flowers and butterflies flittering among them. Pink and yellow flowers cascaded and framed the large arch doors which were decorated with the carvings of a tree.

Treading carefully into the entrance hall of the Queen’s court, it was thickly carpeted with dark abundant ivy, absorbing the sound of our steps and creating a hushed atmosphere. The ivy ran all the way up the walls to the tall ceiling. To each side of the hall, I could see doorways leading to more rooms.

Bower whispered to me, “Whatever you do, don’t look at me. Look at the floor. Look scared.”

“I am.” I shivered. I caught a peek into a few of the rooms, as doors opened and closed for fairies. Clothes were being laid out inside one room. They were startled to see me, and the fairies did all they could to avoid being within our path.

“Pretend you know nothing.”

I thought about it. What actually did I know? “I don’t.”

“Do whatever I say and try nothing dangerous or brave. I know I won’t. I can’t afford to.” Was Bower yet another person scared of the Queen? What power did she hold over them all?

We stepped into an expansive room ablaze from the light of fiery torches affixed to the walls. What appeared to be a strange masqueraded dance was taking place. I almost expected to find fairies wearing luxurious dresses and outfits with many colours tumbling and falling together. But they wore only plain, thin clothes of scarlet. None of the fairy guards apart from Spark were inside. Masks, which looked as if they had been painted with blood, emphasised the dancers” flushed faces. The music was so amateur, even I, though not musically talented, could have done better.

The fairies moved back against the walls, whispering, when they saw us. As they parted, I glimpsed a smaller fairy with a violin in his hands. He looked about five or six years old. No wonder he couldn’t play. He paused, his eyes rising as he saw us. His presence was merely a minor detail in the corner of my eye, compared to the vision of the Queen sitting on an elaborately carved wooden throne, at the far end of the room.

Alluring black veins stretched across the Queen’s wings. Black eyes and black make-up dragged her face through the centuries and almost fooled me into thinking she was as old as Bower. But no, on closer inspection, she was young, possibly in her twenties, her hands youthful and smooth, even with black veins there too. Yet, she was the only one out of all the fairies older than a child. Why were the rest so young?

She drew me in by her appearance, but distanced me simultaneously because she looked so ghostly and unlike anyone I had ever seen. She was dangerous, yet beautiful.

Spark bowed and announced, “They’re here, my Queen.”

Rising from her throne, the Queen swiftly crossed the floor. She positioned herself near Bower, ignoring my presence.

“Leave us,” she commanded and the fairies left quickly and quietly, filing out of the same door we had come in by. The fairy, who had been playing the violin, left so fast, his violin rocked, abandoned, on the floor. Spark too, followed behind them, leaving us alone to face the Queen.

“How are the spells coming, Wizard? Despite being shorter than Bower, her large, dark wings overshadowed the two fire-lit torches on the wall behind her throne.

Bower bowed slightly before the Queen, humbly saying, “Well, Your Majesty, well.” I noticed a tremor in his hand at his side. He noticed it as well and quickly hid it in his other hand by his stomach.

“I heard you took a human to experiment on? Is that true?” she asked, not even glancing in my direction. I was already coming out in a cold sweat.

“Yes.”

“Show me some things you’ve been working on,” she commanded.

“I can’t,” Bower stammered.

“You’re a fool,” she sneered harshly. “Hurry. Show me some spells on the human. I want to see them performed.” She spat her words out.

I sensed Bower’s eyes on me, but remembering what he told me, I didn’t make eye contact. He wasn’t going to perform any magic tricks on me, was he? Otherwise, I would lose control, just as he tried to pull my hands from the prison cell wall knots. Though frightening, I understood his resolve if he felt it was necessary. He had said that there was to be no show of bravery. I hoped he wouldn’t do anything painful to me, but why did I think that? I was just another human to both of them, wasn’t I?

Placing his hand on my shoulder, he pushed me forward. I felt exposed as the Queen’s intense eyes seared into me, for the first time. I looked up and it was as if there was nothing behind those eyes. The only substance inside her was the dim darkness of death.

I closed my eyes, pleading in my silence for it to be over soon. Bower chanted:

“Clothes not mine, clothes so fine,

Let them refresh and intertwine.”

Warm cloth glided over my skin and my hair lifted, tingling. As I opened my eyes, I wore the most stunning velvet, purple dress. Gold sequins glittered from my waist to my shoulders and, as I touched my hair, two red flowers dropped out of my hairdo and on to the floor. The dress was too long for me and a little loose, but I didn’t care. I half smiled at Bower, then curbed my excitement, not wanting the Queen to see it.

“That’s mine,” the Queen shrieked, throwing her fists into the air forcefully. “What a waste, on this pig! It–,” she started as if she couldn’t bear calling me a person, “doesn’t deserve nice clothes, let alone *my* nice clothes. Take all this away!” She waved hysterically at the dress I was wearing.

Moments later, after a quick chant from Bower, I was back in my pyjamas.

“That’s better.” The Queen paced back and forth. “An ordinary child again, shivering in her nightwear. How many centuries have these things turned up, offering themselves upon our mercy, snivelling, as if we could provide them a way out of their miserable existences? You can’t say that I haven’t offered them a way out, even if it’s the most painful way.” Then, stopping her pacing, she addressed Bower. “Do something more. Something it deserves. Make it into something vile.” She turned and smiled, her nose lifting slightly at the end. What?

## Chapter

I wasn’t scared of spiders. Or any insects, for that matter. Was that unusual for a girl my age? Still, there were other vile creatures, monsters only described in books, or half glimpsed on TV, in late-night horror films, that lurked in the shadows of my imagination. What would it be like to be one of them? To be disgusted with myself, and condemned to live a miserable existence as one, a poor hideous creature, unloved and feared. I cringed and my legs wobbled to jelly.

Bower chanted, while he gestured at me:

“Dripping wet, a stream’s custode,

Life of hardships, warts of toad!”

I shrank and slowly, painfully, hunched on to all fours. My hands became soft, wet and brown. Raw throbbing warts burst through my skin like an erupting rash. I screamed, but all that came out of my suddenly toothless mouth, was a deep unfamiliar croak. What had he done to me?

“Ah, ha! A toad! Still more than a child deserves, but at least it’s not a common garden frog. That would be far too merciful, Bower.”

The Queen opened her palm and, with a show of her magic, I was instantly drawn to it. I flew towards her with a shriek. She caught me. Cupping both of her hands around me, she trapped my head and neck between her upper hand’s thumb and index finger.

“Look at it. Pathetic creature, isn’t it? I could end its misery right now,” she said.

With my webbed feet pressed against two of her fingers, I pushed. Even with my back legs, I couldn’t escape. Her grip on my soft, loose skin tightened. If she squeezed me any harder, I’d pop and die!

“No,” I heard Bower say. I hoped he wasn’t showing any concern for me. She was the type of person who’d exploit that weakness.

“No. You’re right.” She threw me to the floor.

I croaked in pain.

“That would be far too quick and painless.” She marched back to her seat.

Bower said quietly over me:

“All lessons learned, return, return

To your form of no concern.”

I found Bower’s hand on my shoulder again, as I turned back into human form. Was this his attempt to offer some kind of comfort? If it was, it wasn’t working.

I shook his hand off and hobbled a short distance from him. A day longer in that prison cell sounded appealing. Even with the far-off threat of being sacrificed, at least I’d know the worst of it. Not knowing what was going to happen to me seemed harder somehow. What would Bower do next?

His hand was still outstretched and the Queen must have noticed. “Sometimes I think you’re sympathising with these humans again. Do you need your memory refreshed?”

“No,” Bower replied. He cradled his hand tightly with his other in front of his stomach.

“I’m not stupid. I realise that was just a parlour trick. Those kinds of spells aren’t worth the effort. I’m not interested in trivialities, as you well know. I’ve an idea. Why not prove to me that my choice to keep you alive is worth it.” Her smile flickered and her eyes shone with insanity, as she commanded, “Kill her.”

“Wh–” Bower started in surprise, before he stopped himself.

“What are you waiting for? It’s permission?” The Queen’s bottom lip wrinkled with disgust. “So primitive. Go on, kill her. Ha, ha, ha! Kill her. Kill her!” she chanted, louder and louder in eager abandon. Her body and fists wriggling with excitement. She was mad. Totally mad. I didn’t stand a chance.

“Ha! Ha! Ha!” he bellowed. “Yes, that would be funny,” he said with tears in his eyes. Tears of laughter? Tears of sadness? Now I wasn’t so sure. What was another human to him?

“No! No!” I pleaded. I wildly shook my head as I looked back and forth between Bower and the Queen. Their laughter chilled me to the bone.

I hobbled towards the door. I wished I was at home and having a nightmare I could wake from. But this was real. I had to get away.

Quickly Bower shouted:

“Lungs of stone, breath all flown.

Nothing left, breath of death!”

Mid-step, my whole body seized up and I fell forward, unable to catch my fall. Staring at the earth, unable to move, I heard the two of them erupt with laughter. She cackled and he bellowed, together blocking out all sound but the thump of my heart. How could they? I couldn’t move.

In moments my lungs stopped. Asphyxiation. Drowning without water. It was even worse than drowning. At least with water, I knew where it was coming from, I had a chance, but with this, there was no hope. Nothing to move away from or towards. It surrounded my panicked mind. There was no escape. I couldn’t breathe. All at once, I was submerged into an inescapable black.

\* \* \*

Two distant voices washed over me. I could breathe again. Just. But I couldn’t move or open my eyes. Was I dead?

“How’s it coming?” a female voice asked.

“Good, but I need more time,” a tired voice replied.

“More time? Let me see. Uhm. Uhm. No,” the female voice snapped. “Don’t be so ridiculous. I want it before the next full moon. The time stays the same. Besides, I don’t know how much life you have left in you. Have you tried it?”

“No, it’s never been tried,” a tired voice remarked.

“How do you know it works then?”

“The opposite worked a long time ago. It was bestowed as a tribute to late wizards who had done something of particular merit. Before your time, Elantra.”

“Don’t you see they killed the wizards and witches too? Why don’t you hate them?” implored the female.

“As you know–”

“Yes,” the female voice interrupted before adding, “I know your wife and children were burned in the witch trials. So *why* don’t you hate the humans who did it?”

“I blame myself–”

“Yes,” she said, “Secretly healing in a far-away village. I know. I know it all. Heck! If it weren’t for me, it would go with you to your grave. If only. Poor Wizard, last of his kind with no little witches or wizards left to enjoy his company. Well, why don’t you hate the scum, the killers, when it was them who took your family away from you? At least I won’t have to hear it from you for much longer.”

“My refusal to fight them is obvious to you, since you’re so sick of hearing about it,” he said angrily.

“It was a long time ago,” she said, mocking him. “A long, long time ago. So what? These are the descendants of the people who threw a flaming torch on to your family’s death pyre. Doesn’t that mean anything? Don’t you want to kill their children, as they killed yours?”

“None of them have anything to do with it. None of the people alive killed them,” he commented with a heavy voice.

“But they have it in their blood. Don’t you see that?” she said, exasperated.

“You have it in your blood to be kind to these humans, like generations of fairies have been. Like your parents were.”

“Shut up!” she screeched. “It’s too late for that now.”

“Yes. Too late, since you killed them,” his voice thundered, in his anger. “How could you ever be like your parents? They gave you so many chances. And I stood by them.”

“And you wish you hadn’t. You feel *so* responsible. Ah! Poor Wizard, the only one who can save humanity, and who hasn’t enough power in him to kill me. Or to save the day.”

“That’s not true–” he said.

“Really? We both know whatever pathetic things you attempt to do, they’re useless against me. All your schemes have come to nothing. You couldn’t lift a finger, not now. And as soon as you’ve finished my bidding, I’ll kill you.”

“What’s in it for me?” His voice was as cold as a wintry draught. “Why should I finish what I’ve started, if it won’t change anything?”

“A painless death if I feel merciful, or a slow, drawn-out, torturous death, if you cross me again. Your ashes will prove very useful to me, either way. A modest parting gift from my Godfather,” she said.

“Godfather! Godfather!” he roared. “I stopped being that a long time ago, when you turned on your family.”

“What did they expect? That I would embrace humanity? Oh, humans, *you’re* the best *species* on this *pathetic little* earth. Why should they be so much more important than we are?”

“In the old times we were at peace,” he stated.

“In the old times we were at peace,” she mimicked. “This is a time of war,” she snarled.

“A war which they don’t even know is happening. A war which they cannot fight.”

“Who cares if they’re ignorant? They provoked it,” she replied.

“Rich words, coming from you, Elantra, who has been, and always will be at war with the world,” he shouted.

“That’s not true. I gave all the fairies the choice.”

“The choice to hate. To become something unnatural like you? Not much of a choice, if you ask me.”

“Fairies are so naturally challenged. Why not be given the chance to hate?”

“To be eaten away by so much magic?”

“I know. Isn’t it wonderful?” she began. “To be absorbed into death. I feel all the ash rise and become part of me. I eat and drink and sleep in it. Whoever thought there was so much life in death, so much power? You cannot stop me, Wizard. Not you. Not anyone.”

The words stirred inside me with urgency, but as hard as I tried, I couldn’t muster up the energy to wake up. Instead, I was dragged down into the world of nightmares.

# Part Two Trapped

## Chapter

“Wake up, Star,” Bower pleaded, his face close to mine and heavy with concern, as I coughed into life. Above, was the lodge’s ceiling. I’d lost track of time.

“I’m not Star. I’m Stacy,” my voice cracked. Distant words from my memory rushed back to me in fragments, like wreckage on a shore.

“Sorry. Don’t move too quickly.” I suddenly recognised his voice among the fragments. Was it a conversation he’d had with the Queen that I’d overheard?

Bower was cradling me, as a parent might hold a baby. What had happened? How did I get here and why was I so weak and woozy?

I reached up and touched Bower’s face, caressing his cheek into a slightly wrinkled smile. How young he still looked, yet how old was he, really? What had his children been like, and had he ever cradled them, as he was cradling me? Did he miss them?

A sharp pain reminded me of their laughter at my supposed demise. “What have you done to me?” I howled, trying to wrestle out of his arms. I had to get away, but I was faint with exhaustion. Helplessly, I flailed, hitting his chest while attempting to push him away.

“No, Stacy.” He sounded nearly as hurt as I was. “It’s OK now. I’m so sorry,” he entreated, before he looked away, ashamed.

I regretted making him feel that way; powerless, but responsible for things he couldn’t change. He was a wizard, a proud spirit, and yet the Queen had so much control over him, over us all. It just wasn’t fair.

Bower said, “I took you close to death. It was a waste of my powers, but I had to convince the Queen.”

“What were the two of you talking about? Witches, the Queen’s parents, and a spell. It must be a spell, but…” I was too shattered.

He rocked me gently, and it felt like water lapping my body. Muffling my worries, it took me back to holidays when I would lie on the beach as the waves washed over my body, and sometimes, to my closed eyes, before it fell away back into the sea. I wasn’t afraid of water when I wasn’t swimming in it. When the sea water bubbled and swashed into my ears, the shouting of other people on the beach faded. Listening to the alluring waves, I was sure they were whispering of the watery underworld, where I imagined strange and beautiful creatures gathered in the dark, calling to me to join them in mind and body.

My eyes were heavy now, and I was so tired as if a war had been waged within me. I had wrestled with oblivion. Death had already forced its poison into me.

I wanted the numbness, the peace, the unknowing of sleep. Sleep, in whatever form, was welcome. Yet a part of me still wanted to fight it off. What if I fell into a deathly slumber?

I had the impression that I needed to know something too. What was it? It was important.

“You’re strong.” Bower’s voice gently soothed me and I finally welcomed sleep. Whatever it was could wait.

## Chapter

I woke up inside the lodge, the sun’s rays forced sharply through the edges of the small, gingham curtain. Two days had passed in a deep but unsettled sleep.

I was surprised to find I had been sleeping on my back, lying on the ottoman with blankets cocooning me. I had always slept on my front since childhood and as long as I could remember. My stomach rumbled.

Bower was asleep in the bed behind me, the colour drained from his face. He looked tired. But as I peered at him for longer, I noticed it was a different sort of tiredness than just a lack of sleep. His mouth was warped and restless as if he couldn’t shake off his worries, even in his inertia. He held on to a tiredness of life, a weariness and heaviness that sleep couldn’t cure.

I stepped out to gather food, with a trug in hand, breathing in the refreshing morning air. The sun was trickling through the trees and patches of dew evaporating slowly. Invigorated with life, I couldn’t remember when I had last felt so refreshed.

Bower had a small vegetable patch close to his home, but I started further afield. I soon realised Bower probably had the best pickings. The fairies were too afraid of Bower. All but Elantra. I stretched to reach and pick a few small apples on a lower branch of a tree.

Strange and strong, stubborn and gruff, that was everything I admired about Bower. I guess I admired it twice as much because I wanted someone tough to protect me in this dangerous world. However, I now realised he lacked those qualities and I’d also witnessed his flaws. He had given in to the Queen yesterday. Or at least appeared to. I hoped the fight wasn’t out of him completely. Surely he wouldn’t give in to her demands.

I picked various wild mushrooms and sticky blackberries and wandered back to his garden, thinking of all the things I heard of yesterday. From his veg patch, I pulled up some potatoes, in case he fancied a similar soup to yesterday’s creation, though I skipped picking any stinging nettles for it.

The questions formed an endless stream of niggling thoughts. If Bower’s family were murdered in the witch trials hundreds of years ago, how old was he?

How could the Queen, Elantra, murder her own parents? Who else had she murdered? And the fairies? Although she might have punished them for their differences, I saw no evidence of it. It worried me. Had she taken away their freewill somehow or brainwashed them?

I realised I didn’t hate Elantra. It was more complicated than that. I pitied her. She could no longer sympathise with anyone. Her own hate and her hate of humanity had destroyed all chances of her reaching out. Yet she had the other fairies. She wasn’t alone. Why did I feel that at all? She could kill me in an instant, yet I wanted her to understand love again. It was strange to have that feeling for someone who wanted me dead.

## Chapter

Bower stirred as I laid the trug on the table. “Star, thank you,” he murmured.

“I’m not Star,” I huffed. Why did he insist on calling me that?

“Throw those back outside.” He reached out, pointing at some mushrooms which were bright red with a cute polka dot pattern.

I picked one up. “What? These?”

“Yes. They’re poisonous,” he confirmed. He was shaky and looked to be straining as he lifted his head from his pillow.

“Are they?” Similar mushrooms had reached me in my incarceration and I had eaten them. Perhaps there was something slightly different about these.

“You still have a lot to learn.”

Tell me about it, I wanted to say.

“I’m too tired to teach you now.” He rested his head back on to the pillow.

I threw the polka dot mushrooms out of the door, then I cut up an apple, and presented it to him in a bowl, with a handful of berries. Horrified by how little he could lift himself and how heavy he was, I dragged him into a sitting position and told him he had to eat.

He took so long chewing three pitiful berries. After those three, he tossed the bowl onto the bed, leaning back against the wall, utterly exhausted. Untouched, the apple was already browning.

“You should eat.” How motherly I sounded! Being an only child and having no younger siblings, it was a new side of me I’d not shown to anyone before.

“I’ll eat later. I don’t feel like it.” Bower said looking so weak.

“Bower–” I started, but I stopped myself. He mustn’t be weak. If he died, what would the Queen do, when she found me alive? My thoughts ran amok, but I couldn’t force him to eat.

“No. It’s OK, Stacy. Everything will be OK.” He held out his arms, invitingly. Though concerned I was too heavy for him, I perched on his lap like he was an elderly family relative, offering what little comfort I could. Soon, I put my full weight on him, resting my head on his chest. I felt safe, missing the childhood attentions I had received from my parents until recent years.

A whistling sound escaped his lips as he inhaled deeply overhead, like he was gathering the strength to tell me something.

“Your parents and your friends will be missing you,” he said, seeming to read my thoughts.

“No,” I replied slowly. “You don’t understand. No one would miss me.” The last time I’d been at school, I’d wanted a sinkhole to appear and to just slip away into it, as Jas and Anjali disappeared and left me standing in the playground on my own. If only I could disappear now. I hid my head back into Bower’s clothes, smelling the natural scent of the wood. It was hard to admit how badly the last few weeks had taken a toll on my relationships. Things weren’t ideal with my parents either.

“Of course they will. Your parents will be missing you too. They love you, Stacy.” He lifted my chin and parted some of my hair which had fallen over my face. As he smiled at me, dimples appeared in his cheeks.

“Try telling that to them,” I replied doubtful, as I looked away.

“I know they love you.”

“How do you know?” I looked up at him.

“I’m sure they do. Besides,” he added, “I would love you, if you were my child.”

We were silent for a long time as I took in what he’d just said.

A line warped his forehead. “Why did you come here?”

“I don’t know.” There was something I still hadn’t figured out from our first encounter; a look of recognition, as if he knew me, but from where or when, I didn’t know. Why would anyone in the fairy world know me? In a bout of sudden nervousness, I cleared my throat and said, “You. It was you. Well, that and my phone. I couldn’t go back without it.”

He didn’t reply with “me?” as if he didn’t know what I meant. A light flickered through his eyes before he said, “Let me rest. Tonight, I may well tell you some things you need to know.” He smiled weakly. “But first I need to sleep. Feed the hart. Whatever you do, you mustn’t open the cage door, got that?” He squeezed my wrist, emphasising its importance.

“OK. I won’t,” I replied.

He let go of my wrist and said, “Get some grass for it. Some water.”

“Do you mean from the stream?”

He nodded. “Be careful. Stay hidden.” He yawned as his eyes opened and closed a few times and his pale face dropped close to his chest.

Bower had told me before, that bringing me close to death was a waste of his powers. He could have left me to die. I was, after all, no different from the other children who were sacrificed. Why save me, when he couldn’t save any of the others?

I gently slid myself out of his lap and sat on the ottoman chair. Looking into Bower’s weathered face, it was as if I were gazing up to a statue, some revered grey figure, obscured by history. It was tragic that neither Bower nor the Queen could change their past. Bower had lost his family. The Queen had murdered hers. Did she regret it now and feel remorse, but try to hide it? Was Bower sad too? Poor Bower. Whatever the Queen was planning, stopping it all seemed to rest in his hands, the hands of one tired, old wizard.

A mew sounded. I lifted the tablecloth and peered into the hart’s cage. It staggered a few steps before reaching the bars. With enormous eyes staring up at me, it shyly inched towards a small drinking container. Cautiously, it lapped at the water. When it paused, I let the tablecloth drop back down, not wanting to disturb it any longer.

I transferred the remaining berries from the trug to a large bowl on the table. If Bower wouldn’t eat them, I’d eat them later. I retrieved the trug, checked one last time on Bower and the concealed hart, then added a water bucket to take with me too.

Outside, I ripped up long bunches of overgrown grass around the outskirts of Bower’s veg patch and collected them in the trug, before depositing it in front of the lodge’s door.

I wandered for a bit with the water bucket, not knowing how to find the stream. If only I’d asked Bower before he’d fallen asleep. My breath caught in my throat at the unexpected beauty of a glade of foxgloves, which appeared up ahead.

“Wow!” I stood staring at them from the outskirts, before sitting down, resting my back against a tree and looking closely at the nearest display of vivid flowers. Deep purple lupins were scattered amongst the large foxgloves, with their spectacular luscious flowering turrets. Bees and butterflies hummed and fluttered above.

I sighed, relishing the moment. I heard the faint sound of a few grasshoppers rubbing their legs together. In the air, particles of dust, unsettled by a light breeze, shimmered in the light as they fell. I shivered. How much longer would I have to wear my PJs, and how long was I going to be here? Finally, I closed my eyes.

Drifting in my thoughts, I fixed on a sound of flowing water. It had to be the stream. I shut out all other noise, but for the beat of my heart. The water filled the gaps between each steady beat, like blood, and soon, I was aware the watery sound was coming from my left. I listened for another minute before opening my eyes, picking up the water bucket and running towards the source.

I was out of breath when I arrived at the stream. Bluebells and wild orchids flowered on the far bank, and I remembered the day I’d first explored the wood. That day seemed so long ago to me. A lot had changed.

Had my parents started a search party looking for me, or had my face been added to the menagerie of missing-child posters? If I followed the stream further, would it lead me home?

I was so close and it would only take a few minutes to get there. Then what? Bower wasn’t well. I owed it to him to stay until his strength returned, didn’t I? True he had saved my life, but I hadn’t asked to be taken close to death. It had been something he’d decided on, following the Queen’s demands. Why should I feel guilty for his choices? I left the bucket on the bank, and jumped towards the other side, but I hit something hard and I didn’t quite make it to the opposite bank.

“Ow!” I fell into the stream backwards, splashing water everywhere, including my face. My pyjama trousers were soaked, but I hardly noticed. In the water’s ripple, it looked like I had fairy wings, but they were gone once the surface flattened. What was that?

I couldn’t see anything literally blocking me either. Had I imagined it? I stood. Reaching out my hand cautiously, I found something solid. An invisible wall? I felt around and it seemed to go higher than I could reach. It was there, practically against the ground too. Oh no! Unless there was a break in it somewhere, that dashed all my hopes of going home without someone else to help. Annoyed, I hit the water’s surface with my hand and spotted the odd shimmer image of myself with fairy wings again. It vanished away. This place was so weird. I collected water and returned to the lodge.

\* \* \*

At the lodge, I spilled water on my trousers while putting down the bucket. “Ah!” I cried. Nothing was going my way today! Remembering Bower, I glanced up. He was still asleep, slumped forwards in a seated position. Taking greater care not to make noise, I slid the trug silently on to the table. I added more fuel to the fire to make sure my wet pyjamas would dry. Securing a blanket around me by folding the top over, I removed my pyjama trousers. Next, I rotated the rocking chair to position its back towards the fire, and draped my pyjama trousers over the back to get them as close to the fire’s warmth as possible.

While I waited for my pyjamas to dry, I lifted one side of the tablecloth to view the hart. The poor thing’s tiny legs trembled in fear, as I knelt down and shuffled closer to it. “I won’t hurt you,” I whispered.

The hart mewed forlornly, cutting into my heart. Did it miss its mother, like I missed mine? I thought of releasing it, its fate in my hands. Its mother was likely waiting nearby in the woods for its return. Suppose she had died, though, and Bower had taken in the little hart to look after in its mother’s absence. Still, Bower should have known that it didn’t belong in a cage. What did he want from it? I didn’t want to question Bower’s actions, yet how important could it be, not to liberate it now? And why had he been so determined I not open the cage door? Perhaps he would give some answers when he’d recovered.

After I squeezed my wrists through the woven bars, removing the water bowl was simple. Considering his larger wrists, I was curious about how Bower refilled it, but he had his arms tucked under a blanket from his elbows down.

Although the water appeared pristine and the bowl was half full, I added fresh water and returned it to the cage. The grass, scattered over the woven wicker bars, landed on the hart’s back in unpredictable ways, making it flinch. “Oops, sorry,” I whispered. I thought of giving the hart a name, but then I thought this would capture it in some other unspeakable way, as the cage had done. I couldn’t do that.

While the hart was eating, I rose and put the tablecloth back. What now? Bower was unlikely to wake soon, leaving me with the rest of the day. My pyjamas would soon be dry, and my proximity to where the fairies lived was too tempting to ignore. If Bower wouldn’t help, I could try rescuing the children myself or lead help here into the woods. That was if I could ever find a way out or to convince anyone that what I was saying made any sense. It was dangerous, but being the eldest out of all the children, and the only one walking around freely, it appeared the responsibility lay on my shoulders, even if I didn’t want it.

I had to be careful though. If the Queen found me, there was no way I’d be spared a second time.

## Chapter

I crept close to the tree trunks, while also keeping some distance between myself and the path as I made my way to the Queen’s court.

Alarmed by the sound of a voice above me, in the tree houses overhead, I stopped and I leaned my back into a tree. I wished I had looked around Bower’s lodge to find something else to cover up my striped pyjamas, though the blanket I had earlier would have been an even worse idea. It didn’t exactly shout combat ready, and the woollen fibres probably would have snagged on just about every tree I’d passed.

“Hi,” said a male fairy who had flown from one tree house to another right above me. Thankfully, he hadn’t noticed me below the boughs of the tree. Through the slats of the tree house floor, I could see feet move towards him. “Have you heard what the Queen’s going to do at the next full moon?” I strained my neck, as if with those few extra centimetres, I could eavesdrop easier.

“No. What?” the fairy inside asked, while I was on tenterhooks.

“She’s going to give us the Power of Ages and make us as powerful as her.”

“Wow! The Power of Ages!” exclaimed the fairy inside.

“Yeah. I know. Sounds wonderful, doesn’t it?” The Power of Ages? What was that? Both fairies left the tree house together.

After they were gone, I ran, dashing from tree to tree. I thought everything was OK, but the more I looked up, the more my mind raced with images of the fairies capturing me again. Each tree house was surprisingly close above me, a ceiling collapsing in on me. How many fairies were inside each dwelling, only metres away from discovering me?

Without realising, I stumbled into the area with meadow flowers, in front of the Queen’s court, approaching it side on. I froze. I spotted two fairies ahead. Oh no!

I forced myself to move and ducked back into the undergrowth behind two huge ferns that were unfurling in the morning sun. A few fairies wandered past me, their feet skirting the edges of the meadow plants. If I had reached out a hand, I could have touched their ankles. A dozen others flew in and descended outside the Queen’s court.

I crept through the undergrowth, round to the back. My heart slammed against my rib cage with each beat, as fear gripped me. It became harder to breathe. Was I hyperventilating? Why was this happening to me?

I stopped and concentrated on breathing deeper and slower. Everything was OK. Come on body, stop panicking. Breathe normally. I was going to pieces in a way I never had before. I waited until my panic passed, before I moved again. My brush with death, had left a lasting mark on me. Or maybe it was the fear of being sacrificed if I was found out. Finally, my breathing returned to normal.

Two fairy guards were posted outside the prison. I crept to the back where the guards wouldn’t be able to spot me and peered through a hole in the wood, where an old knot had fallen lose. Two children saw me, but I didn’t recognise either of them. New arrivals?

The two pointed at me from inside, and then more children looked, snapping their heads towards me with cold, sharp eyes. I didn’t recognise any faces at all. I gasped with confusion. They couldn’t all be new, could they? How extensive was this kidnapping heist? Considering the Queen had engineered quite the ceremony of the single sacrifice I had seen, it seemed unlikely that all those children that had been caged with me, would have all been sacrificed already. But if not, where were they?

I planned to whisper to them that they weren’t forgotten, but I couldn’t recover from my shock, the words now stale in my mouth.

“What are you doing here? You’ll get caught,” one of them, a girl, who was standing in the prison warned me.

“I’m here to help,” I said.

Contrary to my expectations, not one of them cracked a surprised or hopeful smile, not even her. A few visibly shook with distress before they looked away uninterested. Others continued to glare at me, with narrowed eyes, outraged and fiercely angry as if I were their enemy.

“What’s your plan?” she asked. “You don’t have one, do you?” she said, crossing her arms.

“No. Not right now, but I’ll come back with one.”

“Forget it. It’ll be too late.”

I didn’t know what to say. I planted my eye against the hole again, about to ask them if they’d seen any other children, and I received a prompt poke in the eye from a boy inside. “Ow! What was that for!” I yelped.

“Human!” he shouted. Oh no!

I threw myself head-down into the undergrowth, narrowly missing gashing my face on gigantic bramble thorns. My knees were grazed, my heart thundering.

I heard footsteps approaching and I took the chance of dashing behind a tree close by. I dropped low, wishing myself away. The boy was still making a din.

The footsteps stopped and I held my breath. Had the fairies seen me get away? I heard nothing. Perhaps the fairy guard had already moved on. I waited for a couple of minutes in intense anxiety. The boy was silent now.

“There’s no one there,” a voice said, dismissively, before I heard footsteps receding.

I breathed uneasily and crept away, rattled because the children had tried to give me up. That was close. Far too close.

Bower slept soundly when I reached the lodge again. Even though I ate until I was tired of apples and berries, hunger and boredom persisted. I craved the taste of Mum’s cooking, especially beef burgers and chicken. I hadn’t had those for ages. The crunchy crust and soft white centre of bread were even things I missed. It all created the fullness of the stomach that could temporarily mask the emptiness I was feeling in my heart.

How could children just like me, be so hostile to being rescued and strike out at the hand of help? But maybe I had been like that myself. I only had to think of the way I had been with Bower, thrashing out at him after he had nearly killed me. A simple mistake, especially when I didn’t know what was going on. It still puzzled me why he had saved me though.

## Chapter

“How are you feeling?” I asked Bower after he woke. It had been hours. I was still thinking about how I could free the children, but it was becoming less and less likely to be something I could do alone.

“Rough,” he replied, but it appeared he had strength enough to stoke the fire and add fresh wood to it. He grunted and strained after, as he reclined into the rocking chair in front of the fire.

“Can I talk to you?” I asked.

“Let me guess, you want answers?”

I nodded.

“I’ll get to that soon. I’m hungry. Please bring in one of the dead wood pigeons hung up outside?”

“Ew!” I shivered, unable to contain my disgust. “You eat pigeons?”

“Yes. Do you have a problem with that?”

“No, but ew! Why are they hanging outside? Don’t you eat them fresh?”

“No. I let them rest a few days. It improves the flavour of the meat. Now, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“I picked some ingredients earlier for a soup.” I pointed at the few bits I had gathered from his garden which were on the table, including the bowl of blackberries. “Some potatoes and um… mushrooms.” Where were the mushrooms? “I forgot I had to throw them out. Well, there are some potatoes and plenty of blackberries. I’m not suggesting you combine them.”

“Not today, thank you. I’ll have potatoes with something tomorrow.”

“Do I have to get a dead pigeon?” I asked.

“You don’t have to, but it would help. I assume you don’t want any?”

“I’m happier sticking to blackberries.” I looked at Bower. Would he change his mind? But he said nothing. I guess he wouldn’t. “OK,” I said, resigned, “I’ll get one. Where are they?” I asked, as I grabbed my torch, resting on top of the chest of drawers.

He pointed with his finger. “Around the back. They’re protected from the weather under the roof.”

Around the back of the lodge, I caught sight of two dead pigeons, hung and tied by their necks from a hook near the roof.

As I stood on tiptoes to retrieve the closest one, my fingers sunk through the layer of feathers to touch its cold flesh. I couldn’t help feeling sorry for it. Poor thing! Its glassy eyes stared at me in the moonlight.

With the door ajar, I pushed it open with my foot, holding the dead pigeon at arm’s length, prompting Bower to observe, “You look uncomfortable.”

“You think!” I said. Where on earth could I drop it? Uh! And the stink! It had an unpleasant raw meat odour. I didn’t want it to touch the tablecloth, but if he was going to eat it, the floor wasn’t the best idea either.

Bower said, “Give it here.” He sighed, rose out of the chair and took it from my hands. As he expertly plucked the bird, feathers fell out in tufts, dropping to the floor.

Approaching the hearth, Bower, obscured by his shadow, skewered the thing and hung it to roast over the fire. Pulling the rocking chair nearer the fireplace, he prepared to rotate the spit as needed. I glanced quickly from the roasting pigeon, its bright eyes gleaming in the firelight, to the feathers scattered on the floor.

“How did you kill it?” I asked.

“I don’t think you want to know.” He added, “I hope you’re not normally this squeamish.”

“Why?”

He didn’t answer.

After Bower had eaten the wood pigeon and disposed of the bones and feathers outside, he crossed the room to the window, glancing back at me expectantly. With a hand he beckoned me. Did he want to show me something? He pulled open the red, gingham curtain and I joined him.

“See that star up there?” he asked, nodding his head, as he stooped down to peer out the window.

I stood in front of him, his hand upon my shoulder. It was inky black outside and there were dark shapes forming, where the vegetables were growing up the row of poles and wigwams. A gap between the trees framed the star-filled sky. I pretended to humour him and looked up in the general direction. “Yes,” I said.

“No, you don’t,” Bower chided. I glanced back at him and he smiled. “Here, why don’t you try this?” He handed me a telescope which sat on the window sill. “It doesn’t get much use.”

I pointed it at the sky. It was like I was looking through someone else’s glasses. “Why’s it so blurry?” I asked.

He laughed and said, “Here,” as he twisted a section of the telescope.

Suddenly the stars were brilliantly focused and crisp. “Wow!” I exclaimed. The universe was laid out for me. Every light could represent a whole other solar system and each starry vista was like a trail of stepping stones leading to the next galaxy. It was amazingly beautiful.

“Have you ever been star-gazing?” Bower asked.

Still looking through the telescope, I replied, “No. There’s too much light pollution.”

“Consider this your first experience then,” he said, letting me take it all in. When I next glanced at him, smiling, he raised an eyebrow. “Right. Are you ready?”

I nodded.

“We’re trying to find that one up there,” he said.

I followed his finger to a particular star. I planted an eye against the telescope, trying to find it. Was that it? No, I wasn’t sure. There were too many other stars competing against it. I had completely lost it.

“What am I looking for again?” I asked.

He pointed with his finger. “Do you see, it’s a brighter star?”

I pressed the telescope to my eye again and this time spotted it. “Yeah. I think I’ve got it now,” I said. Sure enough, it was brighter than the other stars around it.

“That’s a great wizard,” Bower announced.

“What?” I carefully placed the telescope on the window sill, before I sat down on the ottoman. Was everything going to be this frustrating with him? How could a star be a wizard?

“Have you ever heard the saying: *You were made from dust, and to dust you will return*?” he said, remaining close to the window.

“No,” I replied.

“It’s from the Bible.”

“So?”

“That star was formed by the wizard’s ashes or his dust, whatever you wish to call it. That’s the spell, what it’s used for. It’s a tribute. I’d always hoped I would be remembered in that way. Up there, the ashes of wizards create the birth of a star. The dust continues to feed and nurture the star until it can perpetuate its own life. With a new star, there is always the possibility for life on other planets. It’s at least one condition that has to be in place.”

“You mean for aliens?” I asked, laughing as he shut the curtain.

“Yes, not aliens travelling through space faster than the speed of light, more advanced than us, but simple aliens, stuck on their earth, as we are on ours, and just as wonderful. More likely smaller things though, little amoebae and bacteria.”

“And those tiny alien bacteria are worth something?” I pulled a crass face.

“If not, then a star adds another light into this world of darkness. There’s nothing wrong with that, is there?”

“No. I guess not,” I responded.

Bower moved the rocking chair and parked it on the opposite side of the table from me. As he sat down in it, he rocked it.

“But Bower, what use has the Queen got for a spell like that? It makes little sense,” I said, shaking my head.

“Every spell can be turned on its head to do evil. Rather than gift something to the stars, the Queen wants the stars to be drawn to her. The wizards” stars are much more powerful now than the seed of magic that originally went out with the ashes of each wizard. And there are thousands more that were not created by us. She wants to pull them all to her and take their power from the sky.”

“Why?”

Bower leaned his elbows on the table. He joined his hands together, close to his chin. In that position the chair couldn’t rock. The room was sealed in silence.

“Because she can,” he said, solemnly. “You heard the Queen when you were close to death, didn’t you?”

I nodded at the painful memory.

“Then you know how power hungry she is,” Bower continued. “She needs it all to make her change.”

What did it mean? I knew she was ghostly in places, but what was she turning into? “What will happen if she succeeds. What’ll happen to her?” I asked.

“Who knows? For the stars to be combined into one malevolent being, I can’t even imagine.” He shook his head and let out a heavy breath, before he resumed. “And I’ve seen no one come that close to pure dust before either. Perhaps she’ll become immortal.”

“Immortal? Really?” I asked, stunned.

“It’s hard to tell,” Bower winced grimly as he deliberated. “I think most of her mind will be lost, apart from the madness that compels her to be that way.”

“Lose her mind? Do you think she realises that?” I asked.

“Yes. Deep down maybe. She will lose herself completely, if not for the one thought of revenge and death for humanity along with anything else that she can destroy with it,” he said.

“And what about her body?” I quizzed.

He answered, “I’ve already seen her acquire the ability to become solid and unsolid at will, at least in her limbs where some of her cells have already died.” His furrowed brow creased and he looked troubled.

“What? How’s that possible?” I gasped.

“You’ve seen how her physical body isn’t intact, as if she’s disappearing. Although she can never recreate the living cells she’s lost, she can make parts of herself solid again by gathering quantities of sand, stones or water even, to make a fluid viable self.”

“Wow! That’s–that’s–”

“Weird? Impressive?”

“Yeah.”

“She’ll need to be solid somewhere permanently or she won’t be able to use magic or anchor herself to this world. Most of her torso is still solid, but power eats at her, reducing her physical body each time she collects more dust from someone. It won’t be long until she’ll be an outline of her old self, like a footprint in the sand on a beach.”

“What does the Queen plan to do exactly?” I asked, before I drunk some water from my goblet on the table. I couldn’t imagine making a part of my body from water or from sand or stones.

“Well, the human populace won’t know she’s the cause, if she succeeds and blackens the sky. She could simply let the world die slowly without the sun. Scientists could come up with plausible theories for why the sky’s gone black. I don’t think she’s bothered by recognition, but she wouldn’t want the end of things to be so mundane and undramatic. That’s not her style. You know before when I said that adults can’t often see magic?”

I nodded. It had been a couple of days ago now, but I could vaguely remember he’d said something like that.

He continued, “If they can’t see it, they can’t be touched by it.”

“So what’s the point of having that much power if you can’t impact adults, who you want to control?”

“There are ways around that.” He paused, the frown on his forehead deepening even further. “She loves using children and she loves revenge. Combining the two is her tour de force. In earth’s last hours, she plans to drive children to kill their parents and any other adults they can find.” He shrugged as though it wasn’t a big a deal as it clearly was.

“What? She can’t!” I knew he was serious. A few minutes of silence passed before I asked, “How would she even *do* that?”

“Every child has a part of them that wants to rebel, to experience the freedoms parents withhold. Maybe you were aware of it too, when you were dreaming of fairies. The Queen will bewitch the entire world’s children. Because of the fantasy she plants, they will bend to her will like, well, like children. They are more malleable. It will be straightforward, once she has all that power and the Book of Knowledge.”

“What’s that?”

“A special spell book.” From atop the chest of drawers, he retrieved my torch after standing. He opened the door of the lodge, shining the torch into the dark as if checking for activity. He closed the door again, then, wedged the frame of the rocking chair against the doorhandle to secure it. Bower motioned for me to stand and, after I did, he dragged the ottoman chair a short distance away from where it had been resting. Where he knelt, there appeared to be a tiny crevice in one floorboard and Bower used his fingernails to prize it free. He then lifted the next couple of floorboards too.

From the dark hole in the floor, Bower carefully lifted a wooden box. He removed the lid of the box to reveal a thick black book. In gold lettering on the cover was the title “The Book of Knowledge.”

“You should never take it out or show anyone,” he urged. He let me hold it, but only for a few seconds. I opened it and was about to flick through it, when he snapped it shut on my thumb and yanked it back.

“Ow!” I exclaimed as I rubbed my throbbing thumb.

He didn’t seem to notice my discomfort, and he returned the book back into the box.

“With this in her possession, she could design nightmares to replay unhappy memories in children’s minds.”

“Nightmares? That’s terrible. What nightmares?”

“I don’t know. Reliving being punished by their parents. Or maybe reliving times when their parents were unsupportive. It happens more than you think.”

“I know what that’s like,” I said, nursing my thumb.

“What? Being punished?”

“No, the latter. My own parents aren’t exactly supportive.”

“Really? I’m sorry to hear that.”

He continued to kneel as he reinstated the book in its former hiding place. “There are so many other things that parents do without realising how much damage they’ve caused to their children.”

“Why are parents like that?” I said, unable to hold back a bit of disgust for this type of parent. Bower replaced the flooring and stood up.

“They’re not *all* like that. And I would have hoped you’d have a positive experience with yours?”

“Erm. Why?”

He ignored my question and said, instead, “There’s not exactly a rule book or a learning course that parents take before child rearing. It’s not like driving a car or learning a degree.”

“But it’s even more important to not mess it up, isn’t it?”

“Of course it is. But some parents have no choice other than to muddle along the best they can, hoping their child will turn out alright. Anyway, the Queen could give children dreams of what the world would be like without authority figures. Dreams of how they would be free to do what they want. Push the right buttons and you can drive them to do almost anything.”

“You won’t let her do it, though?” I asked.

“No,” he said, though he didn’t speak on the subject further.

## Chapter

“Thanks for helping,” Bower said, pausing for a moment to get his breath back, while we were working in his garden. It was morning and he’d shown me what weeds he wanted pulled up.

“It’s fine. I’ve always been green fingered.” It felt good to get my hands dirty and I’d made progress.

“Really?”

“Yeah. My plant just seem to grow overnight. I guess I’m charmed.” I laughed as I brushed some dirt off my hands.

He smiled, though it seemed forced. “Did you sleep OK last night?”

“Uh huh,” I replied, though I’d hardly slept at all.

“Sorry if I snored.”

“I didn’t notice,” I said. He had snored a little, but it hadn’t kept me up. What had kept me up was worrying about Queen’s plans for destroying the world. “Yesterday, when you said if you were a human, you would know nothing of the Queen, what did you mean?”

“Humans interpret creatures of magic differently. If a fairy were to do something out of the ordinary, like flying, for instance, they might not see the fairy’s body at all. Magic is a blind spot in the human psyche.”

I picked at the grit collecting under my fingernails.

“The Queen is even trickier, her body becoming so saturated with dust, it’s corrupting her cells. For many humans, they won’t see her. A few might think of her as a ghost, if they think it’s more plausible,” he said.

“Okoh!” I emitted a ghostly noise and waved my arms.

He chuckled before he stooped to pull up a weed or two himself. “Do you want to know a bit more about dust and magic?” he said, straining as he pulled up a weed with his hand.

“Yeah. The two are new to me. Here, do you want the weed-puller?”

He nodded and I handed it to him. “I’ll only pull up some little weeds,” he said. “The more dust you have, the more you’ll see magic and magical creatures. Humans can’t perform magic. They simply haven’t enough dust. Magic is the use or application of dust by wizards, witches or fairies. You with me so far?”

“Yeah,” I said.

He dropped the weed-puller beside the leaves of the pulled weeds and sat exhausted beside his bed of courgettes. “I shouldn’t have done that.” His breath was ragged. “Do you ever get the feeling that you aren’t part of this reality? Or you’re disconnected from your body occasionally?”

I nodded. The memory of a shared group therapy session came to mind, after Jas had overdosed.

Jas had said, “It’s too intense and it got so bad. It’s like everything is focused on this one boy. When it failed, it was just like, well, that’s it, game over. I wanted to die. I couldn’t see the good things in my life. I just wanted the pain to end.”

During the joint therapy sessions, struggling with Jas’s suicidal thoughts, I switched back and forth between intense crying and feeling detached from myself, like I was having an out of body experience. Anjali may have felt the same.

To help Jas, who found that romantic relationships worsened her symptoms, the three of us agreed on a pact to avoid romance. To be fair though, few boys had turned my head recently.

Jas was shortly diagnosed with Emotional Intensity Disorder. It included symptoms of unstable and intense emotions which she didn’t know how to deal with, thoughts of suicide, chronic feelings of emptiness and fear of abandonment.

Why had I not thought about this before? No wonder she blew up when I said I would leave to go to another school. How could I forget? She did have a fear of abandonment and it wasn’t the first time. It must have come as a shock to her I was leaving.

“Sorry, I know it’s nothing to do with what we were talking about, but if your best friend said they were going to be leaving, would you get angry with them?” I asked, helping him to get up, after he gestured me close to him.

“No. Of course not. Are you changing schools?” He tried not to lean too much of his weight on me and we walked back to the lodge.

“Yeah. Jas, she’s one of my best friends, she was really obnoxious and spiteful. Anjali, my other best friend told me to stop contacting her. Anyway, they’re both ignoring me. I saw them in the shopping centre playing besties with another girl. Ungrateful cows,” I couldn’t help adding.

“Sounds like you’re angry too. Fear can make us do funny things. Not laugh out loud funny.”

“I guess so,” I said. It wasn’t more than a few days ago he had faked my death just to please the Queen who I was pretty sure he feared. “So, when we have an out of body experience or dissociation, you think we could be like dipping our toes into another reality?” I asked as he got his breath back. We weren’t far from the lodge now. Just a few more steps.

“Dipping our minds more like. I don’t think it’s a reality we can experience with our bodies.”

“What is this reality then?”

“The ethereal reality. A reality which we know so little of. Dust permeates both realities and is free to enter and leave,” he said.

“OK. So, why does dust move between each reality?” I asked, as we reached the door of the lodge. He opened the door and transferred his weight to the doorframe, as he gripped it with one hand. “Ta. I’ve got this. Do you remember when I mentioned a verse from the Bible, the phrase: *You were made from dust, and to dust you will return*?”

“Yeah. Doesn’t it mean that your body will go back to the earth?”

“There’s more to it than that. The dust that created you can return to the unseen reality.”

“The ethereal reality?”

“Yes.”

“And what if I don’t believe in God?”

He shrugged and said, “All I want is for you to think for yourself. Question life and all its wonders.”

“I still think it’s strange how you believe. Magic seems at odds with God.”

“And you think about God and magic often, do you?” he joked and smiled before he shook his head. “All of creation comes from the same source and if God can’t support a wizard’s existence who believes in His ethereal reality, how can He support the existence of humans? Humans are so self-unaware. Do you think combining the right ingredients to make life is a simple thing to come by accidentally? What I believe shouldn’t influence you. Stacy, what do you believe?”

## Chapter

“I’d best be getting on. I’ve got things to do,” Bower announced after lunch. He stood up and forced the back of the rocking chair against the doorhandle. “We might not have much time.”

“Time for what?”

“Can you keep yourself entertained for a while?”

I nodded. Revision? Without my school books, I’d have to do it all from memory. I guess that wouldn’t work.

Bower opened up the lowest drawer in the chest of drawers and pulled out a small stack of books. “Here. You can have a flick through these.” He placed them on the table and gestured for me to move from the ottoman. He pried up a few boards of the floor again. Whatever he was planning to do, it was clear the Book of Knowledge played a part in it. He placed the Book of Knowledge on the table and sat down on the ottoman beside me.

The stack of books comprised of one hefty Bible and two smaller books. One of the later, looked to be a child’s book with cute fairy illustrations. I might have read one similar to it when I was six or seven. The other book, showing signs of wear and tear, had a black-and-white photo on the front of a young girl and a fairy. Both depicted fairies traditionally, harmless and tiny, that I could have believed in, until a few days ago.

“Is this all the books you have?”

He nodded. “They’re few, I know. I used to keep a diary which had my own spells and incantations in, but I destroyed those pages from it, a while ago.”

“What’s this one?” I propped up the book with the black and white photo on it, so he could see the front cover.

“Read it and find out. Some girls claimed to have taken photos of fairies back in 1917. Obviously, they weren’t real, but it’s quite famous. Now, if you don’t mind, I need a bit of quiet.”

Bower had the Book of Knowledge open on the table to the middle page, where the sewn binding was visible. He gazed at its pages and uttered a spell:

“Wizards of Old

Created this mould

Of what our young wizards should learn,

But the Book fallen foul

Is useless to us now,

Book and binding, break and burn!”

The spell seemed to have no effect and without realising it, I was drawn towards the book, trying to read the words on the page.

“Please don’t read this incantation,” implored Bower.

“Why not? I don’t actually know what it’s about.”

“Well, I’m trying to destroy the book, not have more dangerous spells committed to someone else’s memory.”

“What’s the harm in it? You said humans can’t perform spells.”

He didn’t comment, but blocked my view with a robed arm. He tried the same spell to destroy the book in different languages.

I flicked through the pictures of the books which were in front of me. Tackling my boredom I read a random Bible passage, which, as expected, was full of sexist garbage. I’d forgotten how grim some passages in the bible could be, especially from the Old Testament.

After a while, Bower gravely closed the Book of Knowledge, sat down in his rocking chair and sighed. “Maybe it’s too soon to be trying that anyway.”

“If God’s so great, why are women side-lined in the Bible?”

“Why do you think they are?”

“Well, Eve was the one who was tempted first in the Garden of Eden. Bathsheba was given the job to betray Samson. All the disciples were men. Sexist or what?”

“Yeah. That does sound sexist.” Bower explained the Bible was written during a time when many cultures were heavily patriarchal. “The proximity between wizards and humans led some wizards to view witches as inferior too. You know, in this country women only got the right to vote in 1918?”

I nodded. “So? Couldn’t the Bible be updated?”

“Maybe it should be. Though it would take a lot of work.” Rising to his feet, he searched one of his boxes near the door for a smoking pipe. He paused, pipe in hand, glanced at me, reconsidered, and didn’t fill it. “It helps me to think,” he said, but he stowed it back where it came from.

“So what you’re saying is the Bible reflects the social norms of its era, right?” I asked.

He nodded.

“This still doesn’t answer why so many people continue to believe women are lesser and take the Bible literally. Surely, it’s wrong, isn’t it?”

He nodded and said, “People aren’t perfect. There’ll never come an end of people who use religion, all religion, to justify their own claims. While reading the Bible, try to distinguish between God’s words and man’s. Not every person will take the same meaning from it. Jesus stood apart from most men of his time. Yes, only men were official disciples, but again, that was because of the patriarchal society he was living in. It was hard enough for him to be heard and accepted even conforming in those ways. After his resurrection, Jesus revealed himself to Mary Magdelene before any of his male disciples and during his life, he interacted with women who were social outcasts. Jesus had a lot of respect for women. Do you want to hear something radical?”

I couldn’t stop myself from smiling. What was radical in his eyes could be something so normal in mine, but I still wanted to know. “What?”

“In more recent times, some people like to think of God as a woman, because God being like a man is an idea that’s also come from a male driven society. There are some things in the Bible that could support this view. God says: *Like a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.* God gives Himself many other female attributes, or should I say, instead, *She* gives *Herself* female attributes? Both men and women are in God’s image.”

God being a woman. Now that was new.

## Chapter

Bower ignited a powerful curiosity within me. I’d never spoken to my parents in such a way about religion. Maybe my parents were just embarrassed they couldn’t offer any answers.

As Bower napped through some of the late afternoon and into the evening; I spent the time relaxing on the lodge’s small wooden porch. Using an old drawing set found by Bower, I sketched the lodge’s garden and surrounding woods. Birds chirped cheerfully in the trees and time seemed to slow, a lazy, sun-drenched stillness hanging in the air.

Like a fisherman extending his fishing line, my thoughts wandered, stretching out farther and farther. After the week I’d had, the space to think was helpful and calming, as long as I didn’t dwell on my parents, friends, and the horrible sacrifice. My memories returned intensely if I did, leaving me feeling submerged and helpless like a toy soldier in a bath. No! It was best not to go there.

To my relief, my time outside was fairy-free. Had I seen one, I would have dashed back to the lodge, seeking refuge and hoping to remain unnoticed.

Now, the evening was drawing to a close and, inside the lodge, we were both preparing for bed. I was retrieving blankets from inside the ottoman’s storage compartment, when Bower announced, “I’ve got something for you.” He yawned.

“What is it?” I asked as I closed the ottoman’s lid.

Bower presented me with a tiny, pearl-drop shaped vial, holding it carefully between his thumb and index finger. “A potion. It will let your parents know you are safe,” he said.

As I took it, I cradled the vial within my palm. “How does it work?”

“Think of one of them and they’ll be with you. Choose carefully because you’ll only have one chance. You can tell them you’re OK, but don’t try telling them where you are, it’ll only make them more convinced you’re dead. Even if they step over the stream, they wouldn’t see any of this. To them this is an empty wood and you are part of this world now, Star– Stacy, sorry. You can’t leave. The Queen created a barrier around this place.

“The wall by the stream?”

He nodded. “The fairies can fly over it, the dream spirits can fit through the gaps, but there’s no way back for you yet,” Bower confirmed.

“Couldn’t I climb over it?” I asked.

“I don’t think so. The top is higher than I can reach.”

“I could try sometime with your help.”

“Maybe,” he agreed, reluctantly. He seemed sure it wouldn’t work.

“If it’s impossible to get out, how did I get back through it the first night I was here?” I asked.

“You had only been beyond it for a few minutes. The barrier is at its weakest, when the threshold has just been crossed.” He eased himself back into the bed, leaving me to it. Ready to sleep on the ottoman in my pyjamas, I propped myself up on my front, on my elbow, and kicked up my legs, absent-mindedly behind me. I rolled the fingers of my free hand, along the glass of the vial.

My face and hair were greasy, but what else was I supposed to do without a clean pair of clothes? I must have stunk, but Bower hadn’t remarked on it. It wasn’t as if I could nip to the stream whenever I wanted and have a wash. What if a fairy saw me alive and well?

Maybe tomorrow, I could see if he could warm some water up for me, and I could take a quick wash. Perhaps some blankets hanging between the trees outside could afford enough privacy? It wouldn’t take long.

On the vial, I half expected to see instructions in the orange hue of the fire, but there weren’t any. I turned over and was about to ask Bower, but he was already asleep again, half his face lost under his blanket. His feet were uncovered, hanging off the end of his bed and his brown moccasin shoes had already slipped to the floor. I kept meaning to ask him about my phone too and if we could go looking for it. Oh well. I hoped the potion had no horrible side effects.

Which of my parents should I should go to? Who would panic in my absence as though there was no tomorrow? I smiled a little. Mum. That I knew for sure. I drank the entire potion, coughing at the potent smell of lavender and spoiled milk.

I set down the vial on the table before I closed my eyes and concentrated on her. The smell of lavender still invaded my imagination, but it wasn’t long until that too faded. I allowed myself to imagine and follow a rose scent, one of the smallest details about her, but one of the most important to my every impression of who she was. I always caught it when I was close to her. She wore a rose scented perfume, which in the morning, when it was freshly applied, smelled like sweet roses, but by evening, it had wilted into a pot-pourri aroma.

Suddenly, a breath was on my shoulder, as if there were an angel behind me.

“Mum?” I whispered into the gloom. Was she really behind me? If I opened my eyes and turned around, would she be gone?

## Chapter

Droplets of water dripped on to my shoulder. Mum’s tears? From behind, familiar arms encircled my stomach. I looked down at the pair of familiar hands, their fingernails jagged and chewed, the way they were when she had been worrying. The skin above the cuticles too was loose, raw and bleeding. It had to be her. I broke open her knitted fingers at my belly to turn and embrace her.

“Stacy!” she exclaimed, as she pulled me to her, my head resting in her warmth, close to her heart. I heard it beating against my ear and my fears subsided. My parents loved me. Of course they did, but I’d forgotten how much for so long. My tears dropped on to her thin nightwear.

“Oh!” She hugged me tightly as I cried freely.

I finally pulled away. Brushing tears off my cheek, I looked at her, taking all of her in.

She was wearing her old, comfortable nightdress and her black hair was wrapped bedraggled around her face, misery mingling her tears and hair together. When I brushed her hair away, her tears stilled under her shocked eyes. The bags under her eyes told of sleepless nights too. Her pursed lips and the hurt look on her face cried out to me in my absence.

I didn’t know how much time I had left. Now that the moment had come, I didn’t know what to say. Did she know this was real, though appearing to her in a dream, I was alive? “Mum, don’t worry. I’m OK.” Bower was right. She wouldn’t believe me. Still, I longed to give her that assurance more than anything.

“Your PJs are torn,” Mum remarked.

I smiled, looking down to see my breast pocket hanging by the bottom hem. Only a mother would notice at a time like this. Ripping the pocket off, I gave it to her. Would it stay with her as proof? I had to try.

“Why?” she mouthed, but she let me put it into her palm and close her fingers over it, though I knew she’d rather have hugged me again. Maybe she’d be grateful when she woke.

We stepped away, just for an instant, both hungrily devouring the blessed sight of each other. As we did, we were yanked apart with no conscious effort of our own. I recognised the pull of magic, like when Bower had coaxed my fingers away from the knots of wood when I had been incarcerated. The potion was wearing off.

Mum cried out, “Stacy!” and frantically ran to reach me again, but she couldn’t stop the force that was between us, dragging us further away.

“Mum!” I cried back, not wanting to let her go either, but what if we got caught in the dream, like the dream spirits, the globes of light that were the manifestations of sleeping children visiting the wood in their dreams? What if it was morning already and I didn’t wake? Could something bad happen to my body?

Far in the distance, Mum’s black hair swathed her face in darkness.

I shouted as loud as I could, “Mum! I’m alright!” before she vanished.

Waking in a sweat, the surrounding room was obscured in shadows from the faint light from the moon and stars shining in through the window. Bower was still soundly asleep. I checked the breast pocket on my PJs. It was gone. I only hoped and wished this meant Mum was waking up with it in her hand, with proof I was alive. I was within reach, only down the road from her, yet it felt so far away. It was agony. The longing to be with my parents grew, as if I had invisible roots dragging me down. I cried, saddened and wracked with anguish.

It reminded me of a time long ago after my first school trip camping in the woods. As I blubbered away, after a nightmare, a few of the kids woke up and moaned, annoyed at me for being noisy. Anjali also woke. If I’d been at home, Mum would have given me a hot chocolate to calm me down.

“Come on, you don’t need to cry. Look, Mr Mittens to the rescue!” Anjali had declared, as she threw her favourite stuffed toy at me. I stopped and laughed as I caught the warm, fluffy toy. It was unusual for her to give it to anyone, but the tears burst through again. As I cried, my sobs felt hot and heavy in my chest.

“Jas? Jas!” Anjali had whispered loudly until Jas too had woken up.

“What’s up?” Jas answered groggily.

Anjali pointed at me before turning over and going back to sleep.

Jas shuffled in her sleeping bag closer to me and hugged me tightly. We both fell asleep in each other’s arms. When I returned home, Mum said I’d never looked so glad to see her.

If only I had remembered sooner what it was like to miss my parents, and appreciated their love and protection more, I wouldn’t be out here. If only I’d realised how lucky I’d been to have such special friends for years too.

But I knew I needed to stick around here. I couldn’t leave Bower in this mess. If his plan didn’t work, he’d have nothing to fall back on. If the Queen succeeded, it would affect everyone, including my parents and my friends. I didn’t know what on earth I could do, but I couldn’t give up. Besides, even if I wanted to, I couldn’t go home, not with the magical barrier in place, stopping my escape.

Drying my eyes, trying to forget the deep despair to see Mum and Dad, a light from outside suddenly illuminated the room. What was it?

Rushing to the window, I peered out as a blinding globe of light hovered in the air. I thought of waking Bower, it was so beautiful. But then I remembered, it was one of the dream spirits. A face appeared inside, but it quickly darted through the trees, disappearing before I could be certain.

I grabbed my torch and hurried outside. I was going to find my phone and then I’d call my parents. How hard could it be?

\* \* \*

Shoot! I heard voices above and hid in the shadows. This was the second time I’d almost been caught by the fairy guards since I’d set out from the lodge, and I swore silently to myself as I turned my torch off again. I’d intended to make a beeline for the sacrifice altar, a route that took me past where the fairies lived. But I’d turned on my torch a little too soon, once I’d passed the tree houses, and one of the fairy guards must have spotted it. I’d been chased ever since with a group of fairy guards circling closer and closer for the last half hour. The distinctive orange glow of their lanterns was not far behind me, as they caught up. They were so close. Among a mix of garbled voices, I could distinctly make out the words of two of the fairies.

“It’s near,” said one of them.

“You know how the Queen feels,” the other replied. I recognised this voice. Was it Spark? Was he the one leading them? How many fairy guards were with him? I held my breath as I waited. I was in two minds. Should I just double back and hope it would lead me back to Bower’s? “We’ve got to capture it. It can’t be running around loose.” Spark was speaking again. It appeared he was in charge. Fear swamped my mind and I gulped for air. I remembered my last encounter with him and the day I thought I’d died.

“We’ll catch it the next time it turns that light on.”

“How stupid does it think we are?” said an unknown voice. “We’ll be on it before dawn. Hopefully sooner.”

I quietly searched the ground for something to throw and nearly exclaimed as my fingers grasped around a large slug. Yuck! I wiped my hand on what I assumed was grass. I found a stick or two and that was all.

“Did you hear something?” asked Spark.

I froze.

“No,” said one of the other fairies.

Moving forward on my hands and knees, I struck my knee against a small, protruding stone. I winced. I found the bottom of the stone by touch and then lifted it up. What next? I crawled forward again to find another stone. This time, it embedded painfully into my palm. I pried this one up too, catching my nails sharply. My palms were wet. Blood or sweat, I couldn’t tell. I was so nervous. What I was about to do, I’d seen often in films, but whether it would work in real life was another matter.

Silently standing, I threw the stone in the opposite direction from where I wanted to go.

“I heard something,” said one fairy.

I could see the lights behind me move off as the fairies made their way to where the stone had fallen. Then I threw the second stone in quick succession in roughly the same direction, but further afield. Next, I ran, hoping to get far away enough that they wouldn’t catch up with me.

After a few minutes, I could no longer see any signs of their lanterns from behind me. Had I lost them? I kept going with no torchlight. I ran out from the trees and into a glade. In the small sliver of moon, I could make out a dark shape on a mound, the altar.

I continued running toward where I’d lost my phone. I lowered the brightness of my flashlight and aimed it at the ground. Hopefully, it was less obvious now than when I’d turned it on before.

It wasn’t long before I found something reflective in the dirt. A phone. I turned the torch off and shook the dirt off the screen.

I pressed my finger on the side of my phone, on the scanner, but a pop-up message appeared:

Fingerprint not recognised.

Perhaps there was still some dirt on it or my fingers were too sweaty. I brushed my phone against my pyjama top and was about to try again when I noticed a preview of a text on the locked screen. It was there for only seconds. The preview said:

Are you OK, Y?

The screen died and a pop-up appeared:

1% Device Powering Off.

No! The message disappeared.

“Y” or “Why” was the nickname Jas had given me at infant’s school. Back then, I’d introduced myself as “Stacy with a Y”. It had become a running joke with her and Anjali. Whenever I’d say I liked something, she and Anjali would then say “Why Stacy? Why!” in an exasperated way.

## Chapter

I woke, startled, as the lodge’s door closed with a bang. “Whoops! Sorry,” said Bower, carrying in a bucket of water. “I forgot you’d still be asleep. I’m not used to having a teenager around.”

Pins and needles shot through my hands, and I flexed my fingers, leaving my phone under my pillow. Cradling it, I had fallen asleep. What time was it and had I really received a text from Jas?

“You’re up late. I’m guessing the dreaming was successful?” He placed the bucket of water on the floor and sighed in relief, rubbing his back.

“Yeah,” I mumbled. I’d barely had any sleep at all. Nothing but a fitful slumber. No wonder I’d slept in late.

“You don’t seem happy. I thought it might help to cheer you up.” A collection of flowers was clutched in Bower’s other hand.

“No.” Was I going to cry? I missed my parents so much. My self-control had also been worn down by the lack of sleep. I sensed the panic and tears at the edges of my awareness and couldn’t stuff them back down any longer. I sniffed and thought about my phone instead. It wouldn’t be easy and if I wanted his help, it was best to come out straight with it. “Now I know you’re going to be angry with me, but can we skip that part?” I retrieved my phone from under my pillow and set it down on the table.

Bower dropped most of the flowers he was carrying. A couple fell directly into the fireplace and crackled as they burnt. He appeared startled by the sizzling noise, then his gaze returned to my phone on the table. He stared at it like it was a bomb, but I had to take the risk that it wouldn’t all blow up in my face.

“Can you get it to work?” I asked. In my nervousness, I defensively crossed my arms.

“Did you find it last night?” His voice struggled and it sounded hoarse.

“Yes,” I admitted.

“Stacy, why?”

I smiled thinking of my best friends. Maybe they were back to school, probably wondering where I was. My smile disappeared.

He shook his head with disbelief. “You put yourself in danger. You could have been killed.”

“Killed?” I felt disconnected. My arms dropped to my sides.

“You know what I mean, imprisoned, sacrificed.”

“I know,” I agreed quietly, snapping back to reality. I decided not to tell him about the near encounter I’d had last night. It would just confirm his suspicions. “I was missing Mum and Dad so much. And my friends. If I could just call someone everything would be alright.”

“I didn’t know it was that bad. You should have woken me up. I could have told you it wouldn’t work.”

“But you can charge it, can’t you?”

“It won’t produce a signal. Not here anyway.”

“Could you try?”

“It won’t work.”

“Please. I got a message. It must work. There must be some signal.”

“I don’t think so. Are you sure?” He was about to say no, but maybe he saw the desperation in my expression and was swayed. “OK. I’ll give it a go, but I’m not promising anything.”

“Thank you.” It sounded strained.

“Just don’t expect much.”

I was keen to change the subject. “You picked some flowers?”

He nodded. “I thought it would brighten up the place, but it doesn’t seem to matter now. Some were burnt.”

I rescued the flowers which had fallen on the floor. A few were bright yellow. Others looked like giant daisies. They were all interspersed with some forget-me-nots. It was a friendly gesture, even if I was more concerned about my phone. “I’ll put the rest in a wooden goblet with some water,” I said.

## Chapter

“Are you going to charge my phone with magic?” I asked Bower.

“No. It’s the twenty-first century. I’m going to charge it with this mystical thing called electricity,” he said, with pizazz and a grin on his face. He produced a small solar charger which had been squirrelled away under his bed, catching dust balls, until now. He stood the panel on the window sill to catch the early morning rays of sun.

“I thought you wouldn’t know much about electricity,” I said.

“I’m old. Not stupid, Stacy. I thought you’d know that by now. Electricity is a fascinating invention.”

“How did you get hold of a solar charger? I thought you couldn’t leave.”

“It’s not always been that way. I have been outside the wood, just not for a while. The Queen used to allow me to leave. Even once or twice, it was on her orders so I could gather more materials for potions she was interested in trying.”

“Wasn”t she afraid you’d be able to get help? Or stop her?”

“No. She knew I’d make a speedy return, afraid of what I might find.” Bower attached a charging cable to my phone.

“What you might find? Like what?” I prompted.

“She’s killed fairies. And those were people she liked. I wouldn’t put it past her to instigate a massacre of children, just for the fun of it. She gets riled up when I’m not around, and there’s no one left to antagonise.”

I didn’t know how to respond. “Oh. That’s not good,” I finally said.

“Good isn’t in her vocabulary,” he replied.

“Wait, if she has that power, wouldn’t she be able to do that, when you’re not around?”

“Technically she can, but I think she’s more likely to carry it out as a reminder to me, that if I was to delay, she might think I was trying to betray her. A threat like that is her way of ensuring my return.”

I waited and waited. I prodded the on button a few times, but my phone didn’t even have enough juice for that. I waited again, for what seemed like hours, as Bower tried his incantations on the Book of Knowledge.

I couldn’t take it any longer. Totally bored, I leapt dramatically on to Bower’s bed. Why was it taking *forever* to charge my phone? Goodness only knows how old the solar cell was.

“Huff!” I dropped my head and sank into the bedding face first. Bower didn’t appear to be having any luck with overcoming the powerful magic that bound the Book of Knowledge together. Until he had, he wouldn’t be able to destroy it. I said, my words garbled by the bedding, “Whatver you do–ing, it dosvens seem to wok.”

“What?”

I lifted my face up and huffed again. “Whatever you’re doing, it doesn’t seem to work.”

“Oh, tell me about it.” Bower groaned. “The Queen thinks I’m collecting resources, but the Book already exists in its entirety, as you can see, though I wasn’t the one who made it. Scores of us died in the witch trials, and when we could no longer congregate together to pass on our knowledge by word of mouth to the younger wizards and witches, as had been done for millennia, it was thought necessary that such a book of knowledge and spells be written. It was for prosperity’s sake and for the future good of wizards and witches everywhere. I went abroad for a while and wasn’t told about the Book until I came back. This was long after my family died.” He paused and I sat up. “So far, whenever the Queen has opened the Book, I’ve concealed many spells, pretending that the Book remains unfinished, but my power is waning, and I need to destroy the Book soon, while I still can.”

I was curious about Bower’s family, but I also didn’t want to pry. What if he was still sensitive about it? My curiosity won out. “Do you miss your wife? Your family? You don’t have to answer if you don’t want,” I added quickly.

“No. It’s OK. It almost doesn’t hurt. My wife died a long time ago. My children too. When something like that happens, you just get on with life. You don’t have a choice. You can’t be sad forever. Even if you think you can. And your mind is flexible to change. Language can precipitate it too. Words are associated with certain meanings. If you let go of the associations and meaning, it loses its sting… Wife… I *think* I had a strong association years and years ago. But now it’s a neutral word with very little meaning. When I hear it, I occasionally think, oh, yeah, I had one of those, like it’s a long-forgotten dream.” He didn’t smile, but he didn’t look sad either. I couldn’t imagine going through a loss like that and coming out the other side.

“Were many witches and wizards killed in the trials?” I asked, lifting myself from the bed and sitting on the ottoman chair, closer to him.

“Yes, but some survived. A few humans who were loyal to us died too. We had trained them how to use medicines and herbs, though no magic, of course. None could have learnt it anyway. But the strange concoctions were enough for people to worry about witchcraft.”

“How did the rest of the wizards die?” I asked, leaning forward, and placing my chin on my hands, close to the table.

“Human wars. I’m probably the last, though there could be more out there. I’m the last in Britain, that much I know, because a few years ago I did a drawing spell–”

I laughed.

“It’s not a spell that helps me draw!” he chided, smiling, and shaking his head.

“Obviously not. Go on.”

He grinned as he said, “Drawing them to me, calling them. Like the spell the Queen uses to draw children to her, but one where the intentions aren’t hidden.” His face became serious. “I waited months, but no one came. I couldn’t try across the entire world. It would take too much magic to do that. Magic I don’t have,” he added.

“Couldn’t you or other wizards have stopped the world wars?”

“No. And risk treating humans like children, as if we were superior? People have their own free will. Besides, adults don’t see what they consider impossible. But we were there on the battlefields and in the hospitals healing the wounded. Not as much as we used to, but with such a waste of life, resources were stretched. I even learnt some modern medical techniques, out dated by now–”

“If she’s going to be so powerful, why does the Queen want that book?”

“Well, you remember she wants the opposite of the tribute spell?”

“Remind me. What’s the tribute spell?”

“The spell that would send a wizard’s ashes out into space to help create a new star. She wants to perform the opposite and bring the stars” power to her instead. The tribute spell is not something a fairy can usually do. It’s a wizard’s spell, but apart from that, she’ll soon need the book to do magic. What she finds natural to do now will be much harder after she has become almost pure dust. I say almost, because she could never be pure dust completely and affect this reality. It’s impossible and only God could hold that kind of power,” he conjectured. “The more dust you have, the more power you attain, but if you don’t have a body, you can’t affect this reality as easily as all that,” he added.

“Is God Himself dust?” I asked, curiously.

“I don’t know. But I believe he created beings with the use of dust,” Bower said.

“Don’t you think science and evolution explain creation better?” I asked him.

“Not at all. Like wizards, some scientists believe in God too. Scientists have never disproved God because Science asks a different question completely. It asks *what* are we made of, atoms and molecules and things like that. Religion asks *why* we are made and *who* made us. Scientists can never answer why we were made, though they sometimes think they can, and often make out that His vast universe is Godless, simply because they haven’t discovered Him.”

“Do you think they ever will?”

“Discover him? No. They aren’t asking the right questions. Science and religion come at cross purposes. Personally, I believe Genesis explains God’s hand in creation, that he set the ball rolling. I think the seven days represents stages in time. It was just an easier way to explain it to early generations. Back then, they couldn’t explain things in the same ways as we can now,” he said.

## Chapter

Anxiously, I crossed my fingers, while I turned on my phone. Finally, it had enough juice to boot up.

As I saw Jas’s and Anjali’s faces pop up on the screen along with mine, my stomach wrenched. I forgot my wallpaper was a photo of us all together, just messing about when my phone was new. We looked so happy together.

Why was there no missed calls or messages?

The seconds seemed to go on forever. Still nothing changed. It was bad. Very bad. I swore under my breath. Bower hadn’t heard.

No one was missing me. No one. Not a single person cared. It was like I had turned on a pensioner’s phone. The pensioner who was a technophobe, who only had a phone in case of emergencies. I had imagined Jas texting me after all. I couldn’t believe it.

Bower said nothing, and I looked away from his prying eyes, as tears pricked and swam in mine. Through my blurred vision, I noticed there was no signal strength. Could that be why I’d not received anything? I rushed past Bower and opened the lodge door.

“Stacy? Where are you going?” Bower asked.

“To find a signal,” I called back.

“There won’t be any.”

“I have to try!” I shouted. Running without closing the door, I reached Bower’s garden’s edge and the first trees.

“Slow down. Look, if you’re going to be this stupid, at least let me help you.” Bower had followed me outside, but was some way behind. He caught up with me, panting as he slowed.

I glanced down at my phone. Still no bars. The tears were threatening to come back. “Why isn’t there a signal? There must be some somewhere!” I demanded.

“Be reasonable! I already told you. The Queen’s magic–”

“Rawr!” I growled, interrupting him. I wanted to pull out my hair and scream. “I’ve had it up to here with the Queen’s magic! Tell me something useful.” An idea suddenly dawned on me. “Is there high ground anywhere in this awful place?”

“No. The wood’s pretty level.”

“Rawr!” I growled again. I stuffed my phone into the back pocket of my pyjama trousers and buttoned the pocket. “Then a tree. I must get up one of them,” I commented, as I launched myself at one. The trunk was a shear wall with no footholds. Quickly my feet slid and lost their footing. “No. Not that one!”

“What!” Bower was surprised.

I picked another before Bower could protest further. A tree with lower branches I could tackle in stages. I hadn’t climbed a tree in a few years and I was determined to climb it now, despite my fear of falling.

“What the…what are you doing?” Bower was lost for words.

“Maybe I can get high enough to get some signal,” I said panting. This was much harder than I remembered. Already my legs and arms were burning with the effort, but the pain would all be worth it, if I could just find enough signal to call my parents.

“Uhm, Stacy?” I could barely hear him. “What if you fall? What if a fairy sees you? Stacy!” he hissed, but I was already higher than I’d ever been able to climb before, and it was wonderfully liberating. I was already up the hardest part of the trunk, where I’d had fewer handholds, and now, I was climbing the smaller branches with ease.

Up in the canopy, I felt tall and invincible. It was amazing to see the trees fork out in so many directions and I could see houses in the distance. It was a brilliant vantage point.

“Wow!” Maybe one of those houses was mine, though I couldn’t really tell. I called down to Bower, “I’m OK!” I could only see his brown clothing through some branches.

“Shush!” I heard from below.

“What? No one’s around.” Not once had I seen a fairy, other than Spark, come out this far to Bower’s home. I was safe up here. Safe as houses.

Either Bower didn’t hear me or didn’t respond. Why was he being such a worry wort? I was fine. I smiled as I sat down on one branch. A surprised robin swivelled his head and stared at me. I was an unwarranted intrusion into its domain. As soon as I settled, I saw someone dressed in red poke through the canopy.

Uh, oh! No, it couldn’t be. I was close enough to see it was a fairy. No, no, no, no!

I ducked and clambered back down, as quickly as I could, swinging on each branch in hasty succession. Had they seen me?

My right foot slid on a slippery, outstretched leaf. I fell, smashing into a hefty branch close to the trunk and winded myself.

“Ow!” I cried, as I slid off it. I started falling again. With outstretched arms, I hit the ground. “Ow!”

Instantly, I knew something was very wrong. One of my arms collapsed under my weight and the pain was so unbearable, that I crumpled in a heap and just lay there, cradling it. “Fairy,” I wheezed, before I went back to whimpering, “Ow! Ow!”

“Shush!” Bower placed one of his hands over my mouth and chanted:

“Quiet as an owl. Silent as the grave.

Silence the howl, the laugh, the talk, the deceptions of a knave.”

I knew he was taking my voice away like he had when I’d first met him. “Stay still.” He hid me under the skirt of the oversized robe he was wearing. He was still wearing trousers underneath it and I tried not to move in the semi darkness, as my arm throbbed with a sharp, stabbing pain. His robe might well have been oversized, but it wasn’t designed for this and it was quickly getting hot and cramped. He repositioned one of his trousered legs and I yelped on contact with his knee on my rib, but no sound came out. Every breath was torture.

“I thought I saw a human,” I heard a voice say.

Maybe Bower shrugged. His legs moved again as his weight shifted slightly. “I haven’t seen one,” he said. He waited in silence before the fairy went on their way. He lifted his robe. “Let’s get you back to the lodge quickly and then I’ll give your voice back,” he said. He grabbed my hurt arm and tried to hoist me up with it.

I smacked his arm away with my good hand before he did and he let go. I breathed out heavily as I doubled over, clutching at my arm and chest. Was I going to faint? I breathed out again, the only noise I could make. I didn’t want to move. Not now. Never. I knelt on the ground, desperate to lie down and give up.

He asked, “Sorry, have you broken something?” I lifted my head to glare at him. “I’ll take that as a yes,” he said. Intense vertigo hit me as I dropped my head and finally lay on the ground, closing my eyes. “No. Don’t fall unconscious now.” His voice seemed distant. Sleep was already claiming me.

\* \* \*

My eyes fluttered open and I woke to find Bower lifting me into his rocking chair close to the table.

“Hi Stacy, I’ve already given you your voice back. It was freakish hearing your groans and shrieks while you were out of it.” Bower smiled feebly, laying a clammy hand on my forehead. “Well, you’re not running a fever.”

I was wide awake now and tried to move my hurt arm. “Ahh!” I sucked in my breath as a sharp pain twinged through my arm, between my elbow and wrist.

“I think you may have broken your arm, and likely, bruised your ribs, but I need to check.” He touched my forearm with the lightest of pressure from his index finger.

“Ahh!” I yelped.

“Yeah. I think it must be broken.”

He poked my ribs in a couple of different places too.

“Ow! Ow! Stop it!” I cried.

“I think you must have a couple of ribs broken too. Do you want me to fix them?”

My arm was still throbbing, but maybe after a few days, the pain would subside, if I didn’t move it too much. But just breathing normally, my breath snared and snagged on the pain in my ribs. It caught me off guard every time.

“No. No, don’t do that. It’s my fault I fell.” I desperately wanted him to fix everything, but I couldn’t ask that of him, not when he was doing such important work.

“Are you sure?”

I nodded. “I don’t want you wasting magic on me. Not when you’ve got the book to destroy.” Tears pricked my eyes, but I couldn’t tell if it was my physical pain, my mental anguish or a combination of the two.

Bower said, “It wouldn’t be a waste, but thank you. I appreciate it. Maybe–”

“No one was even missing me. I had no messages or missed calls,” I blubbered.

I pulled my phone out of my back pocket with my unhurt hand and was relieved to find the screen uncracked. Through my tears, I looked at its wallpaper of me, Anjali and Jas.

“That means nothing, Stacy. They couldn’t reach you any more than you could reach them. A lack of signal does that.”

I didn’t comment and Bower gave me some time to recover emotionally. I sniffed and rubbed my bleary eyes.

“Look, do you have photos of your parents on your phone?” Bower enquired.

I nodded.

“If you won’t let me heal you, I need to go get some supplies. Your ribs will heal by themselves, but your arm won’t and it’ll need to be set into a splint. Will you be OK for a few minutes? Maybe it’ll do you some good to look through some of your photos. Yeah?” he asked softly.

I nodded.

When Bower was gone, I looked through family holiday snaps. My favourite was one of me in between my parents as we stood outside a holiday cottage in the Lake District. It was a cute, chocolate box cottage, almost too good to be true, and there had been a beautiful garden in front of the house.

The photo was taken on the second day, before we’d completed any of the strenuous cycling Dad had planned. Two long hours of cycling through a boiling thirty-degree heat and Mum and I quickly became irritable and grumpy. Not to mention, my legs were killing me.

Dad seemed unbothered though and urged us to keep going till we reached the nearest pub. He was dead set on a photo on completion. Unenthusiastically, Mum and me faked a pair of grins as we stood outside the pub.

I realised again, how unalike I looked to both of them in photos. There was no family resemblance between me and either of my parents. I’d never thought to mention it, nor to ask them why. But it got me wondering now.

## Chapter

Waking, my head was fuzzy and my tongue felt like carpet. I didn’t remember falling asleep during the day, but I must have. Probably Bower had misjudged the power of the potion he’d given me to ease the pain.

I’d had such strange dreams. In one, I was scooping out Bower’s brains with a spoon and he smiled at me while I did it, as if it was normal. It was such a creepy dream. I had another, equally disturbing, where I’d dreamt that Jesus turned into Bower. Or had Bower turned into Jesus? Before I knew it, I greeted Bower with a question I thought I’d never ask, “Is Jesus a wizard?”

“Evening. Feeling OK?”

I nodded, though as I sat up and removed the blanket, I tried not to let out a yelp, while pulling the blanket away from my body. The pain was intense, but I would cope. I had to. I didn’t want Bower to feel guilty for not healing me. Destroying the Book of Knowledge was more important, and he still hadn’t pulled it off. I would not be a drain on his power. At least my arm was in a splint now, and Bower had fashioned a sling from an old, but clean piece of clothing.

“No, Jesus wasn’t a wizard. He was the Son of Man and the Son of God. Besides, wizards can’t raise the dead. Only God working through someone can,” Bower said.

“But you brought me back to life.”

“No. I didn’t actually kill you. If wizards could bring back the dead, I wouldn’t be the last of my kind as far as I know.”

“Could the Queen bring back the dead when she becomes almost pure dust?”

“No. Nothing can bring someone else back to life except God. The Queen can’t even bring back her own living cells. First, she stuck a foot in limbo, now she wants to go the whole hog. She can only affect this world. In the other reality, where everything is dust, entities can fight back and she can’t have any control there. But she wants dust as assurance that she can be immortal or as close to it as she can.”

“How can she be immortal when she’s bad? I thought only good people were raised to eternal life?”

“I think everyone is raised to eternal life. For those who go to heaven, it’s seen as a reward. For those that go to Hell and are separated from God’s love, eternal life is a punishment.”

“So, is that what Hell is, do you think? Separation from God’s love?”

“Yes. That’s what I think,” Bower replied.

“Ah, well, that doesn’t sound bad–” I said.

“Don’t be too sure about that,” he said, gravely.

How bad could separation from God be? I had no desire to know. I buried the thought deep somewhere to forget about it for now. “How is God meant to bring someone to life or create someone with dust exactly?” I asked instead.

He shrugged. “Wizards don’t know everything.”

\* \* \*

It was night and I woke hearing the Queen’s voice ringing distantly through the warm stagnant air. She said, “My fairies! The hour has come!” Not another sacrifice! My ears pricked, waiting for more, but I knew I had to save the child. I couldn’t let it happen again. Automatically, I reached for the door. Despite all my injuries, I was about to run out.

Bower had woken from the distant commotion too, and he lunged at me, his bed sheets dropping to the floor. He was wearing a thick beige nightshirt, similar to the simple robes he wore during the day.

“This trespassing human,” the Queen sneered, “this child of axe-men, must be erased to cleanse our woods!”

“Yes,” I thought I heard the fairies respond. I didn’t have long.

“I have to save them,” I pleaded as I tried to struggle out of Bower’s grip. “I *have* to.”

“No! It’s too dangerous. You’ll get yourself killed,” Bower begged.

“But I’ve got to. Let go!” Tears came to my eyes. I hit his wrists, his hands, anything to get him off with my OK arm. Though he grimaced at each blow, he clung on to my shoulders more tightly.

“No, Stacy. Don’t!” Bower cried at me, shaking me. “You won’t get there in time. What good would it do?”

The chanting of the fairies grew louder.

“My fairies, we will not be lost. We will stand until the end of eternity!” the Queen shouted.

I cried, “No! It can’t happen again. No!” Though by now I knew it was too late. My conscience alone battled with it. I fell silent, waiting. In the hush, my heart pounded, but still I heard nothing. Bower’s clothes were warm and reassuring against my cold inertia. I swallowed, becoming fully aware of my body and its surroundings. When startled birds flapped their wings in the distance, I knew it was over.

I hung on to Bower’s familiar clothes and sobbed into them. He hugged me, trying not to place any pressure on the tender part of my arm. Was his conscience struggling with it too? I held on to him for a long time. Then, through my snivels, I whimpered, “That’s what was happening when I saw you in the woods the first time. You spared me from watching.”

“Yes.”

I cried again as the night shrouded us in pain. God? What God was there when things like this happened? Yet if there wasn’t a God, it somehow seemed worse that all this dying and living could be for nothing.

## Chapter

I overslept that morning, and I wasn’t alone. My movements roused Bower from sleep as well. He and I exchanged glances, aware of the raw, tender bond that had blossomed between us during the night.

We ate breakfast in an uncomfortable silence, a first for us. I checked my phone without thinking. There were no new messages. Annoyed with myself for expecting otherwise, I shook my head. To start a conversation with Bower, I told him, “After you gave me that potion and I dreamt of my mother, I gave her my loose pyjama pocket.”

“What?” he gasped and a berry fell out of his hand and on to his lap. He picked it up, hovering it between the space of his bowl and his mouth, his hand shaking a little. Was he in shock? “That shouldn’t have happened. Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’ve looked for it, but can’t find it anywhere,” I added.

“Has anything else unusual happened? Silly question, I know.”

“Yeah, I don’t make it a regular habit to get captured by fairies,” I said, smiling.

“The dream that brought you to this place. You mentioned flying above the stream. Is that true?” he asked.

“Flying and drowning,” I said.

“Drowning! Why didn’t you tell me that part?” He anxiously set his bowl aside and discarded the uneaten berry into it.

“I didn’t think it was vital.” I set aside my bowl too.

“Tell me *exactly* what happened,” he said, rubbing his purple stained hands on a cloth napkin.

“I was flying, or at least trying to. Then I was drowning.”

“Is that all?” Bower asked with a glimmer in his eye. Now, he was perched on the front of his chair, leaning in towards the table and me.

“Well,” I paused, thinking, “when I was drowning, it was like I was being split in half.”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s hard to explain. I haven’t thought about it much since then. Every part of me was reaching up, only my body wouldn’t come with me fast enough. There was light and I, nah, it’s silly to say that I was being pulled apart,” I admitted.

“Have you any other examples? Don’t overthink it,” he said, lowering his head towards the table, as if poised to receive a whispered secret. Instead, he hit his chin on his bowl. “Ow!” He pulled his head away, before settling down again.

“I guess I could start with before I came to the wood.”

“Go on then,” said Bower.

“I thought I heard the wood whispering to me. And there was the smell of ash from the bluebells and the same smell, when I was arguing with Mum.”

“And more recently?”

“Other than being captured by fairies, seeing those balls of light, the dream spirits and what happened when we met the Queen, erm, there was that odd time I saw myself with fairy wings in the stream’s reflection.”

He nodded, expectantly.

“I only saw it in my reflection when the water was disturbed.”

“And you heard the hart?”

“So? Doesn’t everyone?”

“No. I hope you’re not too high on painkillers to take it in. What you saw in the stream water was true. You’re a fairy. Only fairies can hear the voice of a hart,” he said, biting his lip.

## Chapter

“What! I’m a fairy?” I repeated. “I’m an actual real f—” I was about to swear. “—fairy. You’re not kidding me?”

“No. I’m not kidding.” You His face grimaced, perhaps wondering how I was going to react.

Wow… Wow! That was scary, but amazing. But how could I be a fairy and not look like one? And what about my parents? Did that mean that they were fairies too? They had to be, for me to be one. It still didn’t explain why I didn’t look like a fairy. A spell? Had they lived in a wood at some point, like I was now? I felt closer to them, but I couldn’t believe they hadn’t told me. How could they?

“I took you from birth,” said Bower, interrupting my thoughts and bringing my world crashing down.

“What? Say that again.”

“Sorry,” he led with. “I took you from birth. Your parents couldn’t look after you.”

“My parents?” I asked, frowning.

“They needed you to be safe in the human world and away from danger. I put a spell on you that would make you appear human and hide your powers, but it seems your subconscious has been fighting against it and the wood connecting to your power, ever since you came here.”

“What power? Are you saying my magic moved the pyjama pocket?”

“Yes. Perhaps. You wanted it badly enough, while trapped inside a magical dream. It might be possible.”

“Might?”

“It’s a first for me.”

“Who are my parents?” I asked, cautiously. I expected him to say my parents were Mum and Dad. Mum with her black hair and smell of roses, and Dad with his joking attitude, which sometimes annoyed me and his–

“They were fairies,” Bower said.

“The ones I go home to? Aren’t they fairies?”

“No, they’re not fairies. And they’re not you’re real parents. Were you still thinking they were?” he asked.

“Yes,” I admitted, disappointedly. Silence descended as the chaotic thought entered my mind. Whenever I had previously thought who I was, the empty echo just went deeper and deeper into the unknown, but here was a stumbling block. Fairy?

How could I not be Mum and Dad’s child? Oh no, it was true. Of course! It explained Granddad’s indifference and my parents” lack of concern sometimes. It also explained why everyone, including me, thought that my parents and I didn’t look alike. I had no family resemblance, unless you counted the black hair which both me and Mum had, though mine was growing out underneath my blonde hair dye. Yet, when strangers or family friends couldn’t see the resemblance, Mum would loudly insist that I had her nose. I had examined mine in the mirror a few times. It didn’t resemble hers at all, but I dismissed it, thinking not much of it.

I had no idea that she’d been frantically lying her socks off! Now the goalposts had moved, I just wanted an ordinary life. Why couldn’t the last few moments rewind. If only Bower hadn’t said it and it had remained hidden in Bower’s brain.

“I took you to a foster home. Your human parents adopted you,” Bower said.

“You what!” I yelled. I felt like I’d been left upside down, suspended on a broken roller coaster, wishing desperately that someone would help plant my feet on solid ground again. “You dumped me at a foster home!”

““Dumped” is a bit strong.”

But I didn’t hear him. “How could you? I thought you were decent!” I screamed.

That was how he knew me. That was how I was drawn here. He had the most crucial role in changing my life, for good or for bad. And though I knew that however and whenever he told me, I would have reacted the same, I still couldn’t help thinking how could I trust him now? He knew and he hadn’t told me. For so long he had kept it a secret.

Why couldn’t I have stayed away and settled in like a good, little girl at home and at my new school? It sounded pathetic, but I just wanted my life back. Instead, I was offered another.

“I am decent, as decent as I can be,” said Bower. “Anyway, you were safer there than staying with your fairy parents, Star.”

“Why do you keep calling me that? Stop it!” I yelled, agitated. It was bad enough being a fairy, but it was giving me a mega identity crisis him calling me Star too.

“That’s your real name,” Bower said.

“Well, I don’t want it. I’m Stacy!” I shouted at him. I couldn’t care less about the other parents, my “real” parents. They couldn’t have loved me or they wouldn’t have given me up. Bower could have taken me and brought me up as his own, but even he didn’t want me. Why not? The last few days I had trusted him like family, but how could I now, when he had the opportunity to look after me and hadn’t done so?

“Stacy?” Bower started.

“I’m not talking to you,” I insisted. I hurried beyond him, fetching the sketchpad and pencils with my good arm.

“Stacy!” he started again.

“What! Leave me alone. I’m going outside,” I growled through gritted teeth.

“Come on. Don’t be like that,” he pleaded.

“Like what, Bower?” I glared at him, clutching the pad and pencils close, as I prepared to opened the door. “Annoyed? Angry?” The pencils clattered to the floor and I left them there. “Feeling like my whole life is a lie?”

“It’s not a lie,” he said, retrieving them. He handed them to me. I still couldn’t get the door easily. His hand brushed mine as he tried to help. He opened the door slowly as he said, “You’re still you. You’re just–just more.”

“A fairy that sacrifices children? No. I don’t want to be that.” I stormed out and left him to shut the door behind me. The next few hours went by in a tearful blur as I sat on the porch with the sketchpad and pencils beside me. I half expected him to come out after me, but I had told him to leave me alone.

After a while, the shock dissipated and I cradled the pad between my bent knees and my belly, keeping it steady most of the time, with no need to use my splinted arm. I sketched a close up of a fairy’s wing, laced with veins. Their wings were like peacock feathers with so many glimmers of colour, I wished I could draw them all. The Queen’s wings differed from the other fairies. Hers were darkly veined and, though not quite there, they had a dark shimmer to them. I then drew myself with wings as I tried to figure out how I felt about Bower’s latest revelation. How was I meant to feel? Glad? Happy? Sad? Relieved? They all mingled together like the soup of my psyche into one pathetic unappetising dish. What was I meant to do with this new information?

\* \* \*

Later when I returned, Bower was sitting on the floor in front of the waning fire, staring into the orange flames. Something was wrong. The Book of Knowledge lay open on the table, still unbroken, but something in Bower’s countenance had changed.

I sighed. “What’s up?” I asked.

He didn’t reply.

I sat on the floor next to him. His legs were drawn up to his chest, his arms wrapped around them. He looked small and helpless like a child. I rested a hand on his shoulder. “What’s wrong?” I asked. Shouldn’t he have been comforting me after his shocking revelation? The role reversal felt odd.

He didn’t even look at me. It was as if he was hiding his guilt, trying not to disappoint me.

I let my arm fall. We remained silent for a stretch, and my anger slowly melted. I was placed into care years ago. Not much could be done to change the situation now. That didn’t seem to be what was bothering him.

“I don’t think I can destroy it, Stacy,” at last he admitted. His voice sounded barely above a whisper.

“The Book?

“Yes.”

“But you can. I’m sure you can,” I said. He had to do it. It was that or fail and give the Queen the book on a silver platter. He might as well present the fate of the whole of humanity on it too, if that was the case.

“I still have hope. *Maybe* I can destroy it in time.” He smiled wryly, as if he could at least try to soothe all the world’s troubles with this vain gesture.

“Hope? Is that *all*?”

His smile dissolved into a frown.

“But you’re a wizard. You can do anything!” Though as I said it, I realised I had put my foot in it. Wizards had limitations too.

“I can’t do anything. You know that, Stacy. Angrily, he rose to his feet. He distanced himself, arms folded, taking a few steps away.

Instinctively, I reached for the floor to pull myself up. “Ow!” My arm shot through with pain. While it was still throbbing, I yelled at his turned back, “Why did you save me then? Why bother? You could’ve kept more magic and destroyed the Book.”

“Perhaps it was all for naught,” he commented.

“What do you mean?”

With a repulsive gesture towards the book, he explained, without fully facing it or me, that wizards had jointly created and safeguarded it. “Joined magic is more powerful, even when they’re long dead.”

It still might have worked if he hadn’t saved me. Why hadn’t he left me in that prison cell? He was silent, but expecting more from me, so I let him have the worth of my ruminations that my thoughts outside had twisted into.

“Why did you bother saving me?” I asked irritably.

“Bother? It wasn’t a bother. I’ve tried to help you as much as I can.”

“But why? I’m worthless.”

“Stop that!” He faced me, his eyes locking with mine. “You are so valuable and don’t you forget it! You’re worth so much more than some poxy messages on a phone. Don’t think I haven’t seen you looking at it again. You can’t unglue yourself from it. I don’t think you’re worthless at all. It was a bother you climbed that tree and fell. But you’ve not been a bother in any other way, I promise you.”

I let his words sink in, before I asked quietly, “So what now? Are you giving up?”

“The Queen will kill me,” he said calmly, facing the window and looking out. I was shocked he could talk of his own death so casually. “She’ll want my body burnt to save my ashes for the ceremony.”

“No!” I shook my head, refusing to let his words sink in. It couldn’t happen. What about the Book? What about saving the world? How was giving up and dying going to solve anything?

“You’d let her do that to you? Let her have the last word and go down without a fight?” I demanded.

“No, not let her have the last word. Not that at all. There is something more that you have to do.”

“Me?” I asked, confused. What could a girl do that a wizard couldn’t?

“When the time comes, you must kill the hart. Burn its ashes and swap them with mine.”

I shook my head. This was all too much. I couldn’t cope with this much new information. How could I possibly stand by and let the Queen murder him? Then with my own hands, burn his body and destroy the hart, as they were worthless. It was all sickening.

“You have to do this.” He looked at me, pleadingly.

“Nope! No way!”

“Please.”

“No. I am *not* doing it!” I shouted, with renewed anger. “Why on earth do you think I would?”

Settling into his rocking chair, he was quiet and composed. Nearly inaudibly, he spoke, “Because there’s no one else.” He didn’t rock the chair, but remained motionless, perfectly balanced in it. How could he be so cold and distant? But how could he be otherwise? If he wavered, he could easily make me not want to do it. He knew that. “Only you understand the Queen cannot succeed and it’ll stop her for good,” he added.

Reaching the window, I looked beyond the vegetable patch, out to the dense forest of thick-trunked trees. The trees looked old, but Bower could be older still.

In our previous neighbourhood there had been a huge oak tree standing by itself in a farmer’s field. The lightning tree Mum used to call it. Surrounding it, nothing was taller, and lightning had hit it repeatedly. When we had a dog, my parents and I used to walk it around the surrounding fields.

Though I hadn’t known him for long, I imagined Bower as that ancient oak tree on the horizon, acting as a pillar for the sky, burdened by dark clouds. How would the world be without him? How would my life be without him? A hot tear dropped from my eye.

## Chapter

My day felt fragmented and before I knew it, the middle of the afternoon had crept up on me like an ambush. How had hours passed? Bower was occupied in completing a dubious task which involved the table and a length of rope. I was tempted to ask what, but he looked deep in concentration. Again, he had barred the lodge’s door with the back of the rocking chair, so that if anyone knocked on the door, there’d be enough time to hide the hart. Clutter on the table had been cleared away, the tablecloth too and the table moved. Bower now had more space to work in.

I wasn’t looking at him. Instead, I browsed the potions in the chest of drawers. I still didn’t know what to think about being a fairy. Its intangibility was superseded by the overwhelming and very real possibility of Bower’s death. Stray tears fell, as I tried my best not to think about it.

I summoned up the taste of spicy sausages and chips, the comfort food of home, and my mouth watered, but as I screwed my eyes shut, the saltiness of my tears entered at the corner of my mouth and I tasted them too. I wiped them away, determined not to cry in front of him. If I had doubts, I should keep them to myself. I felt I had no right to be sad. He was the one that was going to die, not me. My throat burned hot with uncontrollable emotions, but I couldn’t, I wouldn’t give into them. I swallowed them back down and composed myself. I breathed a few slow, deep breaths and allowed my mind to wander back to food. My mouth watered for an enormous slice of chocolate cake with melting chocolate icing. Or a scrumptious cheese and onion quiche. It was grounding to think of food, but my stomach rumbled, and these food cravings weren’t something which could be satiated here. I missed them all the more.

Bower had stationed an empty box under the cage containing the hart to raise it up, while he secured one end of the rope around one of the table’s legs. He then threaded the rope through the first bar at the top of the cage and ran it all the way through to the last bar and around the opposite leg of the table. He did the same with the other side of the cage.

Intrigued, I watched all this out of the corner of my eye. Thanks to the rope, when Bower pushed the box away, the cage remained suspended under the table. He placed the tablecloth over the table again.

“You can’t see that, can you?” The wicker cage was completely hidden. It wouldn’t show even if someone lifted the tablecloth a little.

I sniffed, as quietly as I could, and turned to face him before I shook my head. I didn’t know what it was all in aide of, but I suddenly had another thought.

“Why can’t you take back the power of the potions?” My voice quivered, but I hoped he hadn’t noticed.

“It doesn’t work that way. Potions lock up dust into a certain magical application,” he said.

“Do fairies normally use spells?”

“No. They rarely need them, though the Queen will when she changes fully. Magic normally comes to fairies with little effort. Most of the time wizards use spells to focus their power. Would you be able to lift that side of the table? Lifting it from the middle should be fine, it’s just got a bit more weight to it now. I can take the tablecloth off, if its slippery.”

I nodded. It seemed easy enough to use my good arm to help Bower manoeuvre the table back into its original space. The cage swung under the table before we set it down.

“Why exactly do wizards need spells to focus their power and fairies don’t?” I restlessly knelt one knee on the ottoman, as Bower emptied the couple of boxes which had housed what had been on the table. He arranged these items in more or less the same fashion as before. It included some dishes, cutlery and goblets, as well as stray vials.

“Do you remember me telling you that fairies gain dust as they naturally grow?” He stacked the boxes away.

“Yes.” I lifted the tablecloth to check on the hart. Most of its water had sloshed on to the floor along with some of the grass which had been sitting on the bottom of the cage. I looked back at the puddles of water trailing the floor.

“Oh, well. That was bound to happen.” Bower dropped an old cloth on the floor and soaked up the water, while I picked up the stray pieces of grass. Bower lifted the tablecloth for me and I sat down next to the cage, checking the hart was alright. I held out the blades of wet grass to it. “Wizards keep their dust levels the same from birth. It gets replaced when a wizard uses his power. I suppose like a rechargeable battery,” Bower said.

By his own estimates, he should have recharged, so why was he having such terrible luck destroying the Book? Was it like he said, that combined magic preserved the book or was he becoming weaker? The hart nervously nibbled at the offered grass blades and then changed its mind and backed away. I scattered the rest of the grass into its cage. Behind me, Bower was now kneeling and had placed new logs onto the fire. I stood up, draping the tablecloth back over the side of the table. I was still unsure how to say what was on my mind. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but you’re not recharging anymore, are you?” I asked.

“No. I’m too old.”

“How old?”

“How old do you think I am?”

“I don’t know. I don’t want to guess if you’re gonna take offence.”

He stopped what he was doing and leant back towards me. “I won’t take offense. Go on,” he urged.

“If you were alive during the witch trials, a few hundred years, maybe more?”

He nodded. “You have your answer,” he said.

“A few hundred years!” I exclaimed, amazed. “Do fairies live that long? Will I live to be that old? Has the Queen been around as long as you?” I flooded him with more questions.

“No. Fairies have a similar lifespan to mortals,” Bower said. He shuffled the logs in the fire around with a long poker, to give them maximum exposure to the heat underneath.

“How old is the Queen?” I asked.

“Twenty-one,” he replied.

“Twenty-one! Is that all? She’s like…she’s like a baby compared to you!”

“Thanks,” Bower said, looking back at me. “You really know how to make someone feel insignificant.”

“Sorry. I didn’t mean it to come out like that.”

A cheeky smile played on his lips and I knew he’d not been offended. He stood up.

“If you’re old enough not to be recharging, then why does the Queen want your ashes?” I asked.

“I think I told you before, but you must have forgotten. No matter how much magic is used in life, there is still a vast, unused amount trapped inside the body. It can’t escape until death. It’s a dormant type of power.”

“So, you can’t tap into that power yourself?

“No,” he confirmed.

“Will you be OK if you die?” I asked, slowly. I didn’t want to cry again, but I needed to know. “Do you believe in an afterlife?”

“Yes. I do.” He sighed, walked the short distance to me and rested a hand on my shoulder. His eyes looked full of pain as he stared into mine.

The intensity was too much for me. Tears swam and I looked away. I couldn’t do anything to stop them.

“Stacy, I have lived for *so* long. Don’t you think it’s my time to leave?” He went on, “I’ve been carrying the weight of responsibility for the Queen and what she could do to the human race for longer than I thought possible. I fear I can’t carry it for much longer and there’s nothing I can do to stop her by myself.”

“But if you die, she’ll use your ashes to destroy everyone.” My words came out as a whimper.

“She’ll kill me anyway. It’s been a long time coming. And if you do what I’ve asked you to do, everything will work out alright.” He smiled. “Come on, it’s OK,” he said, hugging me gently by the shoulders with one arm.

He walked back to the table and was about to sit down, when I implored, “Bower, but what if it goes wrong?”

“It won’t go wrong.”

“But what if it does?” I persisted. “You won’t be here. There won’t be time for another plan. Everything will be ruined.”

“Stacy. Don’t worry. Things will work out.”

## Chapter

“How am I meant to switch the ashes with the hart’s?” I still didn’t want to say they were Bower’s ashes. “Won’t the Queen want me dead if she finds me?”

It was nightfall, but I knew I wouldn’t be able to sleep with all this on my mind. I was drained from feeling down, but I was restless too.

Bower cast more kindling on the fire, and it was like a comforting blanket or a warm mug of something after a hard day. It helped to make things a degree easier.

“Not necessarily,” he considered. “The Queen sees you as a harmless human. She’ll more likely treat you as a servant. If you act as one, she’ll order you around and you’ll have every opportunity to switch them. I’m not saying you don’t have to be careful though. If anyone sees the hart, before you burn it–”

“But how can the hart be free if I kill it? You don’t mean it will be free when it’s dead, do you?”

“No. Harts and unicorns are the only creatures known to wizards that can absorb dust after they die to bring themselves back to life. It only happens if a powerful enough spell has been used.”

“And Jesus resurrecting himself? Was that similar?” No matter how much I thought about it, I couldn’t shake off the desire to see God from this new angle that only Bower had shown me. Like everything else, I didn’t have long to find out. What if his take on God died with him? I had to know more.

“No. People can’t do miracles without help, not even the Son of Man. It was God working through him.” He grinned and laughed. “Besides, Jesus wasn’t a unicorn or a hart in disguise. Harts and unicorns do nothing remarkable in their life, well nothing that would affect anyone else. They can transport themselves. It’s a natural defence. That’s why I’ve asked you never to let the hart out of the cage. It’s encased in magic that stops it from transporting itself away. The hart was a last resort, but now I don’t think we can do this without it.”

“What happens at the, at the–what’s it called?” I asked.

“The ceremony? There’ll be another sacrifice. A child.”

“What?” I didn’t like the sound of this.

“You’ll have to let whoever it is die and die for real. It’s the only way to stop the Queen. I know it’s difficult, but you must.”

I swore with frustration. Bower frowned as if about to comment, but before he had a chance, I quick-fired the next words at him, “Why must I?” Not only did I have to let Bower die, and kill the hart, but I had to let someone else die too, someone who didn’t even know what they were dying for.

“Ashes were never meant to be used as a means for power, so the blood of a human is necessary. This sacrifice will differ from the one you saw. It’s not for the Queen’s pleasure, nor for show, but you mustn’t get involved,” he implored.

“Why can’t I stop her before she does it?” I demanded, leaping up and restlessly pacing around the room.

“You wouldn’t achieve anything by trying to stop her before she completes the spell. She’d only kill you first, then kill the sacrifice, whoever it is. Putting yourself in the way, as heroic as it sounds, it’s just–just stupid!” Bower shouted. He continued, quieter, “You must let the death happen. Letting the Queen perform the spell with the hart’s ashes and not mine, will save millions of lives.”

I couldn’t even imagine a million people, let alone saving that many. “But what about the sacrifice? Don’t they get a say?” I was desperate for other options. Recently, when I had been trapped inside the prison cell, I had imagined myself as a sacrifice. Now, the dagger was going to plunge into another’s heart, I felt my lungs and chest violently seize up. If I had an ounce of compassion, how could I stand by and watch it happen to someone else?

“Is there no other way to unleash the power of the hart’s ashes? Can’t it be done before the spell?” I asked.

“Unleash! Can’t you hear yourself? Look at it,” he said, lifting the tablecloth up, and showing me the hart under the table. It seemed to have picked up on some of our energy, anxiously pawing at the bars of its cage. “Does this look evil to you?”

“Oh. It looks stressed. Can we calm down? I don’t think it’s doing the hart any good.”

“OK. You’re right.” Bower sighed and let the tablecloth drape back over the side of the table. He whispered, “The creature’s ashes possess a unique quality, instinctively quashing the source of a bad and powerful spell.”

“And what exactly will happen to the Queen, if I do this? Will she die?”

“Her spirit will be cleansed by the hart, all the pain and hate will be wiped out, and what’s left of her spirit, will be combined inside the hart. Consider the hart the bleach of magic.”

“If you know about it, and it’s been done in the past, won’t the Queen be expecting it?”

“No. Compared to me, she’s hardly lived at all. Besides, she wouldn’t think anything I was involved in would have any power over her, especially after my death. All she would think is how brilliantly unstoppable she is. That’s her one weakness; she’s too obnoxious to see it coming. That’s our opportunity to bring her down.”

## Chapter

The next day, Bower carried on struggling to destroy the Book of Knowledge in shorter and shorter bursts. He seemed to tire easily now. During one such instance, when I had returned from collecting food from the garden, and when he took a rest, I proposed burial as an alternative to burning his body. What he was preparing me for didn’t require his ashes and I was uncomfortable starting a fire in a wood. I also didn’t want to actively destroy his body.

“What!” he started, “and should anyone look, they’ll find a grave and know what you did. I’m not having it discovered! They’ll dig up my body, tear me limb from limb, with no dignity at all and burn me themselves. No! I’m not having that!”

“Why would the fairies do that to you?”

“Stacy, they’re not like you. They’re afraid of me. Who knows what they’d do? They think odd things are true. If they didn’t break my body first and make sure I was dead, they’d probably think I’d leap out of the flames and kill them. They know nothing about magic or life or anything,” Bower said, lowering his face into his hands and his elbows on to his knees.

“I heard them saying that the Queen was going to give them the Power of Ages and make them as powerful as her,” I said without thinking.

“Where on earth did you hear that?” He raised his face out of his hands. “Oh, never mind. It doesn’t matter. Was it when I was ill?” He turned around in his chair and studied me, a slight smile playing on his lips. “I thought you’d been gone an awfully long time.”

“I didn’t think you’d notice,” I said, feeling myself flush with embarrassment.

“The Power of Ages! That’s what the Queen wants them to think. She’s not even a real Queen. She just calls herself that, so she can lord it over them.” He paused. “To her knowledge she wiped out all the fairies. She used their ashes to give her power. She calls it Collecting. Such a neutral name for such a horrible task,” he said, looking away into the burning flames of the fire.

“Collecting?” I said, repeating the peculiar phrase.

He nodded.

“What are all those fairies out there, if they’re not fairies? I pointed in the general direction of where they lived. Could they be children after all? They looked child-like.

“The other real fairies differed from the Queen. None of them wanted to hate humans. They gave and gave, so mercifully. She was the other extreme. She hated anyone or anything that loved humanity, but in the end, she was consumed by that hate.” Bower hesitated, perhaps recalling memories from that time.

“What did she do?” I asked.

“She began killing fairies, her brothers and sisters and she turned on her parents. Then she killed all the fairies she could get hold of. She was alone with her guilt and had nothing left. For a long time, and I think still now, she hides from the fact that she killed everyone that ever loved her. Maybe she’s been fooling herself with this charade, thinking they are fairies, these human children, their mock wings shining like a beacon that the fairies are still here, that they’re still strong. She only recently kept this many “fairies” around her though.”

“How recent?” I lifted the gingham curtain and stared out of the window, while I rested my splint on the window sill. The sunlight shone on Bower’s veg patch and into the trees of the wood beyond. It was hard to believe all this drama was happening in what looked like a normal wood.

“I don’t know. Maybe four or five months ago. Not long. There is a small elite group who have been with her for much longer. Many of her guards form this group.”

I dropped the curtain and looked back at Bower. “There was one that came here. The one who said the Queen wanted your presence. Spark, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“Is he one of the elite?”

“Yes. Haven’t you wondered why there were no older fairies here, apart from the Queen?”

I had, but there were just so many things that baffled me in this new world, I didn’t know where to start. It was hard to take in that the fairies were human children, and I who appeared a human, was actually a fairy.

“So, let me get this straight.” I paced the room while I thought. “You took me away to protect me from her? And she killed my parents, my real ones?”

“Yes. I’m sorry.” Bower sighed heavily.

“Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I wasn’t sure if you were ready for it.”

“Ready?” I questioned, grimacing.

“It’s hard enough to tell you that your real parents were fairies and now I’m telling you they’re dead,” he said.

I sat down on the ottoman quietly. The Queen had killed my parents. Who knows if I could have lived happily with them, if they were still alive? But all I could imagine when I thought of these ghost parents were Mum and Dad, Clara and Ryan Cox with wings attached. It was funny to see them floating in the air, but they were the only parents I could imagine. What would it have been like to live with my real parents in the woods? It was too far for my mind to stretch.

But I knew now that I was prepared to stop the Queen. She had already crossed the line, killing her own kind, and now she wanted to take everything with her to the hellish land in her darkness. I pursed my lips. Why did she do it? What possessed her to kill my parents? What compelled her to kill anyone? My heart turned cold and my blood ran hot. Angry was an understatement.

“How are children turned into fairies?” I asked. Surely the Queen wouldn’t stand there and turn them into fairies herself. It was too creepy for her to believe they were fairies and still be involved in making it happen.

“The Queen captured some of her magic for the guards to use, like I do with my potions. They open a box, stand clear and the magic changes the child positioned in front of it,” he said.

“Doesn’t it mean the Queen’s weaker if she’s captured all that magic, just to turn children into fairies?”

“No. It’s not enough to draw any significant power away from her. She just gives them wings. Makes them believe they are fairies. No actual transformation occurs.”

## Chapter

Doodling, I sat looking out of the window on Bower’s rocking chair. Bower yawned as he woke up from an afternoon nap. He stood up and stretched. Then, he fixed his gaze on me and a genial smile lit up on his face. “What is it? You want to ask more questions, don’t you?”

Was it that obvious? “It can wait,” I said, returning his smile.

“No. I don’t mind. Ask away,” he implored.

“Well, what would make the children give up their human lives? They can’t be forced to do it, can they?” I asked, as I set down the pencil, I’d been using, on to the window sill beside the telescope.

“When they become fairies, a strange version of a fairy, the Queen’s magic also clouds over their human memories. It’s like a new life to them,” Bower said.

“A second chance?” I asked.

“No. Not likely. They’re just chosen at random from the children in the cages,” he said.

“Cages? So there are more?” I asked, surprised. I pushed the rocking chair back and it swung violently with me still sitting on it.

“Careful!” started Bower. “It’s not a park swing! That chair’s nearly as old as me.”

“Sorry,” I said, letting it rock until it naturally came to a stop.

“OK,” he said. “Yes, there’s more children and more cages. Most of the cages are high in the trees, hidden in the foliage. Many of the fairies don’t even know themselves they’re there. The cell that you were in was for the newer ones. Every few days, the guards move them around into different cells to disorientate them. If I hadn’t come on that day and got you out, anything could have happened to you. Some are for sacrifice. Others, to become fairies,” he said.

I could still imagine myself on the altar, in the unenviable position of the sacrificed child from just a few days ago. “Have you tried saving them from the cages?”

“Of course, but a wizard isn’t a natural flyer. I’ve saved a few, but it makes little difference, others take their place,” Bower said scratching his head. “I wouldn’t have been able to stay close to the Queen and her plans if I had been caught,” he added.

“What about the ones from the prison cell next to the Queen’s court?”

“I haven’t tried with those children. We wouldn’t get far. I’d be like a mother duck, parading past a fox den with a line of ducklings.”

“We’ve got to do *something*,” I said, throwing my sketch pad on to the seat of the rocking chair, after I’d stood up. I paced the room. This plan of his sucked. Wasn”t there another way?

“It’s not a bad life living as a fairy. If they stay out of the Queen’s way and don’t draw attention to themselves, they’re fine,” Bower said, wanting to change the subject.

“What about those who get sacrificed? They’re not fine.”

“I know Star–Stacy, but there’s nothing I can do about it. Only one more has to die. Two at most,” he said. He looked unhappy and he sighed. Would there be more, that he wasn’t aware of? “Then it’s all over and everyone can go back to their lives.”

Back to their lives? How could anyone ever go back to living a normal life after this and pretend that none of it had happened? And what about Bower’s life? There was no return for him.

I was silent for a while, examining a splinter in my finger, which had bothered me while drawing.

“When they’re fairies, do they ever remember their human lives?” I asked, trying to push it out.

He handed me a pair of tweezers from the chest of drawers. “Here, don’t pick at it, use this.”

“I wasn’t picking at it. Anyway, it’s hard to use these.” I gestured to my splinted arm. “Can you get it out?”

He nodded, taking back the tweezers. I offered him my hand. As he held it open with his own big hand, he studied my finger. “Keep still,” he said.

“I am. Ow!”

“There. It’s out.”

“Ta.”

He returned to our original conversation, as he popped the tweezers back. “I suppose they could remember bits and pieces. I never hear of it. Though I wouldn’t if they did. They’d keep quiet about it, thinking that random visions or memories of another life would sound ridiculous to the other fairies.”

“What about Spark, and the fairy guards? You said they might have been here for longer? Don’t they remember?”

“Who knows? They’re taught not to ask questions. That’s part of their duty. If they want to discover anything, they have to go to the Queen themselves, which of course, few would ever do.”

“Have you tried telling any of them about their humanity?”

“I did once. For all the good it did. They believed the Queen, and I was cast out as mad, dangerous. They’re too afraid to talk to me now. It suits me just fine. So, mostly, I’ve been left to get on with my work, until you came along.” He opened the Book on the table, keen to start another session with it.

“*I* won’t forget, will I?”

Bower’s head hung low as he looked down at the open pages in front of him. There was a deep silence. My throat felt like it was burning and my heart beating fast. I almost wished I hadn’t asked.

“I don’t know. Changing form can be traumatic,” he said slowly.

I couldn’t believe it. It seemed so unreal. “This can’t be happening!” I shook my head. “This can’t be happening!” The sorrow and panic overwhelmed me in a wave of emotion I had no control over. I didn’t want to be here. It was too much. His life, the hart, my memories, another child’s life. Everything. It was too much to sacrifice and there was no guarantee any of it would work.

I dropped to my knees, trying to bury my face in my hands, but I couldn’t bring my splinted arm up much further than my waist and it hurt like hell. No! I closed my eyes and covered them with my one free hand. I choked up, my breath ragged, my diaphragm aching.

“Why is this happening?”

“What?”

“Everything!” I screamed angrily at him. “Don’t you get it?”

He was silent.

“All this time, I thought I was learning something. I won’t know anything again. I won’t know anything!” I howled through my sobs. “What’s the point? Forget being a fairy! I don’t want it.”

“Stacy, calm down! You’re hyperventilating. All this agitation won’t help you.” A hand reached out and at his touch, I flinched, like a hot iron was searing my back.

“Don’t!” Despondently, I opened my eyes, but looked away and didn’t engage with him. I ignored the fact that he was now kneeling close to me. My brain was shutting down. I couldn’t think clearly.

Before I knew it, his hand was tentatively touching my back again, his attempts to sooth me. In a circular motion, he rubbed my back, like a parent might to a child. This time I let him.

“Breathe. Come on, breathe!” he pleaded.

I tried to take a deep breath, but coughed instead. “I can’t,” I sobbed, panicking. Dizzy, I brought my hand to the floor to steady myself.

“Yes, you can. Take slow deep breaths… That’s it. That’s better.”

I stood as my breathing normalised and he stood up too. “Do you want a hug? It might help,” he added.

I nodded.

His hug felt warm and comforting. I’d had no closeness like this with a grandparent, and I wondered if this was what it was like. All I could think about was that I’d forget this feeling along with everything else. It was agony. I blinked away my tears. I couldn’t bear his embrace any longer, so I withdrew and sat down on the ottoman, trying to recover.

He moved over to the rocking chair, and placing my sketching pad on the table, he shuffled the chair back into its usual spot by the fire and sat down. He reached behind to remove the pillow I had been using, before he rocked back and forth in it. The rocking chair creaked, but its regular rhythm brought me back to myself.

“Are you OK?” he asked after a while.

“Yeah. I guess,” I responded. I was completely wiped out, fatigued, losing all interest in drawing. Instead, I opened one of the fairy books, the one for young children and read the simple verses. It wasn’t long, till my eyes wandered to the Book of Knowledge and its open pages. The rhythm of the rocking chair stopped suddenly, and Bower leapt up to shut the Book and take it away.

“You might remember,” Bower said revisiting our conversation. I had no more energy left in me to fight with him anymore. “You’re stronger and you’re a real fairy. Once you’ve experienced it, it’ll be like an anchor, you’ll never forget again.”

“So?” I shrugged my shoulders.

“You’re different. Sooner or later, your memory will return.”

“And if not?”

“I can prepare in advance.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Just trust me,” he said, “I’m sure you’ll remember. I only hope it won’t stop you from doing what must be done.”

Miserably I said, “I don’t seem to have a choice, do I? I won’t even remember trusting you. I won’t know who I am, or what’s going on, or anything.”

## Chapter

I heard a bang and the lodge’s door was forced open.

“Your time’s up, Bower!” the Queen shrieked as she stormed into the lodge. Spark stood beside her.

It was morning and I was only just awake, but I leapt to my feet surprised. Where was my splint? Wait a minute. Why did my arm and ribs feel fine? Had Bower fixed them in the night?

“So, you didn’t kill the human, after all. I should have guessed it would be too much for your delicate constitution,” the Queen said, pointing a finger at me.

“No. I didn’t. Does it bother you?” Bower was already awake, sitting on the rocking chair. He rose slowly, taking his time, half smiling in defiance.

“Your love for humanity is disgusting, but alive or dead, she’s just a human.” Holding her head aloof, she shouted to the guards behind her, “Search this squalor for the Book!”

Marching in, three fairies violently yanked open the drawer filled with potions. They threw some contents to the floor. A vial smashed and a short fairy standing above it transformed into a long centipede, wriggling and crawling on the floor. Wide- eyed, one of the fellow guards looked down.

“Not like that. Be careful. Get on with it,” the Queen shouted to the gawking fairy.

Spark gestured for another two guards to come in. The additional guards crowded round the chest of drawers, each one careful not to step on the centipede. When they were occupied, the Queen deliberately and ruthlessly stepped on the centipede. Lifting her foot, there was nothing but a smashed mess of sticky legs ground into the floor.

I wanted to do something, but what? The centipede was already squished. Burying it was pointless. Half of its body was still on the underside of the Queen’s foot. So much for the prospect of only watching one more sacrifice. I glanced briefly at Spark. His face was as hard as nails, not giving anything away. How could he let the Queen kill someone? I looked in Bower’s direction. Had he known the Queen was coming today, and was that why he had healed me? His head was down, in silent prayer.

“You’ve hidden it well, I’m sure. It’s your last, stupid attempt to stop me,” said the Queen.

“Mew!” The hart sounded, frightened by the loud noises in the room.

“What’s that?” the Queen barked.

“I heard nothing, Your Majesty,” said Spark.

Bower glanced at me, frowning. She wasn’t paying attention to either of us. I gave Bower a quick nod in reply.

The hart mewed again.

The Queen forcefully enunciated her words this time, “What was that?” Spark shrugged his shoulders as she glanced about the room.

Bower’s lips were pursed as he tried to think of something that could distract her.

“Mew! It’s me,” I said, making the best impersonation I could.

“Ha, ha!” Her laughter was so unexpected and frightening. “He *has* been experimenting on you,” said the Queen, pointing a finger at me.

One fairy, now knelt within centimetres from the hart, attentively looking at some scrape marks on the floor, left over from when Bower and I had moved the table. They gestured for Spark’s attention and he strode over to have a look. I couldn’t give them any more time. Bower didn’t want to give the Book up without a fight, but it was equally important for the hart to remain hidden. They’d find the Book in the end.

I pushed the ottoman and it scraped noisily against the floor. I said, “It’s here.”

The fairies watched me with fascination, as I fumbled with the loose floorboards, lifted them up, and reached down for the box. My hands shook as I lifted the box onto the table and removed the lid. Spark quickly snatched the Book of Knowledge up out of the open box.

“Got it! I’ve got it, my Queen,” he said, proudly.

“Give it to me!” the Queen commanded. Spark obeyed instantly.

The Queen turned the pages of the Book, grinning with a terrible look of delight, not like anything I had seen before. Then she shut it with a thud.

“This child clearly doesn’t trust you,” the Queen said. “Ha! See how fickle these humans are? Out! Wait outside,” she shouted to the fairies. “Hang on, take this,” she said, handing the Book to Spark, the last fairy to leave. “Don’t open it,” she commanded, her eyes staring into his eye sockets.

“I won’t, my Queen,” he answered, before he hurried outside.

When they had gone, she started again. “Now I have what I want, I can get rid of you,” she said to Bower, ignoring me. “How much time you’ve wasted, I’ve wasted, when I could have been taking my revenge on humanity all those years ago. Back then, I foolishly believed you and your claim that you needed more time, but recently I think, in fact, I know, you’ve been stalling. Afraid of death, wizard? I hope you are. It would be so much more fun if you were. Say you’re scared,” the Queen said.

“I’m scared,” Bower’s voice cracked. I was surprised, but knew he was saying it to convince the Queen that he had been stalling for that reason alone. She made a noise through her teeth like someone letting air out of a balloon.

“Not like you, Bower. Normally you act so tough and can’t bring yourself down to do what I say. What do you think you’re up to?” the Queen snapped suspiciously.

“I’m tired of living,” Bower whispered.

“I can believe that. Without your witch hussy–” said the Queen harshly.

“How dare you?” Bower roared, raising his angry eyes to meet hers.

“That’s more like it. The wizard and his principles. Even saving face when it’s the end,” the Queen said, smiling, now she was on familiar ground.

## Chapter

It finally hit home. Bower was going to die today. My throat and chest tightened, burning as if they were on fire. I couldn’t swallow. I knew he wouldn’t beg. His death was the only way to save us all, but I still wished there was another option.

Welcoming death, Bower held his head high, his eyes raised, reaching beyond the ceiling and the trees above, to heaven’s door.

The Queen crafted a surge of energy. Holding out her hands and stretching the space between them, she formed a zig-zagging black web. She threw it towards Bower. It crackled through the air, but before it struck him, his own hand was reflexively outstretched with power. A beam of golden light hissed, as it met with her black energy. Sparks of light violently exploded and scattered outwards.

I ducked. A wooden bowl on the table blew up, fragments flying above my head. The fire in the fireplace roared into life like someone had poured petrol on to it. Everything in the room shook. This magic, called from the very depths of their beings, was unlike any I’d seen before.

I hugged the floor. The Queen spun another web of energy and flung it towards Bower. He countered her, but her black energy was still driving closer to him.

It was then, he raised a hand dramatically to the sky, the universe funnelling power through him. He trained this power at her, a brilliant white beam gaining momentum, until it was only a hair’s breadth away from the Queen. Despite its intensity, it slowed. The Queen stepped back.

The furniture shook again. Apples on the table behind me exploded, one after another. A bowl and a wooden goblet blew up too. The glass in the window pane cracked, pieces of it shattering outwards.

The Queen’s hair stood on end from static. Vexed, she rose from the floor. She cackled, raised her hand, and showed just how much more power she could command. This time, her energy achieved light work of the exchange and Bower’s light beam retreated.

Bower’s brow plastered with perspiration, as he buckled to his knees, exhausted. The Queen dropped her arms and the black energy evaporated. She stepped back on to the floor, her hair settling around her shoulders, as if it was some kind of sea-creature. Bored, she surveyed the room. She had hardly broken a sweat.

Bower chanted quickly:

“Slice, dice,

Sharp knife.”

A knife appeared in his hand. It was one I recognised from a box of cutlery, now strewn across the floor. He threw it, aiming for her heart. He missed.

The table knife slid like butter through her wings and bounced off the doorframe. Her wings were part of herself that was dust already. She was only shocked. She cracked an amused laugh, opened the door, and kicked the knife outside.

While she did that, Bower silently evoked the incantations for three more knives. The last hadn’t appeared. When she turned, he threw the first two at her, keeping her distracted, while he opened his palm and chanted loudly this time:

“Slice, dice,

Sharp knife!”

Bower’s hand was still empty. Oh no! His magic had failed him. The Queen deflected the two knives. They clattered uselessly to the floor.

The distraction was for nothing. If he scrambled over to the cutlery box now, she’d strike him down. Disappointment weighed heavily in his eyes, yet a stillness, a quiet resignation, held them steady. He didn’t even move.

The Queen, poised as if about to play a funeral dirge on some unseen instrument, violently gestured, her hands flexing with energy. It broke like lightning forks around Bower’s body, bouncing off him, as he bent low to the ground. A sniggering smile on the Queen’s face settled to a bored, stony expression, as he was crushed under her will.

It was agonizing to watch. I still couldn’t believe I was letting him die. I ran to his side. Stray lashes of energy struck me. I doubled over. My vision blurred. My eyes prickled with tears.

“No! Get away,” Bower cried out. Somehow, Bower found a small reserve of magic, just enough to push me just a few centimetres out of the way, my trainers skidding against the floor.

The Queen paused, summoning up more magic. She threw a thick black bolt, sharp as a dagger at Bower. It pierced him. He screamed in agony. Dear God! No! The Queen tried to cover the sound with her own voice.

“Just deserts for someone who thinks they can throw knives at me! Unlike you, Bower, I can make my magic do anything!” she shouted.

The moment of intense pain passed. Bower collapsed, exhausted on to the floor, his face planted in the dirt.

“You can’t bring anyone back from the dead,” he uttered, slowly, painfully. She let out a frustrated scream, a child having an angry tantrum, as he breathed his last breath.

I ran over to him. I turned him over. His eyes and his face were blank. I couldn’t believe he was dead. I couldn’t. I prodded one of his shoulders lightly. When he didn’t respond, I leant my ear to his chest. There was no heartbeat. I stared at him, waiting. He wasn’t getting up, no matter how much I wanted him to.

The world fell on to my fragile shoulders. Even the clouds were heavy with children’s and people’s dreams that could fall to the ground any second as sorrow and tears. But what about me? What about Bower? Though my tears, I closed his glassy eyes. I clung to his clothes.

I hadn’t realised the Queen had been standing there, this whole time. “Shame,” she said solemnly, sighing at her anti-climax. “Never mind. He wouldn’t have wanted to see the end of the world come to pass.” Turning to me she said, in a strange moment of compassion, “It’s odd that Bower took the time to save you, like you were something more than a human child, like a child of his.” Her head tilted away. “But you’re not and he’s not coming back,” she said, sharply, remembering herself.

Maybe she was thinking what her parents had thought of her and if they had still loved her, even as she was killing them.

Then, as if reminded of who she was talking to, she commanded me, “Burn his body. Not in here.” She glanced around. “I need his ashes, not burnt leftovers of this building, and there still may be some things of use to me in this place. No. Take his body outside. Use whatever wood you need to make a pyre. Don’t you dare burn down the trees, or I promise you, you’ll be the next sacrifice! When it’s all over, bring his ashes to the guards. That will be agony enough for you, you foul thing of flesh. Look at you! You’re still snivelling in your pyjamas, so susceptible to cold. I’m beyond all of that. I don’t feel the cold of mortality.”

I wanted to say something through the pain, but what? It wasn’t fair. As she left and shouted for two guards to stay behind, an answer came. The Queen felt the cold, the cold of death. You couldn’t look at her and not see it shrouded around her with the intensity of day. That and regret were her only friends, but Bower had been more than a friend to me, and I would not let his death be for nothing. Bower had believed I could do this. I only hoped he was right.

## Chapter

Bower’s body was far too heavy for me to lift on my own. I gave it a go, before I collapsed down, crying next to his dear face. Why had it come to this? Why was he dead? I couldn’t stand that his lips spoke no more, that his eyes saw nothing of the world. I wished I had shown him more affection while he was alive. Like his child, the Queen had said. Like his child. It was true. He had been the only parent figure to me in this world of magic. Now, I felt like an orphan of magic.

I hid two pouches on top of the hart’s cage, one which contained a knife and some matches, the other was empty. Then I called in the fairy guards.

“Where do you want him?” one of them asked.

“On to the table,” I replied, on autopilot, as I quickly shifted detritus off the scorched tablecloth and into the ottoman.

“You’re not going to burn him in here, are you?” the same fairy asked.

“No,” I said. “I’ve a potion to levitate the table and we can take it outside.”

“You’re not supposed to use potions,” the fairy said.

“Do you want to drag him outside yourselves?” I said angrily. “It’s your choice.”

“How dare you speak to us like that! We’re not stupid, you good-for-nothing human.” Then to his friend, “Come on.”

They lifted him up on to the table. The tablecloth slid up and part of the cage became visible. I glanced anxiously at it, before the shorter fairy, who hadn’t spoken until now, asked, “What now?”

They hadn’t noticed. Carefully, I poured the potion on to the corner of the table. The liquid steamed and filled the room with smoke. The fairies coughed, and the shorter one flapped his hand to disperse the smoke ahead of him, as he ran outside with the other fairy following. The table levitated a few centimetres from the floor, and I adjusted the tablecloth.

The two fairies peered in through the door, opening it wide for me to emerge with his body. I gave the table a gentle prod, and it glided right across to the end of the room, the soles of Bower’s shoes bumping softly against the wall close to the door.

\* \* \*

The guards lifted Bower’s limp body on to the ground and they stood staring at it, while I tried not cry in front of them. We were surrounded by trees. I gathered some kindling and any broken branches nearby, nervously looking over my shoulder at them. What if they didn’t leave? I’d have no way to switch the ashes. I wracked my brain for excuses.

The taller of the guards finally sighed, bored. “You know how to start a fire, don’t you?” he asked me.

I nodded.

“Return to the lodge when you’re done. We’ll be waiting for you there.”

“Why don’t we wait here?” the other guard asked as they ascended in to the canopy.

“Because it could take a while,” said the taller one.

A wave of relief washed over me as I watched them leave of their own accord. Once they were out of sight, I dropped the kindling in my arms. I fell to my knees, rocking with sorrow as I hugged Bower’s familiar body and smelt the forest on his robes: berries, apples, smoke and pigeon-meat. Grief flowed from me, leaving behind an aching emptiness. Was Bower truly gone? I lifted my eyes to his still face. There was no breath from him. I cried again, but I had to stop myself.

It was just a body. It wasn’t him anymore.

I rested his hands one on top of the other on his chest and over his heart. I stuck the branches of kindling inward. Larger pieces crossed over his body, tepee like. I threw some dead leaves and cones into the middle and on top of his body. I lit a match and tossed it on to his leaf-covered clothes. The clothes where the matches had landed caught alight and flames arose until Bower’s body was enclosed in bright flame. I couldn’t bear to look, to see his face crinkle in the fire and maybe see another form of him, older and gnarled underneath that beautiful young skin.

Floating gently behind me, was the levitating table. I lifted the scorched tablecloth and the hart squeaked with fear. How could I possibly kill it? It was like killing a baby. I needed to focus. Bower had died so that this could happen. The hart’s were the only ashes that could stop the Queen. I *had* to do it. It was the ideal time too, to light the fire for the hart. I could at least hide the smoke of this second fire with the first.

The hart would return. It could be free. It was hard to go through with it, but as it stood there unflinching, I knew it was time. I stroked the hart through the cage bars, calming myself. Then I picked up the dagger, hoping to aim true. Bower had shown me where to make the incision so that it was swift and painless.

I thrusted the dagger with as much force as I could. The hart’s whole body jolted with surprise, and then, it was motionless, the smell of blood and animal fur mingling. Its body was still warm in my hands as I lifted it out of the cage. It felt so light too. It was hard to imagine the life force that it had possessed until only a few minutes ago.

I retched.

I created a pyre around its small body and then broke apart the wicker cage, throwing it on top of the fire to destroy the evidence. I also buried the bloodied dagger and matches under a nearby pile of musty leaves.

## Chapter

“Throw some earth on to the fire, you stupid human,” a fairy said, as she descended from the canopy. She tore apart a thin piece of fabric from the layered skirt of her dress and smothered the dancing flames on the branch with it. She wasn’t a guard.

I thought I’d better do what she said, and after throwing handfuls of earth on to the larger fire, it became manageable again.

A younger male fairy with brown hair and a small face, descended through the trees. He stood beside her. His eyes, one green and one blue identical to hers. Were they siblings? They stood watching the two fires, indistinguishable now, as if it was for their amusement.

“What’s in the fire, fires?” she corrected herself, raising an eyebrow, as she glanced between the two.

I didn’t know what to say.

“Heard the wizard’s dead,” the male fairy said without a care. The gossip was unexpected and stung. “I dare you to look in that lodge, Crystal. Supposedly, there’re potions and skulls in there,” he said to the female fairy, prodding her ribs with his elbow.

“Stop it, Toad,” Crystal said, jabbing him back with her finger. “I heard it was protected by a curse and if you stepped inside, you’d die.”

Toad’s eyes widened. Was that all they thought of him, now he was gone? A wizard who had a curse on his home? As the flames hissed and crackled, I smiled to myself, remembering dust, the guilty secret and the knowledge that Bower was much more important than they believed. Few beings knew about the power of dust. At least Bower had passed on a thing or two before he died.

“What are you smiling at? I dare you to look,” said Crystal to me. They really were children. Bower was right.

“I can’t. Guards are outside,” I said. “They won’t let me in.”

“Shame,” she said, sneering. “It would be fun to see a human die. Why have you got two fires burning anyway? I bet one of themes his body, isn’t it? What’s the other one?”

Bower had said the fairies would have torn his body apart before burning it, because of their superstitious nonsense. It was worth a try.

“It’s the rest of his body, so he doesn’t rise up in the flames,” I said.

“Sick or what?” Toad said. He clearly hadn’t lost his entire childhood lingo.

“Hey, why’s this floating?” Toad asked, pointing at the table, as he looked back at it a second time.

“A potion,” I stated.

“A potion. *You* can’t use magic!” Crystal cried.

I shrugged.

They stayed with me until the fires had died out, mixing some earth into the embers to extinguish them.

I grabbed one of the pouches and knelt to gather up Bower’s ashes into it. Inside all these ashes that I was gently gathering were the ashes of Bower’s heart, his closed eyes, and his smile. The smell of ash filled my nostrils and reminded me of the night I’d come looking for my phone. It was the first contact I’d had with him; the stench of ash upon the air, the darkness and a hand over my mouth. He had taken away my voice, but strangely, as time passed, he gave me a voice and a new identity.

“Are you keeping the two halves separated?” Toad asked.

I nodded.

Toad picked up the other pouch before gathering up the hart’s ashes into it. “Look, I’m touching the wizard’s dead body,” he said, laughing. “I dare you to touch it too,” Toad said to Crystal, pointing at the ashes in his pile.

“No. Stop being such a baby,” said Crystal, screwing up her face with disgust.

“Here you are,” Toad said, at last standing up and handing me the pouch. “Was that his head?” he asked, noticing that the pile of ashes he picked up was smaller than the one I was gathering.

“Yes,” I said, quietly, wishing they would just go away and leave me in peace.

“Wow! I was touching wizard’s brains,” he said, grinning with wide eyes.

“That’s it. You’ve had your fun,” I said, finally snapping at him.

“*You* can’t talk to him like that! You’re just a human,” Crystal shrieked.

“I’m telling the Queen!” Toad yelled out.

“No, you won’t,” I said, threatening him through gritted teeth, but I realised my error. “Please don’t. I didn’t mean it,” I quickly pleaded.

“Come on, Crystal, I’m bored now. Let’s go.” Toad was rising upwards, flying in the air.

Crystal stared at me with a sinister look in her eyes. Then, she followed Toad, flying up into the treetops too.

I returned to the lodge with the table, making a quick detour to hide the pouch of Bower’s ashes under a bush and near to a growing collection of poisonous mushrooms. If I got through all of this, I knew what I was going to do with them. I would release his ashes into the universe to create the last wizard’s star, which would glow brighter each night in the black sky. He would be part of the thickly spun cloth wrapping around the planets and be one of the loosely sewn diamonds in it. As he’d once said, there was nothing wrong with adding another light into this world of darkness.

The guards saw me approach and came to meet me. “Is this it, the wizard’s ashes?” asked the taller one. I nodded. He swiped up the red pouch sitting on the tablecloth and opened it.

“Let me see,” the shorter one said, excitedly, as he crowded round too. He peered at it so closely, he almost breathed it in. “That’s definitely it,” he said, coughing over the strong aroma.

The taller one said, “We’ll take it to the Queen. Maybe she’ll reward us. Come on, this human isn’t important. Someone else can always pick her up again. Wouldn’t it be nice to have a tree house to ourselves?” he added, as the two of them headed off to rendezvous with the Queen.

## Chapter

It was an absolute mess inside Bower’s home. Until now, I hadn’t quite realised how much destruction had played havoc through the lodge, most of it generated by the Queen’s and Bower’s fight. Fragments of wood crunched underfoot, while scraps of apple, already turning brown, stuck unpleasantly to my trainers, as I wandered despairingly around the room.

Overturned bottles of potion, lying on their side, crowded at the front of the drawers where they had been pushed forward in a hurry. A few bottles were cracked open on the top of the drawers and a line of red liquid dripped down into the second drawer where a plant was growing. From the wooden base, it grew up slowly before my eyes. Fascinated, I pulled the drawer out and peered at its spreading root.

I stepped back, nearly losing my footing to avoid the centipede-creating concoction. A step or two away, the mush of centipede legs splayed across the floor. I nearly retched again. This was what the Queen had done. The fairy was just a boy turned into a slave and crushed for doing her bidding. So long as she was alive, no one was safe.

I couldn’t stay. The lodge didn’t even have a lock. Without Bower’s presence, it wasn’t safe any longer, but where else could I go? Into the woods? That was the only option.

All this time I had hardly let the pain out. I was surviving, nothing more. Bower! Bower, the last wizard, the man among the fairies. Like a grandfather. Bower, *my friend*. I struggled not to dwell on my thoughts. It wasn’t safe to let myself unravel. There was no change there. Even at home, in my own bed, I hadn’t been safe from the Queen’s influence, dreaming like many children do of fairies, such harmless things. Yeah right! Fairies were real and fairies could kill.

I grabbed a handful of potions at random. I wanted to save more, but I didn’t have time. As I hurriedly forced them into a wooden box, they clattered loudly against one another. It was the wooden box which had held the Book of Knowledge. I felt a pang of guilt for giving it to the Queen. Bower was only useful to her while it had remained hidden. Why on earth had I given it to her? Now he was gone and all I had were trinkets and memories. I spotted the plaque engraved with Bower’s name on the wall. I remembered him saying that his name meant to aim true. His aims had been true. I plucked it off the wall and it fitted into the box with the potions.

From under my pillow, I retrieved my phone, a potion which Bower had given to me to make me appear human, as well as a letter. These last two items were for when all this was over. *If* it would ever be over. Bower had insisted I didn’t look at the letter before then. I shoved them into the box too and discovered that it was too full. I removed a couple of potions and shut the lid. That was it. There was no more room.

I popped the box in a basket and glanced around the lodge one last time. The jagged and broken glass in the upper half of the window caught my eye. The rest of the glass underneath had been flung outwards and there was no sign of the telescope on the window sill. Approaching the window, I saw the telescope lying outside on the ground. I couldn’t abandon it, especially if it still worked. I shut the door. Maybe the threat of a curse would do better than a lock on the door, but I wasn’t going to put it to the test. I hated the way he had been forced to live, with no one to thank him for all the good he had tried to achieve. All those years of healing and helping people, before the trouble of the Queen. *I* hadn’t even thanked him. No one had.

I reached for the telescope on the ground and examined the lenses at either end. They looked intact. The telescope held the memory of the night he had shown me the stars and when he had told me about a wizard’s ashes in one of them. Apart from the spell book, it carried all the weight of the wizard’s hopes. It was all that was left. Stars, which were invisible in the light of day and a book, which had now been pilfered. I wiped a tear from my eye. I still couldn’t believe it had come to this. Bower, dead.

Urging myself to move, I stumbled a few steps forward, my feet like lead, as I urging myself to move. I had never had anyone close to me die before. It was unbearable and I felt so alone. My chest ached like my heart was on fire. My eyes were so full of tears I could hardly see the erratic steps I was taking. I only stopped to retrieve a garden trowel, and the pouch of Bower’s ashes which I’d hidden previously.

I stumbled further and further into the untamed undergrowth. Bower was all that was on my mind now. That and the unwelcomed thought of transforming into a fairy. Now that Bower was dead, his magic was unspooling and working its bindings loose within me. I didn’t know how long I had left as Stacy. Blurry eyed and cold, I looked for a distinctive tree, which I’d hopefully be able to find again, if my memories ever returned. I came across one which was knotted, where multiple trunks had merged and warped together. Beside it, I dug a hole with the trowel I had borrowed and I buried the box, like it was a capsule to be discovered in years to come.

I wasn’t yet sure what to do with the rest. Leaning against a tree with my arm raised high and my face scraping against the bark in my tiring grief, I felt an unexpected opening under my hand. There was a nook where the trunk parted into two spurs. I experimented to find out how deep it was by lowering the telescope inside. It fitted snugly, with room to spare. I lifted it out again and slipped the pouch with Bower’s ashes in first. I then lowered the telescope a second time. There was only the basket and trowel left to conceal and I wanted to keep my phone about my person. I noticed some bushes which had loads of growth on top, but just one main stem. I stowed the brown basket with the trowel inside it under one of these and it blended in, invisible to passers-by.

I returned to the tree and slid to the ground, feeling the bark hard against my back. With my head in my hands, I curled up and tried to comfort myself. My sobs slowed and my heart steadied as I sat hidden by the undergrowth.

There was still no signal to speak of, but I missed Mum and Dad. I positioned my phone to my ear and pretended they could hear me.

“Mum, Dad? I don’t know what’s going to happen. I don’t know why he left without telling me everything. I thought I could deal with it, but I can’t.” I wiped the tears that were pooling from the tip of my nose. “Mum, Dad, I’ve failed you. I’ve failed myself. I’ve failed Bower. I’ve done what asked. I’ve switched the ashes, but I wish I could have saved him too. I wish I didn’t have to say goodbye. I don’t know what’s going to happen next and I’m so scared. I wish I was your child again.”

Fresh sobs caught in my throat. I would hide here until my memories were cleaved from my bones. Would I forget my sorrows then? A new bout of tears burst out of me. Would I forget Bower? Not just Bower. Everything.

“I’ll forget you two. I’ll forget who *I am*.” My tears ran freely and sorrow swallowed me up like an incoming high tide swallows the beach, leaving behind nothing but the white skeleton of the cliff.

# Part Three Awakening

## Chapter

Waking to the sound of someone coughing, I sat up quickly. An unblemished face came into focus, eyes dazzling in the filtered sunlight playing through a canopy of trees above. He smiled. A brown halo of voluminous, short hair and his large wings gave him the aura of an angelic being. Leaves were stuck to my face and I brushed them off, embarrassed.

“It’s OK,” he said. “Do you remember how you got here?”

Thinking back, there was nothing, no thought of yesterday. Only this morning and this moment existed.

“No,” I said, relishing the touch of my lips smacking against each other as I spoke.

“It’s OK. It’s normal to feel disorientated for the first few days. That’s expected,” he said.

First few days of what? Where was I?

“What’s your name?” he asked, kindly.

I waited, expecting the answer to dawn on me. It didn’t. Oh, no! What was my name? How could I not know my name? Even the trees of the wood and the birds of the air had names. How could I not have one? “St–St–Sta–Star,” I stuttered, finally catching on to something, but that was all I had. My head was like an abyss of silence save for the single reverberating word, “Star.” Where had it come from?

“I’m Spark. The others must have forgotten to clothe you properly,” he said, pointing at what I was wearing.

My eyes fell on my blue and white striped pyjamas. They looked well-worn with threads coming lose all over them, as well as some which must have come from a torn-off pocket. I also had a pair of scuffed, dirty, off-white shoes. Spark’s clothes were nothing like mine. They were bedazzling. He had long boots, brown and soft, reaching his calves. They met with a trunk shape on each trouser leg that grew like two trunks and spiralled around each other at the torso. The trunks parted at the heart, developing single branches in the arms. Greenery twined and exploded from every point in the tree shape, making him exude life.

“I like what you’re wearing,” I said, keenly.

“Can you fly?” Spark asked, ignoring my compliment.

“Fly?” Looking behind me, to my astonishment, I had wings. How could I not notice? My wings were bigger than his delicate ones, though unlike his, mine were a shrivelled and droopy at the top, as if they had wasted away from lack of exercise.

“I guess that’s a no then,” Spark said, disappointed. “I’ll teach you,” he added.

I knelt slowly, careful not to tangle my wings around some sticky type of undergrowth.

“Your wings are stronger than you think. They’re not going to rip,” Spark said, catching me by surprise and scooping me up. The undergrowth tore around me, the pressure of his hands against the side of my waist and leg was tantalising.

Spark’s face was close to mine as he focused on the upward journey through the trees. The wind from his wings fanned my face, awakening me to the beautiful morning around us.

Once we were through the canopy, a lake of green spread below, surrounded by strange, large, brick homes, some wider than ten or fifteen tree trunks.

Spark flew higher and I shivered as the wind swept past my clothes. He slowed when the clouds were all that was between us and space. His wings flapped, keeping us hovering in the air, so I could appreciate the amazing vista. The clouds rolled above and the trees rolled out beneath, cushioning us between them, like snuggling between a bed and it’s nice warm covers. My eyelids drooped, sleepily.

When I opened my eyes, fairies were jumping in and out of the greenery, as if they were tiny, red fish in a lake. They darted and crossed, but gracefully parted at the last instant before they hit one another. And I was one of them, desperately wanting to learn how to do that, to perform this wonderful “hello” to a stranger. They never truly knew one another, yet their spirits were touching, their lives overlapping.

“Well, this is as good a spot as any,” Spark said, breaking my daydream, as he dropped the arm which had been supporting my legs.

“What do you mean?” I stuttered, locking my arms tightly around his neck. We were so high. Way down, the sharp trunks and branches now appeared to stretch upwards and thorny.

“Come on, don’t be scared,” he said, impatiently. He tried to pull me off with his arm that had, until moments ago, been wrapped dependably under my legs. But without his support, how could I not be frightened? “Come on. It’s– it’s just like swimming.”

Spark awoke something within me. Swimming. I knew what swimming was. The cold, the dark, the wet stretching out for all eternity. A tightness seized my chest and I couldn’t breathe. Spark wrenched my arms off and let go of me. I plunged down into a nightmare vision where I was drowning, hurtling, tumbling, through air or water. It made no difference. I was going to die.

“Calm down,” Spark called from above. I stole a look up at him, to his anxious face, and a smile stretched across it when he noticed I was looking. My nightmare cracked, like a fissure and I was just free falling. OK, it was a long way down, but I had time to figure it out.

I imagined I was heading towards spongy earth. I greedily breathed in the air whistling past me. Tensing and relaxing my back muscles, a few unused ones stretched and my wings instantly flapped open and shut.

When I gaped at my wings, shocked and astounded, I realised I was falling once more. It wasn’t a good time to admire the beauty of flight!

I had to think of it consciously again. Tense, relax. Open and shut. My descent slowed. I could do it. It became easier with every stroke and soon I was whooping with delight, spiralling up to meet Spark. I had done it. I could fly!

As we parted, only to come back straight on, and miss each other again at tangents, Spark smiled and laughed. The rush of air between us as we brushed past one another generated a tingling sensation on my skin.

Spark waited for me to meet up with him again, properly this time, and I kissed him. I was so full of joy and jubilation. There wasn’t much to it. A wet smack on the lips, but it was still a kiss. As we pulled back, for a split second, a look of sadness seemed to fill his eyes.

“Let’s get you kitted up then,” he said as an unexpected coldness took possession of him.

## Chapter

Almost crashing into a tree house, camouflaged in greenery, I lurched backwards in flight, hitting the branches of a tree behind me and I sunk to the ground.

I lay among some bushes, my wings straining with pain and my breathing ragged, as I noticed more tree houses in the canopy above. Now that I had seen one, they were everywhere, beautiful and at harmony with their surroundings, assembled in various shapes and sizes. They all had open doorways, with no doors, as if nature was always welcome in to the lives of the fairies. If only I had seen them sooner.

Spark landed, saying, “Are you OK? I looked behind me and you were gone!”

“I’m fine,” I said, picking myself up.

“We can walk if you want,” Spark said, reaching towards me to grip on to my elbow as if he needed to prop me up, but my legs were fine. It was as if they remembered walking, but how could my legs remember walking, when my wings couldn’t remember flying? All these thoughts were worrying me. What was going on?

I sighed, confused, as a large wooden building came into view. Trailing plants grew up its walls, and pink and yellow flowers cascaded down from the roof towards the entrance. In front of it, meadow plants also grew.

We entered an entrance hall and inside, the high ceilings and walls hung heavy with ivy. Following Spark, a few leaves brushed my shoulders, like wary hands and I shuddered. Hushed and quiet, the earth beneath swallowed the sound of our footsteps. Spark knocked on a door leading off the entrance hall. As we waited, he looked back at me, reassuringly.

A dumpy-faced fairy answered the door. Her clothes were the same as Spark’s, except for hugging her more tightly, like ivy squeezing around a tree branch. She also wore a strange hat. If you could call it a hat. An odd arrangement of bark, acorns, and leaves sat on her head, as if she had been dragged through a bird’s nest. I held back a laugh as she greeted Spark and opened the door wide for us both to enter.

The room was long and unprepossessing with a few tables laden with folded clothing items. One of the double set of doors at the end of the room was somewhat ajar and a mysterious flash of light emanated through. A moment later, as the light dissipated, a female fairy stepped through the door and into the room we were standing in. She was wearing a plain and super loose, red dress adorned with an excessive number of pockets. I wasn’t going to have to wear something as horrid as that, was I? As the fairy turned and walked past me and towards the door we had just come in by, I saw she had slits in the back of her clothes where her wings extended out looking shrivelled and weak like mine. I hadn’t thought about needing holes for my wings.

When she had left, Spark said, “Wait here,” before he guided the dumpy-faced fairy away from me. They whispered together and I was dying to know what they were saying. After pointing at me, both Spark and the dumpy-faced fairy who Spark had been talking to, stared at me for a split second. My hands grew sweaty and my mouth dry.

I shouldn’t have been waiting like this. I didn’t even know who they were. I didn’t know myself. How was I to know if I was one of them? Spark had said it would be disorientating for the first few days. I calmed down. He had said it was to be expected, but again came the nagging thought: first few days of what? I wanted to shout in frustration and run away. Another impulse was to open the door and clearly see what was happening in the room beyond.

The mysterious light shone again, breaking between Spark and the female fairy’s head as they talked closely, cutting off eye contact with me once again. I settled down, bit my lower lip, trying hopelessly to keep it all in. Another female fairy, also in red clothing stepped through the far door. Her small nose sniffed the air and her two green eyes looked quizzically at me as she passed me and I tried to look as if nothing was wrong. Nothing was the matter. Spark would help me. Of course he would. My nervousness broke and I smiled to myself as the passing fairy left the room. Spark would invite me to his tree house and look after me, teaching me all I needed to know about this confusing life.

Spark and the dumpy-faced female fairy returned. She strode behind a table and gathered up a bundle of red clothes before approaching me, smiling cheerfully. She attempted to separate out the bundle, waving a long dress at me in one hand, and in her two smallest fingers she clung to a pair of red shoes. In the other hand, she carried a thigh high dress, with shorts for underneath. Then there was another dress which she revealed, hidden in the crook of her arm. A very short dress with trousers. “Well, what will you have?”

I cringed. She might as well have asked me to choose between three sets of rags compared to their own clothing. I didn’t want any of them, but if that was all that was on offer, I had to think about what would be most suitable for the woods. So far as I knew, I hadn’t spent a night here. Could it get chilly in the early hours? I didn’t know. I took the shoes and short dress with the trousers.

The female fairy pointed behind me to a wooden screen I hadn’t seen on the opposite side of the room. “If you like, you can get changed behind there,” she said.

“Do I haveto?” I wished I could stay in my clothes I was already wearing. At least I looked a bit different.

“Yes,” the female fairy said, then quieter to Spark, who had now joined us, “She can’t get caught looking like one of them.” One of whom?

“Yes, please. Get changed Star,” Spark said.

As I struggled to untie my shoes behind the small screen, I heard them talking about me in hushed voices.

“Are you sure you can’t remember her being here?” asked Spark.

Leaning my ear close to the screen so I could hear better, I stopped unlacing my second shoe.

“No,” replied the female fairy.

“Isn’t that a little odd?” Spark question.

“Well, yes and no,” she answered, “You know what it’s like since the Queen wanted more fairies made.”

Fairies made! What did that mean? My heart beat fast and erratic. The red clothes I had thrown to the floor were looking more and more like blood pooling at my feet. I couldn’t have been something else, could I? I tried to think, but fairies were all that I could imagine. Fairies and animals. That’s all I knew. What else was there? No. I must have misheard it. Who was this Queen they were talking about? I had to know. I quickly stripped off my striped trousers and replaced them with the red ones, but after that, I was stuck with the challenge of my wings. I wrestled with my top, but it was impossible to take off. My fingers shook.

Reluctantly, I called out, “How do I get my wings out?”

“You could rip what you’re wearing or try tensing another group of muscles, other than those you use for flying,” the female fairy replied. “I assume she’s flown?” she asked Spark.

“Yes,” he said, as I tried to find yet another set of unused muscles in my back. Flummoxing or what?

“Can you do it?” the female fairy called out.

“I think so,” I said, as the muscles suddenly flinched painfully to life. “Ow!” I cried out as my wings folded slowly until they could fit through the holes in my blue and white top. As they opened to their natural tautness once again, I sighed.

“You’ll get used to it. After a while it stops hurting. It’s just the strain,” the female fairy said.

I braced myself for the second wave of pain and breathed another sigh of relief after I had donned my red top. It was going to take some time getting accustomed to. Once I had put on my new red shoes, I grabbed my old clothes from the floor. Curious, I brushed the jagged tears in the fabric of my top. It was as though my wings had broken out through it.

I retrieved my old shoes and walked out from behind the screen. A secret look passed between Spark and the girl fairy before they noticed me and stepped back from one another. They smiled nervously like they didn’t want me to know they’d been talking about me.

“What’s the Queen like?” I asked.

“You don’t know?” the dumpy-faced female fairy exclaimed. She still held on to the other red fairy-dress options, twisted around her leafed arm, making it look as if tree branches were bleeding. There was so much blood in this place. Where did that thought come from? I hadn’t seen anyone being treated badly.

“No, but I’m dying to know what the Queen’s like,” I said.

The female fairy reached out to take my clothes, but I refused to hand them over. They weren’t anybody else’s but mine and if I had been wearing them before any of this, they were my only real reminder of who I was.

“I won’t put them on. I just want to keep them,” I said.

She looked at Spark with a disapproving glare and dropped her arm, but she was still annoyed. I volunteered my shoes almost as a peace offering, more willing to let them go. They were bulky and pointless, springy to walk in, but heavy at the same time.

The female fairy took them and said politely, “The Queen is our protector. She has a plan to raise the fairies up.”

“Up to what?” I asked.

The female fairy looked at Spark, warily.

“To a wonderful greatness,” he said, smiling as if it was obvious. I had no more time to think about it, as he added, “Come on, it’s time to meet your new tree house group.” Spark gestured to the door across the end of the room, which we had entered through.

I turned the wooden knob and opened the door just as someone stormed past outside in the ivy hallway. Well, I say someone, but they weren’t quite there. The outline of her arms, legs and wings was faint. She was dressed in a red corset, the trail of her purple and yellow skirt rippling against the green ivy hanging on the walls. Where it touched, the ivy grew before my eyes at least a hand’s span.

I gasped. Her head snapped around towards me. Black eyes stared out, framed by black make-up. She looked like death itself and yet she was so alluring and interesting. She was different from the others. I’m sure she was older too. She frowned, as if she knew me. She knew me! Perhaps she could tell me who I was, where I came from? I was about to ask her, when Spark squeezed past me into the hallway.

“Queen,” he said, bowing low as he addressed her.

“Spark,” she said, sharply, before her eyes turned away uninterested. Still staring at her, from the doorway, I accidentally stood on her trailing skirt as she continued on her way. She tripped forwards only just managing to stop herself from falling over. Her eyes flashed back at me, accusingly, dark and piercing. It was an accident and yet I grew hotter than the summer’s sun with guilt.

“You shouldn’t have done that,” said Spark, gruffly, when the Queen had gone.

“I didn’t do it on purpose,” I wailed. I had tripped up our Protector! I hoped Spark wouldn’t tell anyone. They’d all hate me and I’d never fit in. With my head down, tears almost coming to my eyes, I followed Spark out. Why wasn’t anything going my way?

## Chapter

“Hello,” said Spark as he fluttered down to a tree house and entered through its open doorway. He was going to introduce me to my new tree house group.

“Hi,” a female fairy responded casually to him as I landed a few paces behind him. I waited nervously outside and I hid my blue and white clothes behind my back.

The female fairy’s jewel-like eyes reflected in the light as she came to meet us. She looked down, embarrassed and her eyes were lost behind a curtain of black hair for a moment. “Spark?” she asked, gesturing him forward with her finger.

He looked at me, as if his glance could freeze me where I stood, then sauntered towards the female fairy.

“Could you do something about this?” It appeared that a layer of the skirt of her dress was missing and a further break in the seam was evident. She held out the tear close to the hem for him to examine.

He bent down close to her shins and held the two sides of torn fabric near the hem.

The female fairy smiled, enjoying his attentions.

“How did you do this?” he asked, pulling the two seams temporarily together.

“I doused out a fire,” she said with her musical voice, “and saved everyone’s life.”

“Is that so?” asked Spark. As he rose, he dropped the hem of her dress. “What do you want? New clothes?”

“Yes, please,” she said.

“OK.” He turned his head towards me. He’d probably forgotten I was even there. Why did this female fairy have to have such seemingly innocent charm and power over him? He strolled back to me and stretched out his arm in her direction, as if pointing out the most magnificent creature of the wood. “This is Crystal,” he said, as I swept round the room with my eyes anxiously. Apart from Crystal, two girl fairies sprawled on their beds, whilst another sat on the floor. They all fixed their gaze on me. The girl fairies on their beds smiled, but the female fairy on the floor pushed her dark brown hair away from her face and glared chillily at me through her grey eyes. “I’ve brought someone new,” Spark announced.

“Oh really?” Crystal looked me over, as if noticing me for the first time, as she flicked back her black hair and smiled. She seemed very friendly and I was sure we were going to get along.

“She’s called Star,” he said smiling back at me. “I’m sure you’ll all look after her, especially you, Crystal,” Spark said, as if paying her a compliment. “This is Violet and Bell.” He gestured, pointing to the two on their beds. Violet was podgy and had a rounded but very lively face and short brown hair. Bell had a small face, a little mouth, tiny nose, kind blue eyes and long blonde hair. She must have been the mouse of the bunch. She certainly looked it. “And this is Ivy.” Spark pointed to the female fairy sitting on the floor.

“Of course, we’ll look after her, won’t we?” asked Crystal of the group.

“Yes,” Violet and Bell chorused together.

Ivy murmured “Yeah,” with no enthusiasm, as she markedly looked away bored.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it.” Spark looked back one last time at Crystal before he headed for the open doorway and flew off into the trees.

Five small beds lay close to the walls, a bedding of leaves, sticking out from the sides of some of the covers on each. In the middle of the room, a wooden table held a bowl of fruit and berries.

“That’s your bed,” Crystal said, pointing to an empty one, furthest away from them.

“Thanks,” I said, “I know you’ll be a good friend to me.” I smiled trying to make a good impression.

“Yeah, right,” said Crystal. “I’d rather make friends with the trees. Look at you. You’re so tall and silly. You don’t look like any fairy I’ve ever met. Except the Queen, but you’re nothing like her. And what’s with your hair? It’s so weird. It’s blonde and black at the same time, as if it can’t make its mind up what colour to be?”

“Ha, ha,” Ivy said. “You tell her. We’re happy as we are in here and we don’t need anyone else. That bed gave us more room…” she trailed off.

There was simply no hope for me. Tired and confused, I leapt face down on to the bed and remained on my front, hiding my old clothes under me and burying my face in the scratchy pillow.

The girl fairies started to chat about their costumes they were going to make for some dance, the Midnight Dance, after the Queen had given them the Power of Ages, whatever that was.

Closing my eyes wasn’t going to do any good. They were still there and soon I became intrigued at how they acted around one another. I twisted my face coyly towards them and listened.

“I’m going to make a necklace out of blue egg shells,” said Crystal, her blue and green eyes reminiscent of their colourings.

“Poor birds,” said Ivy. “Are you sure the Queen will appreciate that? She loves the animals of the wood.”

Another female fairy, with red, gingery brown hair stepped into the tree house and overheard the conversation, hardly noticing me.

“Uh. Maybe not then,” said Crystal, sighing and flicking back her black hair.

“I found a pile of feathers the other day outside the wizard’s hovel. I bet they’re still there. I could make a headdress out of them,” said the female fairy who had dropped in only seconds ago.

“Don’t go near there, Squirrel,” said Crystal to her. “The place is haunted.”

A shiver rippled down my back and out to my wings. What was this place they were talking about?

“I’m going to make a nice wooden necklace,” said Violet, her cheeks growing rosy as she smiled.

“Boring,” said Crystal, screwing up her face like a tree’s bark.

“No, it’s not,” said Bell, rather quietly, though loud enough that they caught her words.

“Yes, it is,” said Ivy.

“Well, what are *you* going to do?” asked Crystal.

“Make a string of bluebells to tie around my head,” Bell said, quickly, as if no one was patient enough to listen to her normally and now she had been given a rare chance to speak up.

“Oh,” said Ivy, impressed. “Maybe I’ll stay in my element too. An ivy sash. What do you think, Crystal?” Ivy asked.

“That’s horrible. Ivy’s so green and so–so putrid,” said Crystal, only just realising what she had said. “Besides, if you all go with your names, I’ll have nothing to go as. There aren’t any crystals around here.”

“What about in the wizard’s hovel? I bet there’s a crystal in there,” said Squirrel, before blowing a bug off her arm.

“No!” Crystal protested. “Why are you so obsessed by the wizard’s hovel?”

Squirrel shrugged. “He had all kinds of strange stuff.”

“Forbidden stuff you mean.”

Ivy changed the subject, saying, “I know. You could try drops of water. They’re see-through like crystals. You could outshine us all,” Ivy added. The others in the group held their breaths, dreaming about how wonderful it could be if they outshone the rest like that.

“What, the dew-drop look? That could work, you know,” Violet commented.

“What about me?” asked Squirrel. “I’m not coming with squirrels tied to my head.”

“Squirrel fur?” suggested Ivy.

“Ew! No,” said Squirrel, “I’m not touching dead squirrels. That’s so disgusting. The Queen never taught us to be brutal to animals.”

“Well, at least you’re not in danger of looking like a drowned rat. What on earth are you two thinking?” said Crystal, walking up to them. She placed a hand in front of each and mimicked knocking their heads together. “I’d either have so little water, it would be gone before I got there and be wearing nothing special, or I’d have to be soaking wet and cold. Eek! What can I do? Help me girls. Help me,” she said before plonking herself down on the floor in exasperation.

“It’s ages away,” said Ivy, getting up from the floor. Because she was extremely thin, she seemed taller than she was, her arms like insect’s legs.

“No, it’s not,” replied Crystal haughtily.

“Are you fretting because you-know-who will be there?” asked Ivy, quietly, bending down towards Crystal.

“Who are you talking about?” Crystal asked.

“You know,” said Ivy.

“Do I?” asked Crystal.

Yes,” said Ivy.

“Who’s she talking about?” asked Squirrel of Violet. Violet raised her eyebrows.

“Oh, him,” said Crystal, annoyed, as it dawned on her who Ivy meant.

“Who?” asked Squirrel.

“Spark. Who else?” Violet’s face blushed with embarrassment as she said his name. She shook her head. “I don’t know. Sometimes it’s like she takes no notice of him at all.”

I winced hearing his name. So, Crystal and Spark were together.

“Poor Spark,” said Squirrel.

“I can hear you,” said Crystal coldly.

“It’s true all the same,” said Violet bringing the conversation back to the whole group. “What about you, Star? What will you wear? Something else that sparkles. Star shapes? I don’t know how you would make it sparkle though.”

“Poo, she’s new. She doesn’t even know what we’re talking about,” said Crystal.

“Dust,” I said, suddenly, not knowing why. Where did that come from?

“Huh! What!” they all started.

“She’s crazy,” said Ivy.

There was a pause while they waited for Crystal to say something, a silence in which I tried to figure out what I had blurted out. Dust? What was that?

“It’s the just-rolled-in-dirt look,” said Crystal, laughing. It would have been a cruel laugh, but I was still confused. It couldn’t have been the dust of the earth. I couldn’t picture it, but there was some quality. Something…

And then their nervous laughter broke through and the thought was lost, trailing away into inconsequence. There could be nothing in it. It must have been the dust of the earth; there was nothing else.

“Hey, it’s time to go,” said Squirrel. “Maybe you’ll get inspiration from the Queen. A dash red, some purple, a dab of black,” she said, as if it was daring.

“Please, I’ve had enough of red,” said Crystal. “Although it is one of the Queen’s favourite colours,” she backtracked. “Still, red won’t make me look special, when I wear it all the time.”

“What are we going to do about her?” asked Squirrel, nodding her head in my direction.

“Leave her,” said Ivy.

Crystal laughed and added, “We can’t look after *that thing*. She can’t dance.”

“We could teach her,” said Violet, smiling at me.

I smiled back, self-consciously, and rose from the bed, readying myself for any eventuality.

“I don’t think so. And miss today’s dancing? No way. You teach her,” said Crystal leaving through the open doorway and flying away with Ivy and Squirrel. The words still stung. I was a person of second chances hoping she would change her mind. I was naïve maybe, but I didn’t know anything else.

“Are you coming?” Bell asked Violet, her little shy face pleading.

“No. You go on. I’ll teach her,” said Violet.

## Chapter

“Don’t mind Crystal. She can be a bit zealous,” said Violet when we were alone in the tree house together. “Dancing isn’t as difficult as she makes out. I don’t know why she wouldn’t teach you. It wouldn’t have taken that long. I suppose she doesn’t want to be late for Spark. Come on, then. Give me your hand. The basics are simple,” Violet explained.

I held out my hand and she took it in her own, before placing her other hand on my side. I followed her lead, feeling her breath on my shoulder, as she said, “The boys don’t dance with us unless the Queen is watching. They want to impress her, you see. Now step back with your left foot, now your right…” I did what she said. “Now move your left foot to your left and slide your right foot to meet it. That’s right,” she said, as I did it.

I smiled, glad I was doing something right. I stopped moving, thinking I had finally mastered it.

“You’re not finished yet. Now bring your left foot forward, careful not to step on my toes, bring your right foot forward. Then you start from the beginning.”

I tried a couple of times, though I kept standing on her toes. I was hopeless. Why couldn’t I dance like her, or like Crystal who was probably dancing with Spark right now? Violet paused.

“Then if you’re really brave you might add flourishes, a twirl here or there, a change in how your hands are positioned, but I think you should practise this more before you move on to them.”

Weren’t there others that found it difficult? I couldn’t be the only one and I was dying to dance with Spark. When he’d flown us up high, almost reaching the clouds, I’d been so close to him, it triggered a feeling of wanting something, something I’d never felt before.

“Aren’t I good enough?” I asked.

“Not for the Queen. Besides, do you want to end up with a limping dance partner?” she asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Oh,” I said disappointed.

“Come on, you can practise more, Star,” she said, holding out her hand. I took it, determined that this time I would do better. A few steps and I stood on her toes again.

“Ow! Look, stop,” she said, her face reddening. “Don’t think about it too much and try to do it without looking at your feet anymore. Look at me,” she said.

I looked at her soft lively face, hoping so much she would be the friend Crystal wouldn’t. She seemed more mature than Crystal in a way I couldn’t understand. She didn’t look older, but she knew how people worked better than I did. All of a sudden, we were standing off the ground, still dancing the steps perfectly.

“Oh, wow!” I was surprised to see a hand’s width between us and the wooden floor. It was like we were balancing on an invisible platform, but when I tried to think about it, I lost my footing and dropped down, as I spun Violet across the room. We both laughed as we fell and tumbled at the same time on to the floor, even if it left us a little bruised.

“What was that?” I asked, amazed.

“You mean dancing in the air?”

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know. It just happens sometimes, usually when we get swept away by the music. I guess that’s partly why we like dancing. It’s like reaching up to heaven. It’s the only bit of magic we’re allowed to do,” she added in a whisper as if someone might be listening. “As I said it just happens. It’s not really a choice, so the Queen excuses it,” Violet said louder.

“Why aren’t you allowed to do other magic?” I asked, wondering why she had whispered about it at first. We were fairies. Surely magic wasn’t a bad thing for us.

“Don’t ask silly questions like that. Magic is dangerous,” Violet shouted angrily.

Oh. Why did everyone have to get annoyed at me when I didn’t understand? Or was it me that was wrong, asking questions that everyone knew the answers to? If I carried on like this, I’d be nicknamed Stupid Star and no one would want to be friends with someone called that, would they?

I didn’t know how to make it up to Violet, but how on earth was I going to fit in when I clearly didn’t belong?

“OK. I’ve got the dance. I’m sure I won’t disappoint you any longer,” I mumbled as I was about to leave.

“Er, where do you think you’re going?” she said, grabbing my wrist. “We’ll be in trouble with Spark, if you run off and get lost.”

I pulled her off me before sitting down on the nearest bed. “Fine!” I said, huffing.

\* \* \*

After showing me a few types of food I could pick from the bushes in the wood, Violet led me to a stream.

From the bank, the afternoon sun was shimmering off the surface of the water and it was blinding. I knelt to drink from the fresh clean water. On the water’s surface, in the shadow I had cast, a girl’s surprised face stared back at me. Her blue eyes were wide, her mouth open and her hair a mess of blonde with streaks of black shot through it. But the black was concentrated mostly at the roots, close to her scalp.

I squinted in the sunlight, expecting someone else to be creating the reflection, but I was alone and Violet was now sitting with her back to me, her fingers knitting together complicated chains of flowers. A few stray dandelion seeds floated on the wind.

It was me. Looking down, my mouth dropped open both in real life and in the reflection. Crystal was right about my hair. Maybe it was as indecisive as the rest of me.

I looked into my eyes, trying to figure out who I was. I was no closer to discovering an answer when a frog jumped into the stream, disturbing the water and breaking the image. I laughed as the frog’s lanky legs lifted him in the air and he was off again, over to the opposite bank.

I chased after him and leapt across the stream, but when my foot should have reached the other side perfectly safe, there was something invisible blocking my way.

I screamed, as I lost my balance, falling over backwards into the stream. My elbow struck against a rock and pins and needles exploded down my arm into my hand.

“Ow!” I said, as I busily rubbed my arm.

The water splashed over my clothes and as the tingling in my arm subsided, I shivered with the cold.

“I forgot to mention that,” said Violet, standing.

“What is it?” I asked, breathing fast. It was such a startling surprise to find myself drenched that I continued to sit in the middle of the stream recuperating.

“A little protection the Queen created,” Violet said.

“Protection from what?” I asked, glancing at her and away from the fish darting around me.

Violet didn’t answer, but gathered up her flower chains and trailed them behind her, as if she was ready to move on.

One fish dashed through my image and I was drawn to my reflection once again. I looked much older than I imagined and older than any of the others I had seen apart from the Queen. My face was less podgy and I was actually taller than a lot of them too. No wonder Crystal thought me strange. Even Spark was younger than me in appearance. I thought it odd there weren’t any old fairies around, shrivelled and bent forwards, but still as agile, flying through the air as we all did.

“Come on,” said Violet irately. “Stop sitting there. We need to pick some more or we won’t have any food this evening. And you’ve probably spoilt the food in your pockets now, haven’t you? I knew I should have told you to add the fruit into the basket before you wandered off!”

“Uh-oh!” I had completely forgotten about that. Slipping my hands into my pockets, they met with gooey berry juices. I emptied what was left of the crushed fruit and washed off as much of the berry juices as I could, before I followed Violet, dejectedly.

\* \* \*

My clothes were still cold and sticky as I stretched and shuffled uncomfortably in my bed. I waited until everyone was dead to the world, before peeling off my red rags and pulling on my striped blue and white clothes. Swathed in warmth and softness, familiar and comforting, I fell asleep in minutes.

## Chapter

“Wake up! What are you wearing?” Crystal shouted.

I stood up in a rush, discombobulated, wondering what the commotion was all about.

I finally looked down at my clothes. I was still wearing the pyjamas which I’d gone to sleep in last night. I had promised myself I would wake before morning and change back, so no one would know. But they were so snug, I’d slept right through. Now it was morning and Crystal and Ivy had both seen them.

“You’re not allowed to wear any other clothes but your reds,” Ivy sneered. “You’re not *special*,” she enunciated slowly. “We’d better take those, once you’re out of them,” Ivy added.

“Yes. What a good idea,” said Crystal.

“No,” I growled, as I found some unknown strength deep within, “They’re mine.” I wasn’t going to let them talk to me like that anymore.

Crystal almost fell over backwards in her escape, like I was a wild animal. She was rescued by Ivy, who caught Crystal by the arm, and led her out of the tree house.

“Come on, let’s go before we’re late,” said Ivy, her eyes darting between me and Crystal.

I held back a laugh until they were gone.

“I’ll be there soon,” said Violet to Bell, the two of them finishing off an almost inaudible conversation, as she began waiting around for me.

“OK,” said Bell awkwardly, before she left.

“You’d better put these on,” Violet said, handing me my red clothing. She turned around and gave me the opportunity to change in private. Afterwards, I shoved the blue and white clothing under my bedsheet and deep into the pile of leaves.

\* \* \*

Violet flew ahead of me, slipping in and out of the foliage until I lost her. I carried on flying until I recognised a short fat tree I had passed before.

I veered right, hoping I wasn’t well and truly lost. Through some criss-crossed branches, I soon spotted the back of a building. It looked familiar. Violet had said we were going to the Queen’s court. Was this it? It looked to be the same place where I had obtained my new clothes.

Here, around the back there were no flowers cascading down the walls. Also, there was a very small structure next to it I hadn’t seen before.

I was curious as I landed outside it. Maybe it was just a small room. There were two boy fairies outside, both holding sticks and wearing the same clothes as Spark, except each wore a hat of twigs and feathers.

One of the boy fairies restlessly hit his hand with the stick and sighed, bored as he stood there. His partner stood on the left-hand side also guarding the door from the outside. I peered in to the shadows between them.

“Huh!” I said, puzzled and shocked as I made out figures inside.

Fairies pressed their muddy faces against the bars of the door, while others held back. Their lack of wings told the story clearly: they were already broken. Who could clip a fairy’s wings? Surely one fairy couldn’t do it to another. It was like ripping away part of a fairy’s very soul. One little female fairy inside was sobbing in her lap and I couldn’t help but feel her pain. Who had done this to her? The fairies inside each wore different clothing but were all covered with dirt that hadn’t been washed off for days. One female fairy, with streaks of neon blue and a red coat reached out her arm through the bars of the door. With her other arm, she hugged a white ball tightly.

“Stacy! Hey, Stacy! It’s me, Miya.” She seemed to know me, but I didn’t have a clue who she was.

Instinctively, I reached out my arms to her and to the prison bars. One of the fairies standing outside next to me, hit my hand with his stick. “Ow!” What was that for?” I demanded. What was wrong with them? The fairy who hit me glowered, but said nothing.

“Stacy! Help. Can’t you get us out of here? Hey! Why are you dressed like that? No, you can’t be a fairy!”

“I don’t know who you are,” I said.

“Oh! Here you are. I’ve been trying to find you. I don’t want to be late going into the Queen’s court.” Violet grabbed my arm, dragging me towards the front of the larger building. I couldn’t understand how she had no sympathy for those who had been imprisoned.

“What happened to them?” I wriggled out of her grasp and stood my ground.

“Nothing,” she said dismissively.

“What do you mean, nothing? What happened to their wings and why are they in a prison?” I asked.

“Their wings?” she said, frowning, “They don’t have wings.” Then she added in an unreasonable voice, “They’re humans. Children. Don’t feel sympathy for them. They destroy the woods.”

“What?” How could such little hands cut down the ash and oak? Didn’t nature sing a song to them? Didn’t they hear the birds of the air and the fish of the stream or the whisper of the leaves in the wind?

There was no time for me to think any more about it, as I was swept up in a sea of late, red-dressed fairies, all excited to get inside the building. They pushed their way in behind us and I held back a gasp as a door opened to a large room. Inside, fairies pressed against the walls making them look washed with blood.

“Do you want a mask?” Violet asked.

I shook my head as she tied hers on. Almost instantly, Violet was asked to dance and she disappeared out of sight. I joined the bystanders and, as I glanced around, I was overwhelmed by the sheer number of those masked in red, their eyes glazed and deadened. Yet through the crowd, I observed a more harrowing sight, the Queen. She was sitting on a large throne at the far end of the room. She appeared regal and remote with a cold face, pursed lips and eyes sharp, and unpredictable.

I spotted a male fairy smiling at the far corner, as he plucked a strange stringed instrument. The closest noise it emulated was that of dripping rain. Those dancing with their partners, ebbed and flowed in time to the dripping which echoed around the room. Their movements were both hypnotic and disturbing.

I only noticed Spark, unmasked, when he rose up from the ground and danced in the air with Crystal, also unmasked. They danced, not a step out of place, unlike how I had been with Violet. None of the other guards were here and he stood out like a tree afloat, rising out of the blood. Crystal still clung to him, like blood pouring off branches. With my red clothes on too, it seemed like I had been swallowed up, lost in the crowd. Spark probably didn’t know I was here and, even if he did, I was kidding myself if I thought he would dance with me.

Spark and Crystal set the standard in the middle of the room and a few other pairs of dancers started to float upwards, until at least half of the dancing crowd were overhead, as confident with their feet as anything. Their wings were as steady as a bird’s, creating a cool breeze in an otherwise hot room. After a certain sequence of plucking from the stringed instrument, Spark and Crystal flew back down to the ground and that signalled the end of the particular dance for everyone.

Spark walked over in my direction and I squeezed past the other dancers towards him eagerly. I thought of giving him a compliment, something about how well he danced, but before I had the chance, he’d already offered me his hand as the music begun again. A glimpse at Crystal, sour-faced as ever, but looking hurt, compelled me to hesitate. “Don’t worry. She’ll get over it,” Spark whispered, taking hold of my fingers without further discussion. He pressed his warm hand in mine and drew me close to his chest, but not touching, and we began to dance. “I looked for you yesterday,” he said, striking up a conversation.

“I wasn’t here,” I replied.

“I know. I asked Crystal about you, and she gave some curt remark that you had to practise your dancing. I hope this isn’t too much for you,” he added.

“No. I think I’ve got the hang of it.”

After a few minutes of silence he said, “You’ve only trampled my toes a couple of times.”

Had I? I blushed.

“I’m only kidding.” He smiled. “How are things, anyway? Are you getting used to everything now?”

“I think so.”

“You know, I don’t think you can be a beginner,” he commented as we rose off the ground.

\* \* \*

A masked, masculine stranger appeared in my arms. An older male fairy dressed in an exquisite suit of green. What was happening? His mask covered his eyes only and he had a striking jawline with the slightest hint of stubble. He was so beautiful, I gasped.

My hand was hot and sweaty against his. My heart pounded and I faltered, nearly letting go. In response, he squeezed my hand and I looked into his dark eyes. This wasn’t a dream, was it? Where was Spark?

I broke the male fairy’s gaze and looked around with confusion. I wore a sumptuous and summery, yellow dress, the skirt of which mushroomed around me in response to my dancing.

Below us, an array of colours wove in and out, like the weave of cloth being drawn together in a loom.

Stringed instruments and tinkling chimes combined into a musical rhythm that rejoiced at the creation of this close community. The fairies and the whole atmosphere of the place had transformed within the blink of an eye. It was like I had just woken up somewhere else. Or another time maybe?

“What’s wrong?” the stranger in my arms whispered in my ear with a husky voice.

“What! Nothing! Nothing’s wrong,” I replied.

Several fairies had masks of black and purple colours, but I could see some unmasked faces, all older than me, and looking up at a couple, not far to our left in the air.

The pair were staring at one another so intently, they didn’t notice anyone else. The male sported a blue suit deep as the night’s sky, studded with stars. His features softened when he smiled and held the female closer. She smiled too and put out a hand to flatten a few short, stray, black hairs on his head. She would have looked like a flower blowing in the breeze from above, for she wore a pink, knee-length skirt which opened and billowed as she moved, but from where I was, the tendrils of pink presented an elusiveness to her figure. It was rather simple compared to many of the other female fairy’s dresses, yet her natural beauty shone through. Her golden hair spread out almost in all directions, like the sun. If it wasn’t for him returning the favour of calming her hair, I would never have seen the small cross at her neck. Her cheeks glowed at his touch and he held her hand at his chest as she whispered something in his ear.

“They’re in love,” said the masked stranger at my side, noticing how my attention had been caught. “What I would do for a love like that.” He sounded as if he was jealous and expected me to be too.

I wasn’t jealous, yet I was drawn to them in some way I couldn’t understand. I longed to know who they were. The male whispered something back to the female. She laughed angelically and they spun upwards, rising quickly like moths enchanted by a light. Right before they reached the ceiling, their bodies fizzled out to nothing. With it, everything fell apart and I tumbled down to the floor.

After a while, I could hear something. It sounded like the drip, drip, drip of rain. Or was it blood?

\* \* \*

“Star, Star?” Spark pleaded questioningly as I opened my eyes. The first thing I noticed was the empty throne and, for a split second, I wondered where the Queen had vanished to. I located her at the corner of the room close to the male fairy who had abandoned his now-silent instrument. He too was staring in my direction. He hurriedly picked up his instrument after the Queen glared at him intensely and the dripping sound resumed.

Looking down towards my feet, I was the centre of attention. Fairies crowded round, even Crystal. The Queen remained standing at a distance, though she seemed to be visibly distressed, the side of her lip curling downwards, as I sat up.

“Are you alright?” Violet asked.

“What happened?” I asked, ignoring her question. I stared as people started to disperse, ready to dance, but with faces eager to know more.

“Give her some air, come on,” Violet chastised Spark as she pushed him to one side. “I don’t know,” she said to me. Then to Spark she began, “You didn’t–”

“No! I didn’t do anything.” He shrugged in confusion. “She must have fainted,” he added.

“How dare you accuse him!” said Crystal, as she tugged at Spark’s sleeve. “Spark, it’s clear you’re not wanted. Come on, let’s dance,” she said, practically dragging him away.

I wanted to call out after him. We’d been in the middle of a dance when–when I’d seen those other fairies. I hadn’t even a chance to finish what I’d started with Spark, but suddenly that desire evaporated. It wasn’t important anymore. What exactly had happened? Who had those fairies been? It made no sense. No sense at all.

“Do you want me to take you back to the tree house?” Violet suggested.

“I think I’ll be OK,” I replied as I stood up with Violet’s help. I could only walk a short way, before I paused, dizzy and nauseous. “No. I think you’re right. I’m not feeling too good. Are you sure you don’t mind taking me back?”

“No, of course not,” said Violet, though by this point I was distracted.

The Queen’s eyes met mine, trying to carve an answer out of me. I looked away wondering if she had seen the same thing I had seen, before I carried on walking slowly out of the Queen’s court. Was it her court? Had it been something else of beauty years before? Had I somehow tapped into an old memory which the place had been preserving?

Once we were outside among the trees, Violet asked “Would you rather walk than fly, considering what just happened?” Her arm was still around my shoulders.

“Yeah. Maybe it’s best,” I replied, agreeing with her suggestion. What had happened seemed so strange, that even when I divined kindness and understanding in her eyes, I couldn’t confide in her. I’d let her believe whatever she wanted.

“You were dropping like a stone,” Violet said. “If it hadn’t been for Spark catching you when he did, you would have fallen and hurt yourself,” she added.

## Chapter

It was the afternoon and Violet and I were gathering supplies. Leaves rustled above, but when I looked up, there was nothing there. I glanced at Violet but she was bending over, unaware of any disturbance. Maybe it was the sounds of a squirrel or bird in the trees?

“Don’t ever eat this one. It’s a poisonous mushroom, OK?” She stood up with a dotted mushroom between her fingers.

“OK.” Another rustle. I looked up quicker this time. Nothing.

“Pay attention!” Violet snapped her fingers.

At the next rustle, Crystal exploded out of the undergrowth, flying, giggling and screaming her way.

“Violet, how’s the newbie?” Crystal cried, through her hysteria, before she dived back into the trees.

Crystal had gone before Violet could make a reply, but I wondered what she would have said, given the chance. I felt guilty I was taking her away from what the others were doing.

“Here are some blackberries. They’ll do nicely. Cram them into your pockets,” Violet said.

There was a rustle again and, after a short while, I realised it was a regular occurrence.

“What’s going on? Why was Crystal flying past like that?” I asked.

“Racing. We’re always doing it at this time of day. That’s what everyone else was doing while we were out gathering food yesterday afternoon when you fell into the stream,” Violet explained.

“Racing? That sounds fun,” I said.

“I didn’t think you were quite ready for it yet and, considering what happened this morning too in the Queen’s court, it’s a good job I didn’t.” She smiled, but I could tell she was still worried about me. “Anyway, it builds up the appetite and gives us something to chat about. Everyone loves the races,” Violet said.

“More than dancing?”

“The dancing doesn’t get competitive.”

“Not where I was standing this morning. Did you see Crystal’s face?”

“You’d better stay out of her way. Seriously, she’s got it in for you.” Violet bent down and picked a few berries. “The races have an impact on our status. Mostly it’s just practice, but every few days the Queen comes out to watch. Then it gets competitive,” she said, brushing her short hair away from her face.

“What, because of the Queen’s attention?” I asked.

“No, because of the position. If we can beat Spark, then we can become one of the guards,” she said.

“What’s so amazing about that?” I asked.

“The perks, the clothes, the rank,” she said, raising her eyebrows a little higher at each reason.

“So? Isn’t it boring? They have duties to do,” I said, scoffing.

“Life’s not all about play, you know,” she said. “If you have duties, you’re considered worthy. Whatever duty you’re undertaking, you’re helping the Queen. That’s reward enough. Imagine being worthy in the Queen’s eyes,” she said, dreamily. “Soon you’ll feel that way, like you’re basking in her magnificent power.”

I didn’t want to say, but as soon as I had seen the Queen, a silence had come upon my very being, like my soul was hushed by her presence. Was that what Violet meant?

“What about Spark? How come he hasn’t got any duties?” I asked.

“He does. You just don’t see them,” she replied quietly.

“What are his duties?” I asked.

She was silent for a split second as if considering confiding in me. “Us. To make sure we’re all happy and functioning as fairies should,” Violet said.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

She lowered her voice and said, “There have been instances where a fairy has not loved the Queen as they should; where they have not had a feeling of allegiance to her.”

I swallowed, wondering if that applied to me and, if it did, how could they prove it? Maybe I needed to check more what I said. I hadn’t said anything offensive yet though, had I? I had to be coy even asking about it. “Why do they not feel allegiance?” I asked, lowering my voice too.

“I don’t know, but it has been rumoured they may have been diseased. Fairy-phobia they call it,” she said.

“Who calls it that?” I asked persistently.

“Fairies. I don’t know,” she said, holding out her arms despairingly.

“What do they do to these fairies?” I asked. I had to know the worst that could happen to prepare myself, just in case.

“The Queen is merciful. She banishes them to live the life of a human. Fairy-phobia is too dangerous for them to live unchecked with it here.”

What was it like to live like a human? I knew next to nothing about them. They looked like us, but that was all I knew. How did they live? What did they eat?

Violet continued, “But sometimes they are found in the woods wanting revenge so the guards have a responsibility to bring them in as prisoners.”

“Like the children in the cages. What do they do with them?” I asked. They didn’t exactly look dangerous to me.

She didn’t answer and said, “I’ve also heard it mentioned that sometimes children come into the woods, looking for an escape out of their miserable existence, hoping the Queen will help them. How anyone can be human and like it, I don’t know.”

I still felt sorry for the humans with their dirty little faces pressed against the bars, their forlorn eyes blinking in the light, but I was also concerned about the conditions they were being kept in, like caged animals. It was a pity they would never know the joy of being a fairy.

“What happens to the children in the cages?” I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders and batted her hand dismissively. “How should I know? Go ask the Queen if you’re that bothered. Or shall I tell Spark you’re having problems with your allegiance?”

“No. I’m not having problems. It was only a question.” I hoped she wouldn’t know just how much I disliked and worried about them being caged. I had to think of something else or I might end up losing the very fabric of my existence.

## Chapter

He had no wings. I stared at a stranger sitting hunched over and looking towards a strange, black surface. A screen? On its surface it displayed images and symbols which I couldn’t make out. There must have been some power in them, for the stranger furrowed his brow, deep in concentration.

Wanting to see more, I stepped into the unfamiliar room. The floor creaked beneath me catching the man’s attention. He swivelled round in his chair. Brown eyes met mine as he remembered something. A wide thoughtful smile suddenly lit his face. Then it was gone with the lump in his throat that moved when he swallowed. I was drawn to him in some unknown way.

“I’m sorry, Honey. I’m busy right now. Go and see your mother. Maybe she’s free,” the man said.

“Whoosh!” As I stepped out of the room, there was a door one way, but I ignored it, turning my attention to the curious sound of water rushing from up high. How could water be flowing inside any structure? It was inside the trees of the wood, but I’d never heard it like this before inside the tree houses or any other place.

In front of me, the ground sloped upwards, up to where the sound was emanating from. Luckily, instead of being a smooth slope which would have been difficult to climb, it contained a series of helpful steps. I stepped up on to the first step. It was covered in soft, spongy material, lovely on my bare feet. The splash of water grew louder and as I entered a sparkling room that shined with a white brilliance, there was a light above me, blindingly bright.

Through the white light I saw another stranger without wings, who was kneeling over a huge, white container. Her black hair was tightly drawn back and behind her ears and she didn’t have any wings, but water magically flowed out through shiny, silver things, like two bent fingers, into the container. Maybe she was a powerful witch. Violet had warned me about going near to where a wizard used to live. Witches were the female equivalent of wizards.

I wasn’t sure if I wanted to be seen by her, the witch, but it was as if she had secret eyes in the back of her head because, somehow, she knew I was there.

I froze on the spot as her head quickly turned to look at me. A smile spread like the sun across her softened face and instantly I was at peace. Returning to a neutral expression, her features were ordinarily sharp, but by no means cruel.

“Your father didn’t clean this very well last time,” she said, turning back to her work. I moved closer, intrigued with what was going on with the water. It had been running for a long time. How come it didn’t overflow? Peering over her head, I saw that the level of water stayed more or less constant, but was still being refilled. Wow!

Seconds later, I became aware of another shiny thing, this time at the bottom of the container, and it had holes in it. Was the water disappearing into that? Hard at work, the witch scrubbed with a cloth, before she picked up a bottle of liquid. Yellow potion briskly squirted out with the movements of her finger and I backed away.

She released her grip on the bottle and it puffed as she hurriedly plonked it on the floor by her knees. The bottle had mysterious symbols on it too, like the man’s black box. This made it certain. They both had to be magical beings of great power. Wizard and witch. I knelt down beside the witch, the sound of water playing in my ears, and poked at the silver holey thing, feeling the water draining away and through the holes at the bottom of the vast container.

“The drains need cleaning again. Could you tell your father?” she said.

Father? There it was again. Father. And that other word. What was it? Mother.

The water gushed and, without warning, I fell into the water, cold and terrified. The white sides of the container vanished and all I saw was the witch’s sorrowful face above me, slipping away through layers of water, light and sky. But I couldn’t reach her. I couldn’t surface. Buffeted by water, my lungs grew tight with panic, calling for air, until I couldn’t do anything but breathe in water. I swallowed. Choked. I needed air. I couldn’t breathe.

\* \* \*

I woke up gasping with a tightness in my chest and throat. Mother. Father. What were these words? What did they mean? And who were those people that they could appear to me in my sleep? And that place, why did it all seem familiar? There were hot tears spilling from my eyes and I didn’t know why.

## Chapter

“What are you wearing for the Midnight Dance?” Crystal asked Spark as my tree house group gathered round him. The Midnight Dance was going to be a celebration after the Queen performed an important ceremony.

“It’s a secret,” replied Spark, smiling.

“Oh, come on, tell us,” Crystal said, twirling her hair around her finger.

“No. It’s a surprise,” said Spark, looking down at her.

We were standing in the woods and the majority of the group were flush, having just flexed their wings in the races. I had watched amused and out of my depth as they flew above me. It was my third day here and I was still feeling like an outsider. I had joined the group after the races were finished, and Violet had created room for me.

Squirrel and a few other fairies were also with us. Among them was a male fairy called Toad, who had the same jewel-like eyes as Crystal. He acted like the two of them were close, not fancying each other, but some other sort of connection. I just couldn’t figure it out.

“Wouldn’t it be great if we wore matching outfits?” Crystal said.

Spark shrugged and Crystal didn’t look very happy with him.

Crystal’s eyes lit up with an idea and she pointed at me. “Let Star have a go against you,” she said.

I cringed. She was so desperate to humiliate me after all the attention I had received from Spark yesterday.

“You know that’s not fair,” said Violet. “She’s not ready. She hasn’t even practised against anyone yet.”

“Go on,” said Ivy. “You’ll have fun,” she added as if they were merely jesting with me. But, of course, they wanted to prove to Spark that I wasn’t deserving of his time.

Crystal began to chant, “Go on! Go on!” A lot of the others joining in and were egging me on too.

“Fine,” I said, giving in. Even if I lost, at least I’d know what I was capable of. I would have preferred to test my ability in secret, but now that I was here, maybe it wasn’t such a bad idea. I had managed to dance in the air with Spark, the most popular fairy. Even if I had fainted or fallen down, it was worth it. Those strange fairies I had been surrounded by and how the Queen had looked at me still haunted me though.

I followed him to the starting line, marked by bunting fashioned with large sycamore and oak leaves on twine.

“What do I need to do exactly?” I asked.

“Er. You don’t have to, you know,” Spark replied.

“I know. How far is it?”

“From here to the end of the wood and back again,” he said, pointing off into the distance.

“The end of the wood?” Isn’t there a barrier of some kind near the stream? Won’t that stop us?”

“Nah. It won’t get in the way when we’re flying.”

“Why not?” I asked, confused.

He shrugged, but wouldn’t say more.

“OK. I’m ready,” I said louder. Toad had also followed us. Crystal had asked him to start the race for us.

“One, two, three, go!” shouted Toad, so fast that I hadn’t a chance. Spark threw himself into action, already up in the air, flying away.

“You’re so lame!” Crystal shouted behind me.

Without waiting to give a reply, I launched through the canopy of trees, though I’d never be able to catch up with Spark, if I was zigzagging through the tree trunks after him.

Instead I flew up through the trees. “What’s she doing?” I heard someone shout below as I flung myself up and into the cloudless sky.

The trees spread below me and, as I scanned them, I hoped to see Spark blazing a trail through the foliage. Easy… but what if he was camouflaged by the trees?

I fluttered eastward, quickly as I could, my eyes as sharp as an eagle’s, until I saw something small moving in the sea of green. At first, I couldn’t see what it was, though it created a wave through the foliage. Following the wave with my eyes, I found Spark, with his tiny head looking behind him expectantly. He had no idea where I was. I was still lagging behind, but now, with the trees out of the way, I could catch up.

I soared until we were almost neck and neck, though I was still high up in the air. If he couldn’t see me reach the end of one lap, how would he know I had completed it? Without him seeing it with his own eyes, he could claim I was cheating. I dived into the undergrowth chasing a slip of green until I wasn’t too far behind. He heard me rustling through the trees and sped towards a fence, which he touched, on the outskirts of the wood.

He turned away from the fence and towards the wood again. Bumping in to me accidentally, he knocked the wind out of me.

“See you later,” he yelled, jokingly, as he flew past.

“No, you don’t!” I shouted, reaching the fence myself and kicking off from it. Propelling myself, I was fast upon him. Once back into the canopy, branches leapt out in unexpected places catching me off guard and I had to dart wildly to avoid them. At this rate, I was going to lose. I spurred myself on and tore through the undergrowth, not caring if my clothes tore. Twigs scratched my face. I had no time to push them aside. Slowly, I gained on him. If I stretched, I could have grabbed Spark’s ankles and tackled him down. Only my admiration for him kept me from doing this. That and another stupid branch sticking out, which I lunged under.

Seeing Crystal and the others in the distance, I knew I didn’t have long. Spark and I were close, but not close enough. Now this wasn’t for anyone but me. I needed to know for myself what kind of stuff I was made of, but no matter how close I got, it still wasn’t fast enough to beat him. We both sped past the crowd and I heard Violet say, “Wow! She’s pretty good.”

Spark slowed and I followed suit and landed beside him. He was flushed, but trying not to show it, as he patted me on the back and said, “Well done. I think that’s enough for today, don’t you? Looks like you’ve been scratched,” he said, pointing at my face.

“Oh well. It doesn’t hurt,” I said, though it was starting to sting.

“Tell Crystal, I’m heading homeward. I’ll see you tomorrow at some point, I guess.” He smiled at me and my knees wobbled in weakness. I was still confused about whether he was into Crystal or me.

“Yeah, see you,” I called out as I panted.

As I staggered back to the crowd, Crystal and Ivy jeered at me, “Loser! Loser!” as if that was something they planned to do all along. I couldn’t believe it.

Anything I did was wrong in their eyes. I know I had lost, but I’d come so close.

Cooling down from the race, I turned away from them and flew into the trees letting my instincts guide me. Crystal was blinded by jealousy, but she didn’t own Spark. It was his decision who he was going to stick with. At least I had the satisfaction of not telling her what Spark had said and she was left there wondering where he had gone. Ha!

Still panting, I slowed and almost drifted in the air, like a dandelion seed, until I suddenly came across a distinctive tree with warped and twisted trunks. This was where I had been found by Spark.

I sank into its canopy, sat on a branch and looked down at it. I touched the rough bark as if I could uncover there some dark secret of how I had come to be in this place. What had my life been like before? I couldn’t think of anything and even the dream I had was growing faint, though I had remembered a few things since then. How could my parents be human? It didn’t make sense.

Below me I noticed a nook which must have formed as the tree trunks grew apart. I floated down to examine it, expecting to find nothing more than leaves or water inside. Instead, it was dry and mossy, and some kind of object that didn’t belong in the natural world was inside. How unexpected!

A clear circle glinted in the light. As I lifted the object up, it seemed to extend. It was about as long as my arm, from my wrist to my elbow. I couldn’t believe all of that had been hiding in the tree. The outside of the object was solid, but on the other end was what seemed to be another clear circle. I peered in and the bark of the tree jumped up so close to my eye, I thought it would hit me in the face.

“Ah!” I cried out. Stunned, I dropped it and jumped up and away. Quickly, I flew back to the safety of the tree house.

## Chapter

An old man sat huddled as he stirred the bubbling contents of a black cauldron. The air was filled with the smell of dead animals. His back straightened and his white hair became brown. Turning to look at me, the prune-like wrinkles on his face un-creased to reveal a young, smiling man.

\* \* \*

I woke yearning for food and hunger rumbled my belly. I had been asleep only for a few hours and berries didn’t sustain me through the night. A shadow swooped down at me. I didn’t even have time to protect my face with my hands.

A warm, wet stickiness slapped on to my cheeks and nose. The taste of berries in my shocked mouth flummoxed me. Ugh! I needed a wash.

I think it was the night of day nine. Or was it the night of day thirteen of being here? The days had started to merge into one. That was until the last few. Weird stuff was starting to happen around me. When I thought of an object which was in my line of sight, I noticed it would shake a bit. What on earth was causing it? And now this? Berries flying into my mouth! It was too much for me to ignore. Something definitely was changing in me. I know I was a fairy, but it freaked me out.

How could berries move to me when I thought of them? It was too surreal. I hadn’t seen anyone else try using their powers and Violet had said magic was dangerous. Perhaps she was right. I couldn’t seem to control it at all. Frightened of what the others might think, I had told no one.

I took off to the nearest part of the stream. It was a clear night, but not a soul was around, apart from me, a few birds and the white globe lights of the mysterious dream spirits that all the fairies seemed wary of. I’d seen some fairies try to shake them off, dodging and ducking them when the dream spirits whizzed past them at night. Stopping only to look at their golden hue as they floated by, I kept my distance. They were like mini suns, mystic and alluring, but I had the strong impression they were dangerous to touch.

Down by the stream, slithers of moonlight through the dense foliage of the trees above, reflected on the water’s surface. It was silent, but for the trickle of water over the stones. I started splashing the icy cold water on to my face and it dripped down my elbows, the chill seeping deep into my bones. There had to be a better way to splash it on to my face without the water going everywhere.

Learning a trick from nature, I hovered above the water like a dragon-fly. With my body angled upwards away from the stream, I gently lowered my face in and out of the water. My hair clung to my face and, before I lowered myself again, I saw a boy’s face on the water’s surface; a child’s face, like the other children, but this time smiling and happy. His button nose was perfectly set into a triangle with his two little eyes.

I rose up very slowly, finding myself just out of arm’s reach to a dream spirit. I couldn’t see the face through the aura of brilliant light. I looked down again to the water, but the reflection was gone. Was there a child’s face in that globe of light? I was drawn to the ball and I longed to touch it. I tried to shake off the temptation, but it was too dazzling and beautiful. Reaching out to touch it, it was only a fingers length away before it darted away into the trees.

I gave chase into dense undergrowth, up and down, over and under the branches. Each time I hurdled over one, the orb was back in my vision, as if promising I could catch up with it. But then there were more branches than I could leap over and when I had overcome one, another branch barred my way. Finally, the golden orb vanished out of sight. Why were the other fairies afraid of the dream spirits?

Without warning, it began to thunder and droplets of rain danced down the canopy of leaves, but I carried on, hoping I could still find it somehow.

I don’t know how long I kept going, but now exhausted, I lowered myself to the ground and lay panting in the undergrowth. The sound of thunder dispersed quickly and the patter of rain ceased to an occasional drip. The gentle rustle of leaves surrounding me, sounded at each breath, like nature and I were entwined. I looked up and found myself near to the warped tree with the nook. I smiled. Nature was being very generous tonight.

I hunted around the base of the tree, entangled with undergrowth, as I tried to find the mysterious object again. I kicked something loose and reached down. My fingers clasped around a seductive doodad. What was it? It was rectangular and fitted within the palm of my hand. It also had a shiny black surface unlike anything found in nature. I stowed it in my pocket and carried on looking for the original mystery object. It had to be here. It couldn’t have gone far.

Suddenly, my foot hit something hard and the thin long object I’d been looking for all along, rolled out from under a small bush. I leapt on it, eager to take it back to the tree house. Maybe someone knew about these objects and what they were, yet at the same time, I wanted to keep them a secret. What if they were something amazing and good? Even if they weren’t, I couldn’t let Crystal get hold of them.

Entering the tree house, I looked around. Each slumbering body was hidden in the darkness of their beds, but their wings looked like giant, laced white lilies in the night. I was now damp in my clothes, but I was so full of wonder, I didn’t mind. Reaching my bed, I sat down and retrieved the smaller object from my pocket, running my hands along the smooth surface. I arranged both of the objects on my lap. The larger of the two was much heavier. I wondered again what it was for. Was it a weapon? I peeped through one of the circles at one of its ends.

Suddenly, the tree house floor was so close, I almost expected it to smack me in the face. I jumped, the other object falling and skittering across the floor. The one that had seized my attention was such an odd thing. I closed an eye again, bracing myself, but it was still a shock to find the floor so close to my open eye. I stared, guardedly, as if looking for longer could cut across that tiny space. Something wiggled in the moonlight. A big woodlouse with its massive armour turned over on to its legs. Had it been knocked over by the smaller object I had dropped? Its huge antennae wavered in the air as it scurried away. As I ran to catch up with it, the wood underfoot creaked and the tree house came to life, starting with an amused shout from Violet, “What are you doing?”

I hid the large object behind my back, hoping no one had seen.

“What have you got? You know you can’t keep anything a secret. You’re not allowed to have secrets, Star,” said Crystal, wiping the sleep from her eyes. Why did Crystal always find a way to ruin my fun?

Bell’s little voice came from the corner, saying, “Please show us.”

Someone snatched it from behind me. Ivy. A dark green cloth for tying her hair was fastened around her wrist giving her away to me immediately. Her dark brown hair shined in the moonlight. I should have known she would do a thing like that. She was a loyal Crystal follower.

I reached for my mystery object in Ivy’s hand, but before I could take possession of it, she had thrown it to Crystal.

I grasped at empty air and ran to Crystal.

Bell lit a candle on the table and said, “Hey, what happened to all the berries? They’re all over her bed,” she said, pointing to it.

“Who cares?” said Ivy, waving at Crystal. I ran across the room and stood guard in front of Ivy, hoping any second now, Crystal would throw it.

“What is it?” said Crystal, pulling up her top lip in disgust as she scrutinised the mysterious object.

Soon the sounds of chatter woke the other fairies in the tree houses to either side of us. Squirrel and Toad, along with a few others, crowded round the outside of our tree house and the wooden ledge outside the door. They too wanted to know what all the hubbub was about.

“Catch,” Crystal cried out to Toad, who was standing in the doorway.

Toad’s eyes flashed with delight. “What are you playing? It’s the middle of the night?” he said, laughing and examining the object. “What is it?” he asked.

“My point exactly,” said Crystal. “Why don’t you tell us what it is?” she said, jumping on to her bed and trying her best to tower over me.

“I don’t know,” I said. “I found it.”

“I don’t know,” Crystal and Ivy mocked me in unison with a whiny voice.

“Then why have you got it?” Crystal demanded to know.

“I found it,” I repeated.

“Wow!” said Toad as he looked down through one of the clear circles.

“What?” said Crystal. “Give it here.”

Toad was about to throw it in one direction and then threw it in another, confusing me, and I was unable to catch it again.

“What did you do?” Crystal asked Toad as she tried to get it to work for her.

“I looked down it and–and everything was bigger,” said Toad, with a gleam in his eye.

“Really?” said Crystal.

“Let me look, let me look,” Ivy, Squirrel and some of the others repeated as Crystal stared down it.

“Wow,” she said. “Still, I don’t see what it’s for. What’s the point of making things seem bigger than they are? You don’t think this is magic, do you?” she asked, as she threw it to Ivy.

“Nah,” Ivy said, running her hands along it and staring down the inside of the object. “Though it is amazing. It *could* be magic. If it is, she shouldn’t have it,” Ivy added.

“But I found it,” I said, desperate to get it back. “I found it.”

“Hey! What’s this?” said Squirrel, picking up the smaller object from the floor, which I’d very nearly forgotten about.

“It’s mine,” I said.

“No, it’s not. Give it here,” said Crystal. Squirrel tossed it to her.

“No fair,” I called out.

“I know what this is. A phone. It’s an evil human device. Any phones which are confiscated from trespassing humans need to be destroyed.” Crystal threw it against the tree house wall with force. It broke into two pieces. It was cracked and wrecked so quickly I didn’t have a chance to stop her. Then she threw it out the window. “There, that should do it,” she said. I looked out after it, but it was too dark to see where it had landed.

After they had stopped messing around and almost everyone had laid their clammy hands on the larger object, Crystal threw it back to me with a yawn. Also losing interest, the others outside dispersed back to their own tree houses.

Bell approached, her hand reaching out for the object. “Can I see it?” she asked, shyly. She was the only one who hadn’t seen through it.

The others were nodding off, but I was still reluctant to give it to Bell, but what worse could she do than any of the others? I let her handle it and, at first, she looked into it like the others had done. She then wandered to the window, as if in a trance, and pointed it up at the stars, which looked like drops of silver in the distance.

“Wow!” she whispered. “Come and see this.” She spoke softly and beckoned me. She held it up for me as I peered in. Now the stars were beautiful and bright, yet not so close that they could hurt my eyes. This way of using it wasn’t scary at all. I turned to Bell.

“How did you know it was for looking at the stars?” I asked.

She shrugged her shoulders and whispered, “I didn’t. I think it’s called a telescope, but don’t ask me why.” She ambled back to her bed. Bell was so remarkable. Quiet, but what did that matter? I gazed at the stars, high in the black blanket of the night, and shifted the telescope from star to star, capturing each one in turn. I found two very bright ones, but glancing between them, I was sure one was just a little more radiant than the other.

I had the strangest feeling, staring up at the brightest, that it was important and I recalled a long, thin finger pointing up to it, as if whoever it was, held the secrets of the universe at their fingertips. The moment vanished and I was left gazing up, trying to recall the fading memory. Whose finger had it been?

I stared at the stars a little longer. Then, when I was completely sure I could make nothing of the revelation, I slipped the telescope under my pillow and dropped on to my front to sleep like the rest of my tree house group. Despite the stickiness of droplets of rain still on my clothes, I slept like a log.

## Chapter

A fire blazed among the trees and a man was burning within it. It was too late. There was nothing I could do. He fell to his knees and the flames licked his body wickedly. He thrashed and rolled around, wailing, moaning, screaming and trying to say something to me. There was something I had to know before he died. He wouldn’t just stop suffering and die.

I didn’t understand. Had I done this to him? Who was he? His pointed finger reached out towards me and his wide eyes stared into mine. His face danced with flames and his eyes closed. Finally, the flames enveloped him. I couldn’t see where the fire started or where his skin used to be. He still looked like a figure, but he was bright as the sun and transforming…

\* \* \*

Instantly, I woke and sat up in my tree house bed. I was out of breath. It was the early hours of the morning. Day sixteen.

In fear and anxiety, my fists clenched. Painfully, my nails dug into my skin on my left hand, but on my right, my nails couldn’t quite reach my skin. There was something inside my fist.

I opened my clenched hand to discover a blue pouch sitting on my palm. Shakily, I unfastened the black string at the top. At first, I saw nothing but darkness inside until I dug in deep and felt a warm dustiness sift between my fingers.

It was ash! How could it be ash? I shook it quickly back into the pouch, sickened.

My own magic had proved my guilt. I was sure it was the man’s ashes, the same man that was in my dreams.

The finger had pointed through the fire accusing me. Why else would he point? It was obvious, but why couldn’t I remember killing him?

Oh! What did it matter if I remembered? Even if my own subconscious hid it from me, I had still done it. How could anyone have peace after that?

My soul stirred painfully from within at the horrible, shameful deed. I had to hide it. Remembering the others in my tree house group were also around me, I quickly checked each sleeping face.

Whew! Everyone was fast asleep. There was nothing to worry about. I nearly stowed the pouch under the pillow with the telescope. No. It would be safer to keep it with me.

## Chapter

Two days later, I was returning to the tree house after collecting water from the stream. As I plunked down the bucket of water on the tree house floor, I spotted that one of my pockets had been torn almost all the way off. What was worse, the pouch of ash was missing.

There was no one else about, so I sat down on my bed, on my own, deep in thought. What would happen if someone else found it?

“You alright?” asked Bell quietly as she dropped in. I was startled by her presence.

“Yes,” I said, pausing. Then, deciding to tell her at least a bit of the truth, I said, “I’ve just lost something.” I tried to calm my nerves as Crystal and Ivy dropped in.

“Do you want help to find it?” Bell asked, after she’d glanced at them and noticed them standing there.

“What have you lost?” asked Crystal, smiling a slippery smile at me.

“Just something. It’s not important,” I said hastily.

“Well, it’s important if you want to find it,” Crystal said. “It’s not another thing you’re not supposed to have?”

“Um. Yes,” I said, unsure how she would react to it. But to my surprise, she distastefully lifted her nose into the air, not showing any further interest and I was able to leave with Bell without any more trouble from Crystal. It was as if Crystal was scared to be involved with anything different or unexpected.

I didn’t know where to start searching for it. With Bell by my side, I traced my steps back through the wood.

“What exactly are we looking for?” asked Bell.

“A pouch,” I said.

“A pouch? What’s special about that?”

I didn’t answer. I couldn’t find it in the wood near the stream and it wasn’t in the Queen’s court. Where else could it be? I hadn’t been foraging today. Maybe it had fallen out while flying and was now cosseted beneath the branches of a tree. If only I knew where. It could ruin my life if it was ever found out. No. *When* it was found. It was only a matter of time now.

## Chapter

It was three weeks since Spark had discovered me in the woods. My roommates and I were gathered round the tree house table eating lunch. Crystal and Ivy seemed in a good mood and were talking about the Queen.

“She asked me how I’d feel about becoming a companion to her,” Crystal said, before placing a berry into her mouth. I had no idea when the Queen had talked to her, but it sounded to me like a long time ago. “Of course, I said.” Crystal paused while she hastily munched and swallowed. “I said, I’d be delighted. So, she said she would talk to me again if she wanted one. I’m sure Spark told her about me. I think she’d like a female’s company,” she swallowed, “other than her female guards–they’re always disappearing off. Someone to look after *her*, for once. She’s so gracious. She hardly acts like a Queen at all.”

The rest of us sat dreamily looking into space, enveloped in Crystal’s vision, each happy in the imagined role of companion of the Queen. Then we came back to earth disappointedly.

“Why are you still smiling?” Crystal asked me. “The Queen’s never going to pick you.”

I couldn’t care less. I basked in the knowledge of my newly acquired skills of magic, which I’d recently been practising in secret. Though it had been scary at first, one afternoon a couple of days ago, I had finally cracked it. With more practice, I could perhaps do some amazing things.

Ivy’s face was simmering red with jealousy at the idea of Crystal being the Queen’s companion. “What about me?” Ivy said.

“What about you? If I were the Queen’s companion, you’d still be my friend and I’d still come to visit the tree house,” Crystal said.

“No. Why can’t *I* be the Queen’s companion?” asked Ivy.

“You don’t love the Queen as I do,” started Crystal.

“Yes, I do. It’s not fair,” said Ivy.

“I’m sure we can come to some arrangement. While I’m the Queen’s companion you can be mine.”

“What!” shouted Ivy irately.

I was itching to show off my magic. Surely it was magic that made a fairy different from a human at heart. I couldn’t contain myself any longer and, finding my voice, I asked, “Why does no one do magic?”

“It’s forbidden,” Crystal stated, glancing at Ivy disapprovingly, their argument postponed.

“But why?” I asked.

They all looked away as I searched their faces one by one, until I came to Violet, who said, “The Queen doesn’t want us to do it. It’s dangerous.”

“Dangerous? But have you ever tried? It’s not dangerous,” I said.

“What do you know?” retorted Ivy.

“I know that this isn’t dangerous,” I said, kneeling and turning round to the tree trunk that had become part of the tree house.

I concentrated, whilst touching the prominent trunk, and new branches forced their way from the bark and grew towards me. I jumped back as shoots almost hit me in the eye. Everyone gawped, examining the new growth.

“It needs perfecting, but it’s not dangerous,” I said.

“That’s forbidden,” said Ivy and Crystal together.

Toad dropped in and pointed enthusiastically at the new branches. “What’s going on? A whole branch can’t grow that fast and it wasn’t there yesterday,” he said.

“I know. It’s my magic,” I said, proudly.

“What else can you do?” he asked, before Crystal could stop him.

I touched one of the new shoots and a young leaf opened and grew. Toad excitedly flew away, and when he returned, I had an even bigger audience. Squirrel and a few others hovered, their wings beating like a humming-bird’s, outside the windows as they eagerly peered in.

I demonstrated what I could do, not nervous anymore of the new attention. For days, I had been trying to come to terms with magic and my relationship with it. I couldn’t help feeling today that it was at the centre of my being. Hidden and beautiful, it held every part of me together and yet it was still dreamlike when I did it, because I still wasn’t quite used to it. That I could do it at all, inspired me to realise that my potential was worth so much more than this constant jarring with Crystal and so much more than the incessant feeling that I was out of place among my own kind. I chose to ignore the feelings of isolation and embrace my magic for what it was: Magic.

Touching the wooden floor and thinking about insects, I managed to tickle them out of the wood and, from all directions, they came straight to me.

“How’d you do that?” Squirrel asked.

“I just concentrated my thoughts on bugs. It seems to work better the closer I am,” I said, as I lifted my hand from the wood and the bugs crawled back from where they had come.

“Can you do magic?” I asked Violet, sure that the rest could, but that they hadn’t tried. Looking around, I noticed that Ivy and Crystal had vanished, probably to tell the Queen, but I was sure they’d got it wrong. All magic couldn’t be forbidden. Most of it was harmless. Violet’s eyes pinched as she concentrated on opening another shoot on one of the new branches.

“I can’t do it,” she said at last, looking downcast, truly like a drooping Violet.

“Don’t worry. You’ll learn. I’ll teach you, if you want. I’ll teach you all,” I said before I realised quite how many new faces were now staring in through the windows. A few of them tutted or shook their heads and turned away, but most were swept up by the chance of learning magic. They had a new gleam in their eyes and their smiles widened.

“Would you?” asked Bell, her voice ringing clear and joyful. Even *her* shyness had vanished, she was just that excited.

Learning magic would be a new experience for them all, like learning to fly. Only this time they wouldn’t be dropped from the sky, left to figure it out in the rush of a perilous moment. They’d learn in safety. And all of them had it in them to be magical.

\* \* \*

The next day, as we were picking fruit, Violet brought me past a mound which was about knee high off the ground. On top, there was a heavy rock, flat and long. Moss and lichens grew on the mound where it looked like blood had been spilled.

At once I knew it was a dreadful place. It was too silent. I didn’t hear a single bird singing as we landed on one side of the mound. As we drew nearer to the large rock at its centre, the earth at our feet had dried and cracked so much, it looked like old stone.

“It’s time you found out about this place,” Violet said, her voice carrying a cold authority. “I wasn’t sure whether to show you yet.”

“Why not?” I asked.

“Because you seemed to like those humans, but I think it’s best to show you sooner rather than later, so you know where your allegiance lies. Humans are bad.”

“But they’re so small,” I said, persistently.

“That’s just the little ones we capture, but there are bigger humans that can’t see us. They destroy the woods. We can’t do anything to the bigger ones, but we can take the little ones and we will carry on taking them until they stop. It’s only justice. They destroy the woods and other fairies” homes. Surely you can understand that, Star.”

“Yes,” I said, though my voice wavered.

“We don’t go and destroy their homes or do anything to hurt them. We just want justice. That’s what the Queen always says. An eye for an eye. The trees mean so much to us. Surely you want justice, don’t you?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said softly before clearing my throat. I could hardly bring up the word, I felt sick to my stomach. I stepped up to the large rock and as soon as I saw spots of blood, my worst suspicions were confirmed. The children were killed in this place. I almost heaved with the thought of it and turned my back on it saying, “I don’t need to see any more.”

“You understand? It must be done.”

“Yes,” I mumbled, but I simply couldn’t understand. They were so like us. “How many?” I asked.

“How many what?” Violet responded, confused.

“How many children have died here?” I demanded. How could she not know what I meant?

“I don’t know. Don’t look like that. They’re horrible things. Anyway, the Queen decides. It’s an honour to watch justice being delivered.”

“Don’t others call it revenge?” I said, forcing the words out in my anger.

“Why are you so concerned? It’s an enjoyable event. Somehow humans derive pleasure from cutting down our trees. It’s the same thing. The Queen once said they smile at bits of trees. Something called money to exchange for more things created from trees. Things like trinkets, chairs. I don’t fully understand why they would want to do that, but they do.”

“But we have beds, chairs and tables. And our tree houses are fashioned of wood,” I started.

“The tree houses have been here forever,” she said.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

“Don’t ask me. That’s what the Queen says,” Violet replied. “Don’t make me start thinking you have fairy-phobia or I’ll have to report it to Spark,” she added.

“No.” I said, quickly, “I don’t have it.” I had to be more careful. I was letting my emotions rule me and she had noticed.

“OK. But if I hear you’ve been asking about humans again, I’ll have to report you. The Queen hates them.”

## Chapter

It was rumoured that there was going to be an inspection, but according to Violet they didn’t happen often. I had a suspicion, wriggling like a worm in my mind, that the inspection was because of the ashes. I came as late as I could to the meeting outside the Queen’s court, but if I hadn’t turned up, someone would have noticed.

I accidentally let out a gasp as the Queen appeared carrying the velvet pouch in her hand. The pouch I had lost. She was the last person I would have wanted to find it.

Bell gasped too, and stared at me. I shook my head, pleading her to be silent.

Violet heard and looked condescendingly at me, as if to say, “What have you done now?”

The Queen’s gaze settled on the crowd ahead of her and she tensely scanned row after row.

I wanted to bolt, but I’d be giving myself away. Then, it would hardly matter if Bell or Violet ratted on me.

“Right,” shouted the Queen, standing before us so we could all hear. “Who lost this?” she said, holding up the pouch with the ashes in and shaking it. “Come forward,” she snapped, impatiently.

She didn’t say what would happen if we admitted it was ours, but her face looked sinisterly sharp. I didn’t want to get on the wrong side of her. Bell looked at me again as the Queen marched along each line. When the Queen reached the beginning of our line, my heart started to pound, my knees weaken. Violet looked away and Bell looked down as the Queen inspected them. I was glad for their friendship and loyalty. My eyes were glued to the ground and the Queen passed by me too.

Once the Queen was at the end of the line, I lifted my head high, my heart glad and confident she wasn’t going to find out. I thought I was safe until I was stupid enough to allow our eyes to meet.

At that moment, the Queen knew and stormed back to me. She pointed to my dress where there was a broken pocket on my thigh. “How did you do this?” she barked.

“I–I–I just caught it on a branch,” I said, adding, “I guess,” but it came too late to sound casual.

“You’ve been collecting too, haven’t you?” she asked, her voice high pitched, yet still a whisper. Jumping to a conclusion, a twinkling in her eyes said everything fitted. All very well for her, but what was collecting? Obviously, it had something to do with the ashes, but what?

She clapped her hands and told all the other fairies to go, including Bell, who gave me one last look, as if wishing me luck. It now appeared the Queen had taken me into her confidence, but I wasn’t sure if this was a good thing.

“Come on, admit it,” the Queen urged me, once they had left.

I nodded nervously. She took the nod for a yes.

“Come with me,” she said. She quickly flew up into the trees and I followed her. Not once did she look behind. I wanted to run and hide. But she would find me again. She was the Queen and there was no other person who had greater authority over us. Why run from the inevitable?

She led the way to a secluded tree house and after landing on the balcony, barred my entrance to it. “Whose ashes are they?” she demanded. A slither of a smile spread on her face, almost like Crystal’s smile, as she stared at me, while she waved the blue pouch at my eye level. Was she going to be cruel like Crystal? I spotted a bed behind her. Was this her tree house? So far as I knew no one had crossed this threshold apart from her. Perhaps she wanted us to be friends, but she was on a whole other level than me.

“I–I–I don’t remember,” I stuttered. She was the Queen and I was just Star. Insignificant, small, powerless, next to her immense power.

“Well, it’ll all come back to you in its own time,” she said, moving aside to let me in. There was a table opposite the bed and laden with candles, a bowl of berries and a small, shiny vase. She picked up a berry and chomped on it, then turned, remembering me. She handed me the pouch and laughed.

“What?” I asked. “What’s so funny?”

“You can’t remember, can you?” She paused as if considering whether she should tell me. “You had us fooled, Bower and me, and all this time, you’ve been collecting ashes. If Bower had known you were a fairy on my side, he wouldn’t have wasted his energy on you. Maybe he would have been able to stop me. Oh well, we’ll never know,” she said melancholically.

I was overwhelmed by this news, a golden nugget of truth. Who was Bower and why was he trying to stop the Queen? And why on earth would anyone want to collect ashes?

“Who’s Bower?” I asked.

“A wizard,” she said, throwing up her hand, as if tossing him to the wind.

“Why would he want to stop you?” In the silence, I wondered if she would even answer my question. From what I’d seen of the fairies, the Queen wasn’t used to answering questions from them.

“I’ve been collecting ashes too,” she said.

“Why?”

“Maybe when you get your memory back, you’ll want to start becoming like me. I’ll help you,” she said, laying her hand on my shoulder. Become like her? All hazy and weird? And yet her touch felt real enough. Her hand at least seemed normal, though it produced a shiver in me.

She was living magic and it had become so much a part of her. As much as I liked that idea, I still held back, nodding politely. The other fairies had said she had forbidden magic and that it was dangerous. Either they had misunderstood or the Queen was a hypocrite, soaking in the power she forbade others to wield. It was good to have magic as a part of you, but not like this, taking away your physical existence. Was the magic controlling her?

“I bet you’ve been dying to get out of those clothes since you came here,” she said.

“Oh, yes.” Now here was a conversation on solid ground. I wasn’t crazy about my clothes. As eager as I was to know more, if I asked too many questions, it might become clear to the Queen that I wasn’t collecting ashes. At least I didn’t think I was.

What would she say if I told her I had killed someone? I was afraid of judgement and punishment. I hadn’t seen anyone punished, but if anything did deserve punishment, it should be this. Yet, if he was a human like the other little ones, the children, then why was I worrying at all? If I was a fairy and was supposed to hate humans, then why did some fairies have sympathy for humans and develop fairy-phobia?

Nothing seemed to make sense, but I could hardly ask the Queen about it.

I smiled gratuitously, and said, “I’m a bit tired of seeing red, Your Majesty.”

“Call me Elantra. Your Majesty is too formal for what I have in mind for you,” said the Queen.

“OK, Elantra.” It sounded so strange to be calling the Queen something else. “Am I going to be dressed like the guards?” I asked.

“No. You’re going to be my companion,” she said. It was the ideal way to get back at Crystal, especially for all the times she had been cruel to me, but now that I was actually here, it was completely different. My stomach churned. I didn’t want to usurp her role as companion or to gloat at her, yet what could I say to the Queen?

The Queen selected a pink top and green trousers from a box at the foot of her bed.

“Wear this,” she commanded.

There was a screen in her room that I got changed behind. When I returned to face her, I tugged the trousers at the thigh, hoping she wouldn’t insist I wear them. They were super baggy. She didn’t seem to notice my expression of distaste. “What about shoes?” I asked.

“Oh, you don’t need those,” she said, lifting her skirt and revealing muddy feet beneath. She wriggled her toes as she giggled and shrugged her shoulders. “Give us a twirl,” she said, looking pleased with herself.

I sighed and gave a fleeting smile, trying to act gratefully. As I spun around, the green and pink twirled together. Before my eyes the clothes transformed into something beautiful. What had happened? Was this the Queen’s magic? It was wonderful to feel gossamer tendrils of fabric gather into a ragged pink and green skirt around my legs. I didn’t know why, but strips of paper came into my mind. From the waist up, I found myself clad in pink with puffed up shoulders, completing a dress. I looked like a flower, akin to the woman I saw in my vision when I was dancing in the Queen’s court. I grinned buoyantly, though I kept the secret reason close to my heart.

\* \* \*

Hoping Crystal and Ivy were out, I approached the tree house in my new clothes. The pouch of ash was safely tucked away in a hidden pocket in the skirt of my new dress. Now I was going to be living in a tree house all to myself, I’d experience less noise and have more freedom to do what I wanted.

I heard Crystal’s voice inside as I flew closer and almost turned back, but I needed to have the courage to face her.

I dropped down on the outside balcony, my dress tendrils settling around my legs. Walking inside, my bare feet hardly made a noise. Everyone else saw me first, before I caught Crystal’s attention. She gaped at me, but I avoided eye contact with her, stepping around the group and collecting my belongings, the telescope and my blue and white pyjamas.

“Why are you wearing that?” said Ivy, breaking the silence first.

“She’s the Queen’s… the Queen’s…” started Crystal, distraught, her whole world collapsing around the unspoken word “companion”.

“No, she can’t be, can she?” asked Ivy in disbelief.

Not wanting to make the situation any worse, I said nothing and was about to leave before Crystal said, “But you don’t even like the Queen… You haven’t known her for as long as I have… How could she?” she added, staring at the others, one by one.

I didn’t know how to answer, so I left, my face red with shame as my heart tied up in knots.

## Chapter

Each night now my dreams were empty, apart from incomprehensible flashes of another world and questions about the Queen. I gravitated towards the Queen and yet something within me retreated away from her too. I was a flower blowing in the breeze, back and forth.

It was awkward not living with the others. I missed their gentle breathing nearby. No more the closeness of sleep, only the strange hush of nothing.

It had been a few weeks since I had flown against Spark and a group of us, excluding Crystal and Ivy, had been absent, practising magic even on the official race days in their tree house.

Violet had been attempting to levitate a fruit bowl. Bell and Squirrel were endeavouring to make new growth from the branch I had called forth from the tree trunk before. Chestnut and Cherry Berry, two fairies from a nearby tree house, were making an effort to float wild-flower necklaces off the ground and Toad was having a stab at calling bugs to him.

I had seduced a butterfly in from the open window and enjoyed watching it rest in my palm, opening and closing its wings slowly.

“I still can’t do it,” said Violet, violently knocking the fruit bowl over with her forearm.

My concentration snapped and the butterfly fluttered away. I leapt up and gathered the undamaged fruit, throwing the threw the rest out of the window.

“I thought you were supposed to be teaching us,” said Squirrel, as I laid the fruit bowl back on to the table.

Before I could answer, Bell also leapt on me like a scavenging fox, “Why can’t we do magic like yours? I’ve seen you picking fruit with it. We all have. Don’t think we haven’t.” I expected more from her.

It wasn’t fair. How could I teach them, if their magic just wasn’t there to harness? I didn’t want to disappoint them, but for a few days now, I had thought that they must be magicless.

I had shown them how I did it. I had explained how to concentrate. I even designed breathing exercises to keep them focused.

“Your powers have been growing stronger. Are you stealing our magic and using it for yourself?” Cherry Berry asked, accusingly.

“No. Of course not, but…but…” I started. How was I going to tell them?

“But what?” said Squirrel, “Ever since you’ve become the Queen’s favourite, you’ve been keen to show us you’re better than us.”

“I’m not. I’m no better than any of you. I just have magic and you don’t,” I blurted out. It was met by silence.

“And why are *you* the Queen’s favourite?” asked Toad, cruelly flicking a woodlouse on to its back with his finger.

“I don’t know,” I said, not sure how else I could console them. “*She* chose me,” I added.

“And she hasn’t told you why?” asked Chestnut.

“No.”

“Yeah, right,” said Violet and Squirrel together.

“I don’t know,” I repeated.

“There’s no point us being here if she’s not going to teach us,” said Squirrel, ready to leave.

“Don’t you think it’s convenient we’ve missed the flying competitions just to be here? Do you think she was trying to stop us joining the guards?” asked Cherry Berry of the others, as if I wasn’t even there. How rude!

“No one made you!” I shouted, as I fought back tears. Everything had become strained between my old tree house group since I had left. “You came yourselves. It’s not my fault,” I said. I had tried. Out of the goodness of my heart, I had taken the time to show them and they just didn’t seem to care.

“And we were silly enough to believe you, and do what you said, were we?” asked Bell, with tears in her eyes. “I thought it was true. I thought you were our friend,” she said, sobbing between her words.

“Don’t cry Bell, she’s not worth it,” said Violet, hugging her by the shoulders, before scowling at me.

They all left, none of them looking back, except Bell with tears shining on her cheeks and her chin wobbling in disappointment and anger. Tears welled up in my eyes, blurring my vision, and by the time I’d wiped the tears away, Bell had turned away too.

I was so ashamed of myself for not telling them sooner. I had lost Bell and Violet. I didn’t even know we were friends. Of course we had been, but I hadn’t properly appreciated it until then, until it was too late. How were they ever going to forgive me?

I thought of giving the telescope to Bell to remind her of that night she helped me, but I was afraid she and Violet would break it, to spite me. Besides, it wasn’t worth anything to them. I thought of asking the Queen to engage them as favourites too, but that might compel the others to hate Bell and Violet as well as me. I couldn’t imagine the Queen allowing them all to be guards either.

How was I worthy myself? Collecting ashes was all that distinguished me from the others, and I still hadn’t found answers for why anyone would want to do that. What did collecting mean? I was so confused. And it remained on my conscience that I had killed someone, regardless of him not being a fairy.

\* \* \*

Four days had passed and it was a warm afternoon. I stood next to the Queen on the official race day as she judged each race. The extended tree house group stood at a distance. Ivy and Crystal were pretending not to notice me, like they didn’t know who I was, and looked straight through me, while Bell and Violet couldn’t look me in the eye. It cut me deep inside. They thought I had betrayed them and being the Queen’s companion didn’t help matters.

“Is anything wrong?” asked the Queen. I still found it strange thinking of the Queen as Elantra, which is what she’d requested I call her.

“No.” Then I added, “My friends are ignoring me.”

“Friends? You have friends? Of course you would. Where are they?”

I nodded my head in their direction.

“And they are ignoring you?” asked the Queen.

“Yes.”

“We’ll give them something they can’t ignore. Fly against Spark when he comes back.”

“No. I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“No one will mind. They’re not real friends if they can’t accept you for who you are. Go on,” she urged me.

I sighed. “OK.”

I ambled up to the display of bunting which marked the start line. Everyone already there silently made way for me so I could skip the queue. They stood away from me to each side, like I was diseased, privileged or both. I couldn’t decide if I liked this reaction.

While I was waiting, Violet surprised me by tapping me on the shoulder. I turned round to see her and Bell standing behind me. Bell looked worried, but not sad. No one seemed to mind as I moved away from the queue to one side with Bell and Violet following. I didn’t know what they wanted, but I wasn’t exactly in the mood for more confrontation, what with our relationship leaving a bitter taste in my mouth.

“We’re sorry,” said Bell, surprising me, “about the other day. It’s not your fault we don’t have magic. I kind of knew it all along. It’s just…” she faltered.

“What she’s trying to say is that you gave us hope. You inspired us. We were talking and–” Violet lowered her voice, “Maybe we’re not real fairies.”

I had no time to think it over. “What! Of course you are,” I said to them.

Spark had come back from flying against someone, his chest proud and his hands on his hips, “Who’s next?” he asked, trying not to sound as if he was breathing hard.

Glancing at me furtively, the fairies in the queue waited for me to announce myself.

“You’d better go,” said Violet. We knew that we shouldn’t talk anymore about things that might give the impression of having fairy-phobia and I had seen that fear in Violet’s eyes as she took the risk to tell me. I was after all the Queen’s companion now. I said nothing more on the subject.

“Show them what you’ve got,” said Bell, smiling. Was she really happy for me? “Do it for us,” she added.

“Are you my friends again?” I called back, after I’d walked a few paces away.

“Yes,” chorused Bell and Violet.

“Then I’ll do it for you,” I said.

“Come on, who’s next?” asked Spark, expectantly.

“Star!” shouted the Queen. “She’s next!”

Everyone was still. Then there was a wave of fairies turning their heads, observing me, until everyone was gawking at me speechlessly. I averted my gaze and looked at the ground.

“Why?” asked Spark, also looking at me, confused about what I would gain from flying against him. I already had everything anyone could wish for. I was her favourite.

He looked to the Queen and she said nothing, but stared him down, until he looked uncomfortable. “OK, Star, are you ready?” Spark asked me loudly.

Everything snapped back to normal. Heads turned pretending to be indifferent, and the talk resumed within their familiar groups.

“Yes,” I said. Looking back to Bell and Violet rejoining their group, I spotted Crystal burning with resentment, her face almost as red as her clothes. Spark was already spoken for as my partner in the mornings for dancing and now I was going to shine competing against him in the races too. I bet that’s what she thought, but I hadn’t exactly snared him. I hoped he, at least, admired me, but maybe his attentions were just because I was now the Queen’s companion. Either way, he had offered his hand to me for dancing. The Queen herself had suggested flying against him. I wasn’t entirely sure I wanted to do it. I was out of practice, having missed two weeks to teach magic to the others. Still, as I stood waiting for the countdown, my wings stretched out, longing to be used, like they had been imprisoned for millennia or more.

“One, two three, go!” shouted a fairy on the side line.

Spark and I shot off like two strung and taunt arrows abruptly released. This time I wasn’t going to let him get the best of me. Weaving and dodging through the trees, we were neck and neck. Exhilarating as it was, I wasn’t going to dive into the deep blue of the sky again, but I still loved flying through the wood too. Nature at first opposed me, leaving branches out to grab at me, but I soon learnt to expect them. I even grew strength from them, finally testing my limits, pushing on and on, completely forgetting about Spark. It was simply about me and nature and magic, how we were intertwined, until the whole universe opened up.

Spark called out to me, “Hey!” and the world came back, along with him far behind. All along where I had flown and brushed the trees, new life exploded into action with leaves and buds. I grinned, ear to ear. It was so amazing! I was spilling over with magic and it had happened without me even knowing.

Spark’s mouth was open with surprise as he looked back too and choked down a fly.

“Come on,” I shouted to him. “Are you letting me win?” I was joking, but his smile cracked and wobbled as he reached the conclusion that he couldn’t catch up and would never be able to.

I had won already, but my wings still ached to be flying high. I flew the last stretch so fast, that I burst through the bordering trees and didn’t stop at the fence. With my back to the woods, I soared up high above the brick homes. One of them had two people outside. Spotting black hair, I reeled back, back into my dream, which I had almost forgotten. I remembered their faces, each lifting to recognise me. I couldn’t shake it off. Who were these people?

Instinctively, I flew closer. The woman was crying, her face puffy and red. I needed to do something to comfort her. Why did I feel sorry for her?

Spark called after me, “What are you doing? You were winning. Let’s go back.”

“OK,” I said, knowing I wasn’t meant to be here. Yet, I still couldn’t help looking back, repeatedly, my eyes glued.

The brick homes all looked the same, but this one had two smaller boxes on wheels outside, and one of sunflower yellow, which they were approaching.

Spark waited for me to return with him to the fence before asking, “Are you OK?”

I nodded. This had to be my secret. The brick homes had nothing to do with us. We were part of the fairy domain.

“I’ll count us in to finish off the second part of the race, then. 1, 2, 3. Go!” said Spark.

We pushed off from the fence at the same time, neck and neck all the way and hit the finish line together.

When I landed, near the starting position, there were guards standing around the Queen appearing on tenterhooks as they whispered something to her. The Queen laughed and smiled, spreading the line of black lipstick across her face. “Star,” she called, as she waved the guards away, as was her habit. I came to her side as the races resumed. “You created quite a stir. Impressive,” she congratulated me, but my mind was elsewhere.

\* \* \*

In the quiet of the night, I flew to the brick house which had the small yellow box outside it. There was an open window and I made my way to it, but was unable to see anything inside. A piece of cloth fluttered in a warm, strong breeze and it embraced my face. I shook it off, alarmed. Lifting it a bit above my head, I peered into the room. A man and a woman slept close together, with their arms around each other. I had never seen humans asleep. Whereas we slept on our fronts because of our wings, humans had no trouble sleeping on their backs or in any position they liked.

\* \* \*

I jolted awake as light rain spat on my face. Somehow I had fallen asleep and was now lying in a flowerbed. I couldn’t tell how late it was. I flew up to the window again. It was a bad idea to go inside, this was the home of humans, but lulled into a false sense of security by the sound of their restful breathing I climbed in, anyway, through the window and into the room.

I stared at the people. I wasn’t sure why I was so interested in them. Then I looked around the room. There was something flat against the wall, inside a frame of wood. As I moved, the image inside moved, like the reflection in the stream’s water. I reached out to touch it, expecting perhaps water, but my hand hit it hard. Ow! It definitely wasn’t water.

The man shuffled in his sleep, his breath like a snuffling animal. His hand fell towards the outer edges of the bed, his fingers reaching out not far from where I stood. I froze on the spot and waited until their breaths returned to a steady and sure rhythm. I looked back to the flat object on the wall and in the very corner of the surface, where it met the wooden frame, was a piece of paper with a tiny image on it. It showed a girl standing with a pair of adults, the same two people now sleeping behind me. But wait a minute, the girl looked like me, and they, we were all smiling. Was this some kind of trick? I slipped the piece of paper out from between the surface and the frame, taking it closer to the moonlight at the window. I was careful not to bump into the sleeping man’s hand and wake him.

The image looked a lot like me, but whoever it was didn’t have wings. What’s more, she looked younger too with blonde hair. Only some of my hair was blonde, the rest black. No, it couldn’t be me.

The moonlight glittered off a small box with a pretty pattern of flowers on it and I lifted the lid. “Ding!” it sounded and I dropped the lid down, surprised. I scrambled out through the window.

Behind me, the woman woke and I heard her call out, “Stacy!” to the empty room. As I observed her, from outside where she couldn’t see me, tears shone in her eyes, breaking my heart. Much to my relief the man woke and comforted her. I realised I still had the image in my hand, but I couldn’t put it back now, not without them seeing me.

\* \* \*

The next night I returned with the image and placed it back where I had found it. I was about to leave when I noticed, this time, the man and woman slept further apart, creating a space in the middle. I crept into the bed where their feet were. They looked so comfortable, almost beckoning me to curl up and sleep beside them, despite the awkwardness caused by my wings, as if I was safe, as if I was home.

But as the man stirred in his sleep, beginning to breach the gap between him and the woman, and could wake at any instant, I realised what I was doing. I was a fairy. They were humans. I couldn’t have stayed here even if I wanted to; we were worlds apart and I belonged back with the fairies.

I crept out of the bed and held my breath as I looked at them. It had to be the last time I would come here. It was dangerous enough already, but if Spark found out, my position could be questioned or, worse, my life with the fairies could end. Both the man and the woman kept turning restlessly. In the woman’s hand, a square piece of material floated out of her palm on to the floor.

I tiptoed round to the woman’s side of the bed and picked it up. The pattern was familiar and just like my old clothing. In fact, it was the right shape for the piece of material that was missing and looked to be the front of a pocket. How had she come to be in possession of it? What was she to me? I rested the square carefully down by her bedside table.

Watching her face, I noticed a wrinkle or two lined her forehead. They smoothed out as she shifted in the bed, as if soothed by my unknown presence. I didn’t know why, but I wanted to kiss her cheek. Before I left, I kissed her softly, like the kiss of butterfly wings.

## Chapter

The Queen tugged my hair, as she plaited it, and a wonderful tingle ran through my body, crumpling my reserved manner.

“Are you cold?” she asked.

I nodded.

She dived into her box of clothing and rummaged around, until finding a royal blue cloak. She helped me into it, resting it around my shoulders. Stroking the soft velvety outside of the cloak, she said, “This was my mother’s. You will be careful with it, won’t you?” There. She had said it. Mother.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Go ahead.”

“Do I have a mother. Is she one of the humans?”

“What? Don’t let anyone else hear you say that! You actually believe the human’s love you, do you?”

“They do.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. They don’t know what you are. She pulled me out of the cloak as if my presence was tainting it and hugged it close to her. “I know you can do magic. I saw what you did in the court.”

“What?”

“Yes. I saw the fairies you saw. I hadn’t seen them in ages. They’re family Star.”

“What? Your family?”

“And yours.”

“Where are they?” I asked.

She looked like she was about to throw up and she placed the cloak down on her bed. What had happened to them? My stomach doubled in dread too.

Finally she said, “They died a long time ago.”

“No,” I started, confused.

“Yes. But I’m here Star. I’m family too.”

“You’re my sister?” I said, in disbelief.

“Yes,” she said. “My beautiful sister,” she said, embracing me. I couldn’t believe it.

“Why can’t the rest of the fairies do magic?” I asked.

She shook her head. “Don’t worry yourself. It’s no concern of yours.” Though her voice was light, it concealed a hidden sharpness to her words.

## Chapter

We stood outside a run-down lodge with a mishmash of repairs and a broken window. I took a few steps towards it. What was everyone waiting for?

“Don’t go near there,” warned Violet.

“Why not?” I’d hardly slept at all last night, but when Violet and Bell had flown past my tree house this morning, asking if I wanted to join them, I was eager to forage with them.

I hadn’t realised Ivy and Crystal would be heading up the expedition in search of fruit which was only available around this lodge.

Ivy forcefully said, “Don’t tell her.”

Violet looked at me, pleadingly. So did Bell. I yawned. What were they so worried about? It was only a lodge, four little wooden walls and a roof. It was nothing. I had heard rumours of all sorts, but I didn’t believe them. They had grown more and more out of proportion. It couldn’t be true.

“I dare you to go in there,” said Crystal, glaring at me. She was jealous more than ever of me.

“Yeah. I dare you too,” said Ivy, re-tying her hair.

“Don’t,” Violet pleaded and Bell shook her head.

“If she’s going in, I am too,” said Toad.

“No, you don’t,” said Crystal restraining him. She whispered something to him that I couldn’t catch.

“Then can I go in?” Toad asked.

“Yes, but only then,” Crystal replied, unable to keep her voice inaudible to me. She said louder, “Well, are you going in, or are you a coward?”

“I don’t see you going in,” I said. I raised my eyebrow in defiance.

“That’s– that’s because we’ve already been in there, haven’t we, Crystal?” Ivy was flush in the face.

“Yes,” said Crystal.

“No, you haven’t,” I said.

“Prove we haven’t.” Crystal smiled, goading me.

Toad bleated, “You haven’t. You told me.”

“Shut up,” shrieked Crystal, punching him.

“Ow!” whined Toad, rubbing his arm.

“I don’t care,” I said. I’d had enough of them and was already walking towards the door. I called back, “I’m going in there anyway!”

As I opened the door and stepped inside, a breeze swept in from the broken window, passed through the room and left by the door. A chair rocked back and forth eerily like someone had been sitting in it. I shut the door and the chair was still.

The floor was sticky and gross against my bare feet. I couldn’t make sense of the mess. What had happened here? It looked like the whole wood had invaded and there were scorch marks on a crumpled tablecloth on the table which held a small jumble of potions.

There was supposed to be a curse on the place, so everyone said. The old wizard had died here. What an idiot! He had tried to stop the Queen, though that made me think twice about my first impressions. Why had he?

I lit the half-burnt wood in the fireplace with my magic and stared into the bright flames. Why would anyone spend their life trying to stop the Queen, my sister? It was so weird thinking about her like that. I hadn’t told anyone else yet.

I explored the room, which seemed familiar and I soaked it in, as if I had been here before, as if I was meant to be here. There was a chest of drawers in one corner and a bed and table on the other side of the room. He hadn’t lived with much.

On top of the drawers were a collection of deathly looking skulls, giving me the shudders. A bushy plant was growing out of an open drawer, leaning towards the light from the window. Surrounding it were bottles and vials of strangely coloured liquids as alluring as blackberries in the woods.

As my fingers brushed against the tablecloth on the table, my position in the room changed. I was looking down into the lost empty eyes of the same man I had dreamt of. He was lying in the middle of the room, face up.

An instant later, I returned. I almost expected to see him lying on the floor, in real time, but nothing was there. I had to see more. What had I done to that man?

I touched the tablecloth again, this time purposefully, and saw his eyes and my fingers shakily drawing his eyelids down. They were my hands, my fingers, but I had no control. What was happening? His face was young and old at the same time. It was like he had two skins, one woven underneath the other, the wrinkles under the surface.

Then it was bright and the light was filtering through a canopy of trees above his head. The vision must have been showing me something outside now. I was crying, weeping, yet none of the tears were my own. They belonged to whoever I inhabited and even if it was myself, I wouldn’t let it be, because it couldn’t be. How could I kill a man and not know it? Regardless, I heard her sobs as she leant over the man. As I rocked and shook with her, I began to feel it, some of her pain, some of her anguish, until my heart felt like it was breaking in two, being torn by invisible threads. It seemed as if I was there myself, the pain the same as mine, awakening me and bringing me fully into my body and into that mysterious moment.

My hands had closed his eyes. My hands must have killed him for why else was I crying? It shocked me that I could cry this much. I couldn’t remember crying before. Not like this. I held on to his body and smelt the aroma of the forest on his clothing: berries, apples, smoke and something stronger like a burnt animal. It wasn’t the same scent as the fairies carried, for meat was forbidden, but it was more comforting and provoked hunger too, especially after becoming drowsy from crying for what seemed like so long. How could I crave something I had never tasted, and yet I did taste it. I salivated, longing for the smoky, hot, strong, fulfilling taste of meat.

Oh! How could I think of food when I had killed him?

\* \* \*

“Star? Star?” shouted worried voices from outside.

I woke, finding myself slumped over the table, facing away from the door. My head was in my crossed arms, moist from tears.

“I think something’s wrong. She’s not coming out,” I could hear Violet say.

“Let me go in and find out,” said Toad. I could hear their voices carry through the broken window.

“No,” said Crystal, “If she’s got magic like you say she has, she’ll be fine, but if she hasn’t at least we can be rid of her.”

“I want to go in there,” said Toad again, though no one was listening.

“Convenient, right?” said Ivy.

“Right,” said Crystal. I heard hands briefly clap.

“Don’t you dare say that,” said Violet.

“Or what?” said Crystal. “You’ll zap us with your magical powers? Yeah, that’s right. You haven’t any.”

“Neither have you,” Toad butted in.

“Shut it, twirp. The point is, Violet can’t stop us from saying anything we want to,” said Crystal. “Don’t you dare go in, Toad,” she said, as he opened the door.

As the door creaked open, I still had my back turned. I was reluctant to show him I’d been crying.

“Wow!” exclaimed Toad, standing in the doorway. “I bagsie it all. This is my hideout from now on and you can’t do anything about it,” he shouted back to Crystal. “You’re too scared to come in, anyway,” he added, quieter.

If the wizard and the man in my dream were the same person, his home deserved more dignity than to be bagsied. I was angry at myself for not knowing I had killed him and that I was the guilty party. How could I ever make up for taking someone’s life? It was my responsibility to give his place dignity. It was the least I could do.

“Are you OK?” Toad asked me, finally.

“No, get out! No one has a claim to it. Someone died here.”

“What?”

“It’s not yours!” I shouted, turning to face him and letting my anger flow through my outstretched arm to the door. It slammed in his face. I was unnervingly surprised. Maybe I *had* stolen the wizard’s powers. That would explain why only I could do things the other fairies couldn’t. Perhaps I had absorbed his power on his deathbed.

“Ow,” said Toad, his moaning muffled from outside. “It’s no one’s place. He’s dead. I want it,” he added.

I snuffed the fire out with my magic and left the lodge, shutting the door behind me. Everyone stared at me with fresh eyes, as if sizing up how dangerous I was. They didn’t understand. They hadn’t known him like I had. They hadn’t killed him.

“I want it. Make her, Crystal,” whimpered Toad, nursing his nose, but Crystal looked surprised and did nothing. As she stood there, her eyes met mine and, realising my hurt was genuine, she looked away. I knew she wouldn’t let anyone go in there, Toad least of all, and the wizard’s place would be safe from prying fairy fingers. As soon as I knew that, I ran through the trees, escaping from their questions and judgements.

\* \* \*

A couple of days later, it had been Violet’s turn to pick food for the guards and I hoped to go with her, after bumping into her an hour beforehand.

After I had explained that foraging for the fairies was a service to the Queen, something to pay her back for all her kindness, the Queen had excused me. Honestly, it was the only way to get some time away from her.

Now after foraging, Violet and I were whiling away the time together. “Have you decided what to wear for the midnight dance?” Violet asked.

Too much played on my mind: the ash, killing the wizard and those humans I had visited, that I hadn’t paid it much attention. I shook my head, before asking, “Have you?”

“I was thinking of using feathers. Squirrel said there were some outside the old wizard’s home. Do you want to come with me?”

“Yes,” I said.

Before we alighted outside the lodge, I noticed the Queen’s guards standing outside. I nudged Violet mid-flight and we both somersaulted into the undergrowth, before they could spot us.

“What did you do that for?” asked Violet, huffing, as she picked leaves off her clothes.

“The Queen’s guards are there. The Queen must be inside,” I whispered.

“Shouldn’t we leave?” asked Violet, standing up to move away, and brushing more leaves off her. I dragged her back down into the undergrowth again.

“No. Why should we? It’s not her lodge,” I said, crawling closer through the undergrowth to get a better view.

“What are you going to do?” she asked, following me on all fours.

“What do you think? Let’s see what she’s up to,” I whispered.

“But what if we get caught?” she asked.

“We won’t. Even if we do, we won’t be in trouble. She likes me,” I added. I didn’t want to mention we were family. When I had last seen the Queen, after my last experience inside the lodge, I had hesitated and couldn’t bring myself to say anything to her about the wizard’s death. He had fought with her but it sounded as if they had been on familiar terms. How much did she know about his death? Was she looking for clues now?

Violet and I reached the closest undergrowth to the lodge before it became sparse. The Queen strode out of the door, carrying–some paper? That didn’t seem very exciting. She flew off, followed by her guards. A few seconds later, I advanced and Violet followed.

“What do you think she was doing?” asked Violet. It was odd of her to ask anything of the Queen’s business, but I needn’t have worried. She was excited and flushed red, like we were playing a game.

“I don’t know,” I said, shrugging, though a plan was starting to form in my mind. Maybe there was a way to find out.

“Oh well, I’ll have a look for the feathers for my costume,” she said. “You can keep watch here, if you want,” Violet said, noticing my reluctance to follow her.

I nodded and slipped into the lodge, instead, and rummaged among the potions in the drawers. I was sure I had seen one the other day with the symbol of a moth on it, and I now hoped it could temporarily transform me into a moth. It was a relief, when I finally spotted the vial I was looking for. I smiled mischievously to myself as I slipped into my pocket and hurried outside. Violet saw me coming out, a bundle of feathers in her hands.

“I was just looking inside,” I said, guiltily.

“And?” she asked, no doubt wanting to know if I had discovered what the Queen had been up to.

“Nothing looks different,” I said. I couldn’t afford to get Violet involved. What if she didn’t like my plan to spy on the Queen in her tree house? I had to know what was going on.

“I guess we won’t know what bought the Queen here,” Violet said.

I fought the urge to smile. I would find out sooner than she thought. Even if it was prying, it was crucial for my questions to be settled once and for all.

## Chapter

“Stay by my side, Sister,” said the Queen to me, before she delivered an address to all the fairies.

Spark looked up and stared, surprised. I still hadn’t told anyone. His jaw dropped.

“Stop gawking, Spark. It’s unbecoming,” the Queen said to him.

“Sorry, your majesty. I thought she was only your companion, but she’s your sister too?”

“Yes. Listen,” she said, speaking to the crowd now. “You may not know this, but Star is my sister.”

I tried not to meet anyone’s eyes, but couldn’t help noticing Bell and Violet’s surprise too. “My wish is for you to respect and honour her as you have me. Is that clear?”

“Yes, your majesty,” everyone chorused.

“Now, when I have the power of Ages, when we all have the power of Ages,” she corrected herself and hugged my shoulders, smiling, “we will then be able to stop humans destroying our woods and forests.” She raised her fists rousingly.

Some of the fairies cheered while others remained silent and awestruck. All the faces I could see were lit up and smiling, heads held high. I smiled too, though I wondered how she planned to stop the humans and if it would hurt them.

“I desire to be lenient and give the children a chance to join with us, for I am a merciful queen. Let them know that we are different from their parents and all adults. We offer them a new life without parental rule or human struggle. I want you to make yourselves known to them. Be kind,” she paused as if her mouth was filling up with sand.

Some of the fairies looked at each other, confusion and uncertainty written on their faces. They hadn’t been kind to humans before.

“Befriend them,” the Queen continued. “But, most importantly, let them know of our existence. Go in pairs, look for bigger buildings where more of them are likely to be gathered together. Don’t waste your time going into every single house. Children will talk to one another and spread our message for us.”

A whisper arose as the fairies devoured this new, exciting mission. Violet and Bell looked towards me as if checking whether I had any inside information. I shrugged my shoulders at them when the Queen wasn’t looking.

The Queen said quietly to Spark, “Take Star with you.”

“Come on.” Spark gestured upwards with a flick of his head, before he and I flew up into the air. Our departure signalled to everyone else that they were to leave the woods too and, behind us, fairies flew up in all directions.

\* \* \*

“Look, there’re loads of small humans there!” I exclaimed to Spark. As we flew, the low clouds parted and we could see them, ever so tiny.

“So there is. I think we’ve found a school,” said Spark as we approached a very large building, which seemed to have a lot of other buildings joining it.

“What’s a school?” I asked, as we landed on the main roof.

“A place where children learn,” Spark informed me.

We watched the children shout and play on a grey surface beneath us.

A loud ringing sounded and I jumped out of my skin. Spark smiled unfazed as though he’d heard it before. Had he? “What’s that?” I asked. “Oh, they’re disappearing inside!”

“Don’t worry, we can still reach them and introduce ourselves.” He held back for a moment. “So, how long have you known that the Queen was your sister?”

“Not long,” I answered.

“I remember when you first arrived with no memory, nothing but worn pyjamas and shrivelled wings,” he said. “It was me who taught you to fly, remember that.”

Maybe he was hoping I’d be up for doing him favours or speaking to the Queen on his behalf. “OK,” I said.

“You do kind of look alike. You have the same nose.”

“Do I?” I said, touching my nose.

“Yes. I don’t get why she acted like you and her were strangers.”

“I don’t know why either,” I said.

We flew outside the large building, and it appeared there were numerous rooms inside it and so many children too. Their eyes stared at us, some judging, others bewildered, and I felt uncomfortable. At the bottom of the building were some pink flowering bushes and I landed down next to them, relieved to find some greenery in this awful, barren place.

“What are you doing?” hissed Spark. “Get up here.”

I shook my head and took a deep refreshing breath. I hadn’t even realised I’d been holding it before.

He came down to the bottom level. “What are you afraid of? Here, watch me. I’ll make them laugh! Then you’ll have nothing to be frightened of.”

It was afternoon, but there had been some recent spots of rain and there was a slight chill in the air. Spark breathed on the lowest set of windows and drew funny faces on the panes of glass. The children inside laughed. I suddenly felt safe to join him and I flew up to his side. An older human stormed over to the window, and, for an instant, I thought she saw me because she was staring straight into my eyes.

“Who did this?” she demanded, tapping on the glass. Her voice from inside the room sounded distant. Spark stuck his tongue out over the woman’s head and crossed his eyes. All the children laughed again.

“What’s so funny?” the woman shouted. Spark breathed on the glass again before drawing a willy. Did it look to the kids inside as if it was poking into the woman’s ear?

The children laughed even harder and the woman turned to look at the window, noticing the new addition. She looked puzzled and said, “That’s enough. Who’s going to speak up and tell me who did it?” she asked.

“Miss, there are people outside,” one of the children volunteered.

“What! I knew it,” she said, opening the stiff, squeaky window with force. We moved back as she leaned outside towards the bushes. “Who is it? Come out! If it’s you, Ben Johnson, you’d better remember the last time you were expelled. It was *not* a pleasant experience.”

Spark raced through the open window and, from inside the room, kicked her behind as she leaned out.

“Oh!” she jolted. If Spark had been any more violent, she could have fallen out on to the bushes outside! I wasn’t impressed. Some of the kids laughed, but others looked alarmed, shuffling in their seats.

“Who did that?” the woman screamed, shutting the window faster than Spark could escape back outside. Spark panicked and tried to reopen the rickety window, but it was shut fast and he wasn’t strong enough to force it. As the woman stormed back to the front of the room, he looked at me, as if telling me not to worry. The older human didn’t seem to notice Spark. Were we invisible to her?

“Maybe it’s time you lot learned about manners,” the woman said. “Detention for a week.” Her words were muffled, but I could still make them out.

“No miss,” some of the children groaned amidst a chorus of “Oh’s.”

As the woman turned back to the wall, Spark flew to the front of the room. The children’s wide eyes were glued to him until he opened the door and flew out.

“Who’s leaving my class?” the woman asked, noticing the open door. “Come back,” she said, striding to the door and searching outside her room. “Oh,” she said. She frowned, shutting the door, and started the lesson with the children again, rather infuriated.

For a long time, Spark didn’t make an appearance. What if he couldn’t find a way out of the monstrous building?

I thought of trying to find a way in myself to hunt for Spark, but I was scared. Besides, it would make things more complicated, if I too got lost trying to find him. It wasn’t that bad where I was, floating outside the window, watching the children learn, but Spark kept entering my thoughts. Were all his efforts an attempt to make me feel better?

I decided it was best if he could see me clearly, in case he couldn’t remember where the window of the room was. I flew up above the building and waited.

Finally, he found a way out and he met me. “Awful,” he said. “I don’t understand how those humans can stand it. It’s like a maze in there. And to sit still all day.”

“But don’t you think they must be learning something important?” I inquired.

“Humph,” he responded. “They’re humans. Nothing’s important to them. At least nothing that matters anyway, or they wouldn’t be cutting down trees. Why don’t they learn about that?”

“How come the older human couldn’t see us?” I asked.

“Dunno. It’s always been that way.”

We visited a couple more schools, but I wasn’t sure if we were demonstrating to them that we were good friendly fairies. It didn’t seem to make much sense to me. Why would the Queen kill them and be merciful at the same time? Violet had said the ones that had been found in the wood were fairies who wanted revenge or were trespassing. I suppose it was the only way to show we weren’t tolerant of interlopers or people who destroyed the well-being or the sanity of our Queen. I too would be paranoid if people were after me in that way. No wonder she had so many guards around her.

If anything, this excursion was like a window into the world of humans. They didn’t seem to be bad. It just became more apparent that I needed to find answers quickly. What was going on and why was no one speaking about it?

\* \* \*

That night, I slowly read the big written instructions on the vial of Moth Potion:

Drink all liquid, lasts for up to an hour.

Possible side effects:

Pain and vomiting from sudden transformation.

If unwanted side effects occur seek the magical attention of a wizard.

A wizard! Brilliant. I was on my own then if something went wrong. I deliberated. Then, decided there was more to lose if I didn’t go ahead. My hands shook as I pulled the stopper off. I gulped down the murky brown liquid even though it tasted woody. It marinated my tongue with a pithy texture, like I was sucking bark, not that I knew what that was like. My wings began to bend painfully. The instructions hadn’t mentioned any complications for fairies. What if this wasn’t meant to happen?

“Aaah!” I screamed with agony and clapped my hand to my mouth as I fell to my knees. I was sure my arms and legs were going to vanish as they shrivelled thin as strands of hair before my eyes. My eyes! In the brilliance of the candlelight, everything was bigger, brighter. What a sensory overload! Shoot! I’d forgotten to blow it out too. If someone dropped in, they could quickly see I wasn’t there and, what’s more, the vial was lying smashed on the floor.

Instinctively, I was drawn to the candlelight. I flew towards it. I couldn’t help it. It was warm, inviting. I savoured the residue heat around the edges of the flame, shutting my eyes sleepily. The lingering heat started to burn. No! The candlelight wasn’t my friend. Not in a million years!

I opened my eyes and tore myself away. Instead, I began to test my tiny wings by flying around the room. It wasn’t long till the intense candlelight beckoned to me again and I bumped into the walls, distractedly. I had to get a move on. I flew out of the tree house.

Though it was night, lights twinkled from everywhere, from the sky, through the slatted wood in the tree houses and directly through the entrances. Candlelight and starlight shone, amplified by my many month-eyed lenses.

I flew up through the canopy to gain a better view of the landscape. I was close to the guards” tree houses and not far away from the Queen’s quarters. As soon as I saw the lights from the Queen’s tree house, I descended back into the trees, fluttering and circling around the branches.

A gigantic bird hopping on a branch, its wingspan a million times bigger than me, spotted me. It inclined its head towards me and hopped closer. I fluttered down to the next branch and it followed, jumping quickly behind. I still wasn’t going anywhere fast enough to escape the menace. What on earth could I do to get rid of it?

I shouted, trying to shoo it away, but I couldn’t make a sound. I froze and opened my wings, hugging them around the branch’s curve.

The bird sprang closer and peered down at me with its balloon head side-on. In its ugly, shiny eye I could see the reflection of the light from the Queen’s tree house. If only I could reach it. It seemed a haven compared to this, but if I moved now, it was sure to be the end. I closed my eyes, shaking off the reflective light which was still calling to me, but I opened them again when I couldn’t bear not knowing.

The bird inclined its head again. Its sharp beak descended a short distance from me. It was like a huge, monstrous machine that I could imagine humans using to destroy the woods. The bird pecked around. In an instant, it could spike me to death. I braced myself for the intense pain that could end it all.

Suddenly, the bird flew off, its wings creating a wind around me, and I clung on for dear life. Perhaps something had disturbed it, or maybe it had lost interest.

I stayed still for a minute or two, making sure it had gone, before I fluttered to the Queen’s tree house.

## Chapter

In the Queen’s tree house, wax dripped from an array of candles on the table where the Queen sat combing her hair.

I had to remind myself that I wasn’t a moth, not really, and that I shouldn’t listen to the instincts that were now a part of me. I flew past the lights and fluttered up to the wall to land. I’d never tried landing vertically before. It was strange to find tiny bristles on my feet gripping miniscule fissures in the wall’s surface.

Full of ash, the Queen set down her wooden comb on the table, and began to braid her hair. As Spark slowly entered, she straightened in her chair.

“Spark,” she said, briefly acknowledging him, before continuing braiding her hair. Her house was in a more secluded area of the wood and she had more privacy than the rest of us.

“They are saying Star is as powerful as you,” said Spark.

“What!” the Queen said, instantly abandoning her plait. She twisted her head towards Spark, looking at him properly with sharp eyes that wanted to cut the truth out of him.

“And even more powerful than you, some are suggesting,” said Spark, quietly. Was power that important to her?

“Ridiculous. Let them say what they like. She’s just flexing her muscles. Soon they’ll see my power and forget all about her,” said the Queen, as she undid her half-formed plait in frustration. She began combing her hair once more, her fingers quick but jittery.

“Can you make me taller and more handsome?” asked Spark.

“What, again? Are you never happy?” she snapped, throwing her comb on the table. Spark jolted with surprise at the bang, but he still waited for an answer. He stood close by the entrance, looking like he was ready to make an exit should it get nasty. The Queen’s lips curved, ever so slightly. Then, she composed herself and turned to face him, smiling politely, as if remembering her role. “A little more then. You’ll have it when you wake. Go,” she said, waving him away.

As soon as he left, her focus turned towards the candles. I stayed fixed on the wall not far away from her. She said to herself quietly, “They’ll all bow to me under fallen stars, in the darkness of night.” Deep in concentration, she stained her lip red with blood as she bit it too hard. After a twitch of pain, she sucked it and resumed louder, “Mine will be the only light, the last light, they’ll ever see.”

What on earth was she talking about? I had to get out of there quick, before she saw me. My wings trembled as I tried to fly away, passing her as I headed for the open window.

“I wanted a sister, not a rival,” she murmured. She suddenly clapped her hands around me, the sound booming like thunder.

Squeezed tightly between her palms, I couldn’t see a thing and my wings had hardly any room to move. All she had to do was squeeze and that would be it. She would kill me without ever knowing. Unless, I was in the same colours as my clothes, green and pink. I hadn’t even examined my reflection in the stream before I left.

“But blood always betrays,” she said, as she finally opened her hands. I fluttered out through the window, as fast as I could.

Back in fairy form after the spell had worn off, my sleep was restless and I couldn’t stop wishing in some ways that the Queen had got it over with. My power was insignificant compared to hers.

\* \* \*

The next morning, when Spark turned up to the Queen’s court for dancing, he was a degree more handsome. If I hadn’t known about his request to the Queen, he would have taken my breath away.

He certainly took Crystal’s away and she watched, green with envy, as he chose me again.

“You look tired,” he said as he offered me his arm. “Have you been up all night practising your magic or something?” He was an inch or two taller. Beyond that, I wasn’t quite sure what was more handsome about him. Some extra twinkling in the eyes? An extra something about his smile? I couldn’t believe he was the snitch reporting to the Queen about me.

“No. I just couldn’t sleep,” I replied. “You look–different,” I said. He was already smiling widely.

That was it. His smile! It appeared fixed in place and he couldn’t have looked miserable if he wanted to. Though I speculated what he really looked like, my imagination couldn’t penetrate those confident eyes.

“I feel different,” he said. “That’s what a good night’s sleep can do. You should try it sometime,” he joked.

I didn’t laugh. Did he know what was going on? I wanted to burn the answers out of him. I even thought of using my magic on him, but it was too dangerous for both of us and what if he knew nothing?

“Are you OK?” Spark asked, finally.

“Yeah, fine,” I said, putting on a fake smile of my own.

## Chapter

“It’s very nearly time to gather for the Power of Ages. Everything’s ready and the moon’s full. A good sign, don’t you think, Star?” the Queen asked as we were together in her tree house. Eager voices outside, shouted and celebrated, but it seemed a world away. It was an hour before the ceremony was due to start.

“Yes,” I agreed. There were some flowers sitting in a vase at her table and I pointed to them, curious to what they were.

“They’re all poisonous, though you wouldn’t know just by looking at them, would you? That’s a lupin.” She pointed at one which was a showy, solid stem of deep purple flowers. “This one’s an enchanter’s night shade.” It had cute, understated flowers. I guess deadly things didn’t always look it. “Back to more important matters. Did you prepare anything special to wear for tonight, the ceremony and the dance after?”

“No. I had a few ideas, but I couldn’t pull them off in time,” I lied.

“You can’t go like that, not as my companion, nor as my sister. What will everyone think? Here, take this,” she said, positioning our mother’s cloak round my shoulders.

“Thanks,” I said. I drew my wings through the cloak and secured it around my neck by knotting together the cloak’s cords. She stroked the shoulder of it. It was clearly precious to her. “I’ll look after it,” I said.

“There are some things happening tonight that you might not like. But justice is something which is,” she paused, choosing her words, “necessary. You mustn’t worry yourself. Everyone will be there to watch. Most have already seen a sacrifice before.”

My throat dried. A sacrifice? It wasn’t with one of those children, was it?

“The other fairies. They’re not afraid. Don’t you be. It’s only a bit of blood. When I, when we have the Power of Ages, no one needs to be sacrificed again,” she said, smiling.

I wondered what was in her thoughts. I knew from last night that all the power was for her. What was she going to do with it?

“Spark will look after you,” she commented. “Humans always destroy things they don’t understand. Remember that, Star,” the Queen said, flicking out my fringe with her fingers, trying to make me more presentable. Even just a brush of her fingers was colder than usual.

I smiled at her touch, but shuddered inside. How much of our relationship was fake? Was she telling the truth that we were sisters or was she just playing with my emotions? I knew I was different from the other fairies somehow and in some ways, I was like her, though I couldn’t ignore human life.

However far removed they were from us, humans were akin to us. They resembled us in appearance: fairies without wings, deprived, caged and dejected. Almost like their souls had been lost. They looked so much like us, but weren’t us. I had to keep that in mind. Humans weren’t the same. They lived, they died, but they had no magic, no communion with the trees, with nature and the real meaning of life. They were like dust in the wind.

\* \* \*

I followed the Queen and her guards to the foreboding, rock altar.

She guided me to my place next to Spark. I felt such dread in my stomach, that I could hardly move. We weren’t really going to sacrifice a human, were we? I was chilled to the bone and my teeth chattered. Fairies stood behind us, as far as the eye could see, lit by a ring of fire lanterns up in the tree branches around the edge of the glade. I spotted Bell and Violet in the crowd. Guards dotted through the red-clothed, ordinary fairies. Round the other side of the mound stood an assembly of children, boxed in by more guards.

The Queen clenched my chin in her hands, saying, “It’ll be alright, Sister. Smile.”

I barely tried, but it didn’t matter as the Queen’s gaze fell on some guards flying their human prisoner, a girl, through the trees. Her hair was greasy, and it looked like a faded blue stain ran down her hair pin stripes. She didn’t have a red coat or a ball now and the rest of her clothes were dusty, but I could tell, it was the same girl who has been in the prison. The girl’s hands were bound and she screamed as she saw us all, staring at her intently.

The girl wailed and kicked, midair trying to get away. The two guards lowered her down to the centre of the mound and tied her to the rock. When she saw me, she called out “Stacy! Stacy! Help!” Other fairies were surprised and looked over at me. The Queen floated to the top of the mound.

“No!” the girl cried.

“She’s not your friend. She’s a fairy,” the Queen said. “It’s time you were gagged.” One of the guards had a rag which he handed to the Queen. She gagged the girl. The guards departed on foot, brushing past me as they forced their way into the crowd on foot.

Another two guards shortly descended from the sky and a hush fell over the crowd, as the first one presented the Queen with the same spell book she had shown me when I had first become her companion. A dagger sat on top. At the sight of the dagger, the Queen smiled. I was hit with a strong wave of nausea. The Queen seized the dagger with one hand and the spell book with the other. The second guard then set down a clay jar on the rock to one side of the girl. The Queen opened the spell book and rested it on the side closest to her. The guards left.

The children that she had gathered to watch, looked down as the ceremony began. The girl shook uncontrollably and her eyes were wide with panic, but the fairies looked on unconcerned. The Queen’s face was set like flint to the dark night’s sky. Soon it would be over. Soon she would have the power. Power to do what? I surveyed the crowd of fairies. Oh, why didn’t any look distraught? Didn’t they care if someone died? Even if she was a human, she didn’t deserve death. The Queen began shouting the spell:

“Ashes from ashes,

Dust from stardust

Man on the earth

Ready for his death–”

I thought the Queen said this sacrifice would be the last to die, but she said “man,” like she was talking about the whole human race dying at her hands. Wasn’t one enough? Why did she want to destroy them all? She said humans destroyed everything, but she wasn’t any better.

“No!” I said, stepping forward. “You can’t do that. You can’t kill her and you can’t kill the rest of them,” I said, confused. The Queen and Spark said nothing. I stared into the unacknowledging faces of the crowd behind me. Violet and Bell wove their way through it to stand by my side and give me support.

“It’s OK,” said Violet, gently. “It has to happen,” she added, stroking my arm.

“No. It’s not OK,” I said to Violet. To the Queen I shouted, “You can’t!”

“Be quiet,” Spark said, but the Queen had already heard.

“Can’t I?” the Queen yelled.

“It’s wrong,” I said.

“Shut up, shut up!” Spark warned, but I wasn’t paying him any heed.

“I knew I had to watch you,” the Queen growled. “I thought you might try something like this. But you can’t do anything to stop me.” She reached inside a pocket on her wavering dress and unfolded a piece of paper. “I found this in the wizard’s lodge, under his chair. He didn’t even have a chance to give it to you. He must have been writing it the morning he died,” she said. She then started to read the letter in a loud mocking tone:

“Star, if you are reading this then the time has come for you to know that you’re not what you think you are. Do you remember your old name? Stacy? Please remember. It might be the only trigger that does. Think Stacy, now do you remember who you were? The girl who was drawn towards me and the fairy realm, though you didn’t know why? You are the only one who can stop Elantra, the Queen. You have the power–”

The Queen broke off with a distasteful smile. “Foolish wizard. You don’t even remember, do you? Ha! Read the rest if you want. I don’t care. It’s all dross. Just don’t get in the way.” Effortlessly, she glided down from the mound. She stared at me coldly, before handing the letter to me.

My hands shook as I took it. I had been so sure of myself, that I couldn’t imagine another life, but now one was frantically knocking on my door, asking me to stop the Queen. I couldn’t focus on anything. I needed to act now and yet I needed to know who I was.

The Queen returned to the top of the mound. The clay jar scraped on the rough surface of the rock as she protectively dragged it closer to her. I still didn’t know what was inside it, but I knew it was essential to her plan.

The Queen began chanting her spell again, louder and faster, as I began to read, squinting and stumbling over the words in the wizard’s letter to me. Under the light of the flickering fire lanterns around the glade, I read:

Star was your first name, the name you never knew until I called you by it. Don’t be angry, but you were adopted, you had to be. You were never meant to be this close to Elantra, the Queen. But now I see you are the only one who can stop her. Try to remember what you did before you woke as a fairy–

I dropped the letter. I couldn’t remember anything before waking up as a fairy nor what I had done. I held my head in my hands, wracking my brains. Was it to do with killing him? No?

“Are you OK?” said Violet, “What’s wrong?” She positioned her arm round my shoulder, but I shrugged it off.

“You can’t be fine with this,” I said to Violet and Bell. “She’s killing someone up there. Imagine if it was one of you being killed.”

“So? They’re humans,” said Violet.

“They’re alive. You don’t kill the birds or the trees. Why humans?” I asked.

Bits of my life before came back, like slivers of light: The wizard in the wood, how he had called me and caught me. I remembered the mistaken wonder of the fairy kingdom and how some things didn’t add up in it… But what did I have to do now to stop her?

“They destroy the woods–” said Violet with the usual excuse.

“You are humans,” I said cutting her short, suddenly remembering a bit more from my past.

I stared at the pair of them, and they stared back, gobsmacked, but Bell understood. I could see the strong connection in her eyes, like the flash of lightening, with the thunder following not far behind. Something of her old life came back then.

“…Ready for his death,” the Queen said, for the second time, on the verge of lowering the dagger. I tried to run forwards to stop her, but Spark wrestled my arms behind me.

Bell scrabbled up the mound. She reached halfway, before the Queen threw her into the air with her magic. A few fairies in the crowd dodged her body and Bell fell unconscious on the ground.

Violet let out a gasp, afraid of the Queen’s awesome power. She ran over to Bell’s motionless body. So did Squirrel, who I hadn’t noticed had come up to the front of the crowd. Crystal and Ivy were close by too, though they ran towards a group of guards, to help reinforce them. They were now assembling around the base of the mound.

Violet lifted Bell’s head on to her knees and was checking for signs of life. Squirrel looked worried. The crowd had created an empty space around them, no one wanting to stand close to the traitors.

Out of the jar, ash floated up and around the altar and the glade. It drifted like a black snow settling on a near dead world. The ash’s pungent smell triggered a cascade of images and memories that hit my conscience with the intensity of beating wings. Last of all, the sights and sounds of killing a white deer attacked and overwhelmed my senses, making me want to hurl. I tasted bile. No, it was a hart not a deer I had killed. Now I knew what had to happen. Bower had said I couldn’t save the sacrifice, that this death had to take place.

I no longer fought Spark’s grasp, but as the Queen plunged her dagger through the girl’s chest, I whimpered in pain along with the girl, hot tears coming to my eyes. I hated myself. The hardest thing was to let it happen. Would I relive this night for the rest of my life? I convulsed with a horrified shudder.

Then the girl’s body was still as blood poured out from it in rivulets down on to the mound.

With blood on her bosom and a fleck on her cheek, the Queen resumed, after a defiant glare at me. She yanked the dagger out of the girl’s body, as if delivering one last injury, and she rested the blood-covered weapon beside the girl. The Queen shouted:

“Wizard in the sky

Lower the Guardians on high,

Take away God’s light,

Make it forever night!”

The spell seemed to be going too well. I had done everything right, hadn’t I? Why hadn’t the hart’s magic stopped the Queen already? A stray piece of ash settled on my lashes and I flinched as I shook it off.

The fire lanterns extinguished one by one around the glade as if the spell was drawing their energy too. Spooked starlings, sparrows, blackbirds and magpies, all rose squawking from the trees end masse, flying as quickly away from the wood as possible. The ash began to fly just around the Queen, encircling wildly, a dark tempest. Her face appeared victorious, yet her eyes were empty and hollow. Through the fierce swirling eye of the storm, where the Queen was standing, the stars looked like they were being drawn closer with their fiery orange glow. The universe’s fire was about to be snapped up into one being. The trees surrounding the glade were lit in orange and red colours and underneath each billow of light and wind, darkness gathered.

Several of the fairies within the crowd were transfixed, their faces lit with naïve smiles. A larger number of the fairies were running away, screaming, into the woods.

“What’s happening?” Toad had rushed to the front of the crowd and shouted at Crystal, tugging at her. But when she didn’t respond, Toad shook his head, turned and ran.

“Make her stop!” Squirrel wailed, unsure whether to follow Toad or stay behind and protect Bell and Violet.

The children, forced to watch, were horrified too, but one by one, the guards abandoned their posts, and the children ran off unchecked, until all of them, guards and children, had bolted off into the trees. Many of the guards around the mound also abandoned their posts.

Spark forced me to bow down at this impressive display of the Queen’s power, though he didn’t notice that there was only a handful of them left, including Crystal and Ivy.

The stars tore and tore, until they looked like they would drop out of the sky and into the Queen’s open palm. She opened her mouth and began sucking in the surrounding ash to join with the ash of her veins.

Suddenly, she retched and gagged like an embarrassed cat caught coughing up a fur ball. She dropped to her knees, a confused expression on her face, as she watched the stars finally catapult back up to their places, like the power was too much for her to possess.

Astonished, Spark frowned, letting his grip loosen enough that I was able to break free and rush up to the top of the mound. I approached the altar. Crystal and Ivy had knelt down and were only just now getting to their feet, annoyed they couldn’t stop me in time.

“What’s happening?” the Queen hissed. “What have *you* done?” She wore a look of surprise on her face. “You haven’t been a fairy for long. How could you possibly judge me?”

“No,” I choked, tears streaming down my face. “You chose this. I could have loved you, but I won’t let you hurt them anymore.” I raised Bower’s ashes, my resolve steel despite the pain. She was my sister, but she’d buried her heart in blood. As her eyes met mine, a flicker of regret passed through them, but it was too late. I had to end this, for the kids, for our parents, for the girl she’d never be again. “You thought you were invincible.” I plucked out the blue pouch from my pocket.

She looked between the pouch in my hand and the jar on the altar, as the realisation dawned on her that the ashes she’d used were not Bower’s.

Her answer was unexpected. “I am invincible,” she replied. She reached out for the pouch using her magic.

Even though I was caught off guard by the pull, I held on to it firmly. I clasped my other hand around the pouch too and swore as I was dragged forwards. “No! I won’t let you win!” I cried, but what could I do? She was so strong.

She stood up triumphantly, as the distance between us closed rapidly. Oh, no! She was going to acquire Bower’s ashes after all!

I spotted the dagger on the rock, still lying beside the sacrificed girl on the altar. With my magic, I called out to it and aimed it at the Queen’s back and torso where she wasn’t fading away.

“What the…” she exclaimed in surprise as the knife lodged in her back and she dropped her arm. A sickening smile spread on her face. A smile that could defang a poisonous snake, it was that sinister.

I remembered what she’d said about me, the day she killed Bower, that I was just a human. The memories were still coming back fresh and painful.

“I’m not just a human. But you are just a fairy and I’m not afraid of you anymore, sister!” I choked with the emotion, my throat and lungs painfully burning with it, before relief flooded my body in quick succession. I knew who I was.

She lurched forwards. “Star,” she whispered, tears spilling down her cheeks. “After all this time… Why?” Her voice broke, raw with love and agony, and my heart splintered, aching for the sister I’d never had. The sister I’d lost.

I reached for her arm to steady her, but there was nothing to hold on to. Was she so weak, she could no longer command her substance at will, not even for a few moments?

“Why couldn’t you see it my way?” She curled up on the floor and I wanted to hold her in my arms. But I couldn’t even do that. Tear stung my eyes. “I’m sorry,” I said. “It wasn’t meant to be this way.”

“You’ve killed her!” Spark shrieked and ran to the opposite side of her lying body. He too couldn’t touch her.

“No, I…” I was scared. Was she dying? Fear and shock stopped my streaming tears. As her body transformed, I thought I heard voices, whispering softly on the wind ever so faintly, “Thank you.”

In the Queen’s place, the hart took form, its white, small flank replacing her clothes and body. The dagger clattered to the ground. Her wings were the only part of her that didn’t completely vanish. They shrunk in size and lost their dark veins, but they were still clearly fairy wings, her wings. It was then that I remembered what Bower had said, that the Queen’s spirit would be cleansed and absorbed by the hart. I didn’t know what to make of her last words.

“No, no. This can’t happen. The Queen, where is she?” said Spark, totally confused.

The hart stood up, perfect and white in the moonlight, shaking on its legs. It stretched its newly acquired wings and they shimmered. “Ah, cute!” I pointed towards the animal. “She’s there.” The hart mewed and for once it sounded less like an animal and more like a little girl being overheard singing a made-up tune. I smiled, certain the innocent part of her had been saved. “Can’t you hear her? Can’t you hear my sister?”

“What? Where’s the Queen?” Spark asked again.

I ignored him and turned towards what was left of the crowd, but no one was paying attention. The fairies” wings dissolved, revealing trembling children. Violet, Bell, Crystal, Ivy, their eyes wide with confusion and fear. The Queen’s magic had shattered with her transformation into the hart, stripping away the lie that had stolen their childhoods. I choked on a sob, my heart breaking for them, for the innocence she’d twisted into her army. The ones who’d fled into the trees stumbled back, now children too, their voices a rising chorus of bewildered questions: “Where am I?” “What happened?” I stood frozen, their fear echoing my own, knowing I’d almost lost myself to her too. When I next looked back at Spark, in his place was a spotty young boy with a big nose. He was still kneeling and staring at the hart, but he looked to be only about seven or eight years old. I almost didn’t recognise him. Had I really had a crush on him?

“Spark?” I called.

“What? Who are you?” he asked, finally taking his eyes off the hart. From a distance the hart’s mother stood framed by leafy trees, waiting for the hart to join her. A flick of its tail and it was off, frolicking towards her. It looked strange with its new addition of wings, but its mother snuffled its face and gave the wings a sniff. Then, they were bounding off together into the undergrowth and away.

Something grabbed my arm from behind me. I jumped out of my skin, still jittery and turned around.

Bound hands reached out to me. It couldn’t be. The dead girl was moving. Miya. How was she even alive? It didn’t make sense!

Dazed and confused, I loosened her bonds and untied her gag. She looked just as surprised as I was. Her tears had made tracks in the dirt on her face. There was blood around her chest, but as she poked through her torn clothing with a finger, there was no wound to speak of. It had healed! We laughed with joy and I hugged her, overcome with emotion.

As I let go and looked back at the glade, a few of the children who weren’t looking around at their confused neighbours, stared opened mouthed at me. I realised they were staring at my wings. I was the odd one out, now, though my clothes had lost their glamour. What was I going to do? The potion. Of course. Bower had given me a potion which would make me look like a human.

I ran into the wood, brushing past some of the confused children, until I was out of their sight. I then flew hastily, only stopping to gather my pyjamas and the telescope from the tree house, before heading towards the tree, where I hoped my secret stash was still safely hiding. I dug up the earth. It was crumbly and soft and cleared easily, but still, I was digging deeper than expected. Where was it? Had someone else found it? Then, I spotted the familiar lid.

I opened the box of potions and drank a few sips of the vial which Bower had put aside for me.

“Aaah!” I cried out as I recoiled in pain and nearly dropped the open vial. It was a strange sensation like gossamer silk brushing against and cupping my heart and I gasped as my fading wings touched the epicentre of my being. Then everything returned to normal.

Bower’s ashes were still in my pocket in the blue pouch. I dropped them into the hole after the box with the leftover potion. I took off the cloak and I didn’t know whether I should put my pyjamas on. Other children were in the same situation as me with torn clothing that wasn’t their own. I decided to use my pyjamas to protect the cloak and the telescope. I wrapped them into a loose parcel on top. I quickly covered it all up with earth, hoping it wouldn’t be found. It was safer here than on me. It was time to go home.

I ran until I was out of breath and walked the rest of the way. I headed towards the sound of children’s voices. Other children too were still making their way out of the trees to meet with the noisy group. I blended in easily.

There was a crowd forming around Bell’s body and Violet was now standing over her, her eyes wide. As I approached, she asked, “Please, can you help? What’s wrong with her? Why won’t she move?”

I dropped to my knees in a hurry and leant in to hear if Bell was breathing. Shoot! I’d forgotten all about her. If she wasn’t breathing it was all my fault. Squirrel was standing nearby.

Bell’s breathing was faint. “She’s unconscious,” I said. “She needs an ambulance. Go! Quickly! She needs help!” I shouted to Violet, as I pointed to the way out of the wood. Violet took off at a run and Squirrel urgently scrambled after her.

## Chapter

When my parents saw me for the first time at the police station, they wore such goofy grins. I probably wore a goofy grin too, I was just so excited to see them. I had missed them so much. I dived headlong into a joint hug with both of them.

“Stacy, you’re alive!” Mum said.

“Yeah Mum. I’m alive.”

“Hi, Stace. Are you OK, Kiddo?” asked Dad, ruffling my hair. He hadn’t called me Kiddo in years.

I nodded.

“Are you hurt? Are you hungry?” asked Mum.

“No. A bit hungry though,” I responded. Talking into her chest, my voice sounded mumbled.

“What did you say?” Mum asked.

I looked up into their smiling faces and repeated myself.

“Are you cold?” asked Dad. “You’re shivering.”

“I’m all right now,” I replied. “The station’s quite warm.”

“What are you wearing and why on earth have you tears in the back of your top? asked Dad.

I shrugged and Mum said, “Oh, it doesn’t matter. She’s back with us now. That’s all we care about.”

Mum continued to hold me in her arms in disbelief, her hugs squeezing and a bit over the top, while Dad gave a few of their details to an officer.

We were shepherded towards a private room and introduced to an officer for my statement to be taken. Mum stopped hugging me for a minute or two.

“My name is Constable Deepings, but you can call me Jenny. Please sit down,” she said to me, pointing to a chair across from her.

I sat down.

“And that’s Hugh.” Jenny pointed to another police officer who had stepped into the room at the last minute.

Hugh shut the door behind himself and the noisy commotion of the busy police station subsided. He stood close to my parents and had a notepad in one of his hands. He waved at me and said, “Hello.”

“Don’t worry. We won’t be long,” Jenny said. “I’m just going to ask some questions and Hugh will be over there taking notes. OK?”

I nodded.

“Do you know why you and the other children were there?” Jenny, the officer asked.

I shook my head.

“Or why you were being held?”

“No. I’ve no idea,” I said.

“Do you remember any other locations?” Jenny had her hair tied in a relaxed bun. The top few buttons of her collared uniform were loose.

“No. Just the wood,” I said.

“Nope,” Hugh said, as he extracted a scrunched tissue and a packet of mints from one of his trouser pockets. He too was in uniform and appeared to be looking for something on his person. “Sorry,” he said to no one in particular, then, “Ah, ha!” as he found a pen in the pocket of his other trouser leg.

Jenny continued. “The same wood where you were found?”

“Yeah,” I replied. Hugh began to write notes scratchily on to his paper pad.

“You don’t remember anything else? A name? A face?” she asked. The scratching on the pad paused.

Jenny had kind, warm eyes and for an instant, I wanted to tell her everything. But, no. She’d never believe me. The Queen, Bower. What did it matter? There was nothing they could trace in those names. Neither had a physical body anymore. There was no proof either had ever been alive.

“No,” I said.

“Were you at any point attacked or harassed?” she asked.

Dad raised an eyebrow.

“It’s important to ask in case we need to press charges, should we find any assailants or obstructors of justice,” she explained to them.

I paused and, raising my eyes to the corner of the room, thought about it. Even if the other children didn’t remember much, they might still remember being captured.

“Yes,” I said. Mum hid her head in Dad’s shoulder. Even the suggestion of violence was too much for her.

“I know it’s hard, but try to tell us about it,” Jenny asked.

It was difficult to know what to say. “I was pushed around, shoved. Then I fell and they tied my hands and dragged me through the trees,” I said.

“Did you see a face?”

“No,” I said.

“Anything else?”

I almost died, I wanted to add, but didn’t. How could I be that self-obsessed when there were children that had died? Their families might never know if they were missing or dead. I wondered where the bodies were buried. I assumed buried and not burned because most of the sacrifices were decreed by the Queen, simply because she could. There wasn’t enough cash to make it worthwhile. Perhaps there lay a body underneath the gnarled roots of a tree and deep in the undergrowth maybe another. Dark secrets that could stay hidden.

If asked to identify the girl who was sacrificed on the first night I had entered the fairy realm, I wouldn’t have been able to. It all seemed so long ago. And who knows how many more unknown children may have been somewhere in that wood? Would the police ever find them?

“I think there might be some children dead,” I said.

“How do you know?” Jenny asked, glancing at Hugh. My parents shared a look of horror too.

“Well, I heard screaming,” I said, cautiously.

“And how often did you hear screaming?” Jenny asked.

“A few times,” I replied.

“And exactly how long were you there for, Stacy?”

“I don’t remember.”

“So, you remember being taken when you were in the wood, and you remember waking up in the wood?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said.

“And how did you know one of the girls needed medical assistance?” she asked.

“Oh, it was just common sense,” I responded. Dad beamed proudly in my direction, the same way he did when I received good grades.

“One of the children said you rallied around her and organised what needed doing?” she asked.

“Um. She was lying on the ground, unconscious,” I muttered.

“And your kidnappers were gone at that point?” Jenny asked.

“Yes.”

“I have a question for you,” said Hugh. “At any point did you see fairies?” Jenny glared at him, surprised he would even ask it.

“No,” I lied.

“OK. You can go,” said Jenny.

\* \* \*

My parents hugged me again before they said goodnight. I think Mum would have followed me into my bedroom, had I not extracted my hand from hers and said, “See you in the morning, Mum, Dad.”

Mum looked like she was about to cry, but I didn’t have the energy for more drama tonight. It had felt like a long day.

“Have a goodnight, Kiddo,” Dad said.

I shut my bedroom door. The curtain was open and from outside the moonlight shone in. I didn’t turn on the light in the room, but I sat down on the edge of my bed and tried to forget the questions at the police station that now kept playing over and over in my mind. It was the first minute I’d had to myself for hours and I sighed, relieved at last.

Everything looked just how I left it with a stack of unpacked boxes piled high on one side of the room.

I hadn’t thought of Bower for a while, not enough to really acknowledge his death. But now, in the dark of my room, I did. Slow and heavy, the tears dropped on to the un-glamoured clothes the Queen had given to me. I was so tired that I’d only managed to have a quick wash to remove the surface grime, I could still smell the ash. I would have a proper wash soon. Tomorrow, most likely, but not tonight.

After a while, I stood up and stared at the stars, eager that Bower would soon be able to join them. What did it mean to lose someone close to you? This was the first time for me. Did my fairy parents count? Now that I had seen their faces in the Queen’s court, even if it was when they were younger, their loss seemed tangible, real and solid. Was it little more than wishful thinking that I had assumed it was them? I sighed, my chest heavy with the weight of two worlds–one human, one fairy, neither fully mine. Sinking into the soft mattress, I felt the ache of Bower’s absence, the ghost of my sister’s betrayal, and the fragile hope of my parents” love. As sleep claimed me, the last few weeks blurred into dreams, but the truth of who I was clung to me, sharp and unyielding.

## Chapter

There had been so much police activity that when I woke in the morning and looked out of my bedroom window, I could see multiple police cars parked and lining up just down the street from us. And when I tiptoed downstairs, my parents were already up and had shut some of the curtains trying to hide all the police’s commotion from me. Mum and Dad, my foster parents, although I wouldn’t ever call them that out loud, were acting unusually kind and I think they would have given me a fry up if there had been more food in the fridge.

It was a Saturday. Dad didn’t go to football practice as usual. Apparently, he had given up going quite early on since my disappearance. Mum and Dad just sat and stared at me as I downed as much cereal as I could eat. I had missed cornflakes and even the milk which I had once thought of as bland was heaven in my mouth.

“Jas phoned every day since you were missing. She seemed really happy to find out you were OK this morning,” said Mum.

“You’ve heard from her?” I asked, surprised.

“She mentioned something about a fight? She’s really sorry.”

“No, Mum. You’re not apologising for her. If she wants to say sorry she’s going to have to do it herself.”

After breakfast, it fell to Dad to leave the inner sanctum that my unexpected presence seemed to have become and to re-stock the fridge. I said I’d take a bath and left Mum to tidy the kitchen.

I sunk into the warm foam of bubbles and inhaled the steam. It was so good to feel clean. I had poured in way too much and when I emerged all crinkly and tired, I stunk overwhelmingly like someone who had bathed in a factory’s worth of bubble bath.

I looked around some of the upstairs rooms, as if I wanted to take in the detail, but I still missed our old house.

My parents bedroom was wide open and I peered in. I couldn’t help thinking of when I’d wanted to crawl into their bed with them and how, even as a fairy, I’d found myself drawn to them.

I was still so sleepy. I lay down on their bed in my dressing gown and with a towel wrapped around my wet hair, I dropped off.

I woke, hearing my parents downstairs, shuffling in the kitchen with an occasional rustle of bags. It still felt strange to be waking up in this house.

As I descended the stairs, I could hear Mum’s voice say, “She seems quiet.”

“Give her a few days. It’ll pass. I think she’s suffering from shock.”

I didn’t want them to know I’d overheard them, nor did I want them to be concerned for me.

I parked myself on the couch in the living room and turned on the TV. It showed the news channel, and a reporter was talking.

“In Sussex, hundreds of children were released in what was thought to be a mass kidnapping operation. Police believe that an underground organisation had some kind of power struggle. Details are, as yet, unclear, but it seems that the gang’s leaders may have died, resulting in the release of the victims to a wood. No trace of these gang leaders has been found so far.” Was this report about me?

Mum rushed in through the living room door. “Oh Stacy, sweetie, you shouldn’t be watching that!” But she drew close, sitting down beside me, and listened to it too, just as glued to it as I was.

“The Chief Constable believed it to be a well-run operation as none of the children remember their kidnappers, nor what happened to them during their ordeal. He also said some may have been drugged, bound and held captive in cramped, dark conditions for days or weeks, causing them to hallucinate and experience delusions. Toxicology revealed trace signs of psilocybin, more commonly known as magic mushrooms.”

“Drugs!” Mum exclaimed. “Nobody mentioned this at the police station. Ryan, come and watch this.”

“What?” Dad opened the kitchen door. He was halfway through a bag of crisps and stopped munching as he heard the report. A crisp fell out of his mouth as his jaw dropped and his eyes widened.

“The investigation is still underway and police have cordoned off the area near St. Hilda’s wood.”

“That’s here! No wonder there were some right wackos parking all over the pavements and the road this morning. I only just managed to get the car out. They basically boxed me in.”

“Quiet.” Mum shushed him, gesturing with her hand.

On the TV, a reporter was being filmed standing outside the wooden fence on the outskirts of the wood. It was overrun with blue and white “do not cross” police tape. A couple of police officers stood guarding the perimeter behind her. In a snappy news tone, she said, “We are at the scene now, where many children were thought to have been dumped after a kidnapping operation went wrong. Police believe they were victims of a unique gang involved in child trafficking–”

“What!” my parents both exclaimed at the same time.

“–unusually, taking children from British homes all over the country and smuggling them overseas. It is thought the abducted children were to be sold to rich individuals in third world countries who could then use them as household slaves or for British child porn–”

“No! This isn’t right.” Mum muted the TV and rested the remote control on her lap. “We shouldn’t be having the police report disclosed to us like this. Child porn?”

I almost laughed, it was so far from the truth. I sunk lower on the couch, not wanting to give myself away.

“No,” Dad agreed. “You know, I think I’m going to complain. They should have told us parents all of this first. We shouldn’t be finding it out via the TV.”

“Perhaps they wanted to get a report out quickly and stop people on social media coming up with their own theories,” Mum suggested.

“But it really isn’t on,” Dad responded. “I don’t care if they create a circus out of it, it’s our little girl.”

I sat in silence as tears suddenly pricked and swam in my eyes. Inside, my chest burned hot. They did care. Of course they cared. The TV displayed a clip from inside a hospital ward. Across the bottom of the screen, the banner said “One child remains in hospital. Their condition is believed to be stable.” Bell. It had to be her. I dried my eyes.

“Do you remember anything more, Stacy? A face or anything? I know we’ve been through this with the police already, but it’s important,” Mum said, stroking my arm affectionately.

I didn’t look her in the eyes, and was instead distracted by another banner across the screen, “Police unable to identify all children’s families. Some children taken into care.”

“Stacy?” Mum asked again.

“No. Nothing Mum.” She would never believe me if I said our kidnappers were children disguised as fairies and that, in fact, I was a fairy myself. No one would believe how close the world had come to ending.

## Chapter

“That’ll be Jas,” said Mum.

“What!” Suddenly my stomach felt rammed with a hundred and one butterflies desperate to escape. Mum had sprung a visit on me. That explained why Dad had suddenly retreated to the kitchen to “read the paper” a moment ago.

Mum looked out through the window beside the front door. She said, “And it looks like her mum is joining us too. You don’t mind, do you?”

“Yes,” I started. I wanted to run past Mum and up to my room, but she was already opening the front door. I couldn’t escape now without looking like a coward.

“Oh my! This is a nice surprise!” Mum said through a broad smile. Why had she taken it upon herself to invite them? I stood stock still like an animal trapped in headlights, wishing I was anywhere but here.

Jas glanced at me briefly and then looked away. She was hopping from leg to leg. Was she anxious?

“Why don’t you two talk?” said Harmony, Jas’s mum, as she pushed her daughter forward into the room, before following closely behind.

I pawed the carpet with my sock and looked away as Jas came over to join me. Could this day get any worse? What did our mums gain from watching us two baulk at each other? But neither of them said anything else. Mum closed the front door and Jas’s mum raised an eyebrow as I prepared myself for whatever Jas might say.

“Look,” started Jas. “Look. I’m *really really* sorry,” she said with a pleading gesture.

I sighed loudly and looked away again.

“I mean it. Please don’t shut me out,” Jas pleaded.

“But that’s what you did to me,” I said instinctively and annoyed.

“I know and I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have said those things. I don’t want to be like that. Please don’t blame Anjali. It wasn’t her fault.”

“But Anjali went along with it. She didn’t even try standing up for me,” I said.

“That’s because she was worried about me.” She didn’t need to mention her suicide attempt last year. We were both thinking it. “We could have–” she reached for a word and then changed her mind. “*I* could have handled it better. I’m the one to blame. I behaved cruel and catty.”

“That’s one way to put it!” If our parents weren’t standing right over us, she wouldn’t have been so mild in her choice of words. I nodded as tears pricked my eyes.

“Can we be friends again?” she asked.

“I’d like that,” I said, nodding. “Though you’re still not quite forgiven, I said, folding my arms and trying to look annoyed through the wry smile I couldn’t suppress. “You were beastly!”

“Rawr!” Jas gestured with one of her hands like scratching claws. We both exploded with nervous giggles and I spotted Jas’s Mum relaxing her smile behind her.

“I know. I’m sorry.” She hugged me, with a dramatic gleeful noise, squeezing me like Mum did. “We thought you were dead or something. Your mum told us what happened. Did you get any of our messages?”

I nearly nodded, misremembering the occasion when I thought I had received a text from her. “No,” I replied, quietly. It was going to be hard holding it all back from her.

“I sent messages and Anjali did too.”

“No, sorry. I didn’t get them.”

“Anjali wanted to come today, too, but I didn’t want you to feel crowded, you know.” We stopped and overheard what our mums were now saying to each other.

“Are you OK, Clara?” Jas’s mum asked mine, but she continued talking, not waiting for my mum to reply. “I can’t even imagine what it must have been like to go through. It must have been awful. To think it was happening all so close to you too.”

“It was awful,” Mum replied.

“Do you think you’ll move again?” Jas’s mum then asked.

Dad interrupted their conversation, as he entered the hall, his tablet in his hand. He had an online subscription for one of the newspapers. “Hi Harmony, I don’t think we need to take such drastic measures. The police said that when a network like this is exposed, they never return to the scene of the crime. Stacy will be safe now.”

They noticed us listening to them and made a point of walking out of earshot into the kitchen.

“Are you still going to the new school?” asked Jas.

“Looks like it,” I said.

“I know it’ll be different. We might not be best friends always, but that’s something I need to accept.”

“Something I need to accept too. You could move on without me.” I sighed.

“No.”

“You could.”

“No,” she insisted.

## Chapter

The moon hung like a Chinese lantern, low and bright over the houses, as I slipped out into the night. I ran to the wood, ducked under the blue and white tape and bolted through the trees, only stopping to catch my breath before leaping over the stream. The trees and undergrowth cast eerie shadows from a head torch I had borrowed as I hurried past them. Apart from the tape left behind, there was no more police activity, but I still had to ensure I wasn’t missed at home.

While waiting for the police activity to die down over the previous few weeks, I had flicked through the news channels when my parents weren’t looking. The police, it seemed, had found very little. A few bodies had been uncovered, but there was no mention of discovering any of the structures, the tree houses, Bower’s home, the Queen’s court or the altar where the sacrifices had taken place. Perhaps the Queen’s power was still strong enough to hide them all from prying eyes.

I didn’t like keeping so many secrets, but if I told my parents the complete truth, how would they react? Good grief, Mum would burst into tears, thinking I was delusional and needed psychological help. Maybe I did, but not for the reasons she thought.

Psychologists on the TV reports said that some of the children could need counselling for many years to come. Others said the children had created fantasies about fairies as a way to block out painful memories. There wasn’t a lot I could do or say to stop it, unless I wanted to join them.

I had only seen my neighbour, Miya, the once since it happened, playing with her football outside. Her Mum had worried called her in and shut the door behind her.

I rushed through the sacrificial glade, but as soon as I saw the altar, I froze, all the memories of bloodshed upon that rock flooding my mind. I hurried and closed the open book, the Book of Knowledge, which had been left to lie there, its magic protecting the pages from the weather. I took the book with me and continued down the path that led to the tree houses, went past the Queen’s court and carried on towards the tree I had stashed away some of my things under.

I threw myself on to my knees and dug up the earth, the head torch I had borrowed coming into its element now.

I unearthed the cloak, the telescope, Bower’s ashes, the box and other paraphernalia. I opened the box and, resting my back against the tree, I reached inside it for the letter. It was addressed “To Star,” on the front and I wondered what Bower had to say.

As I opened the envelope, a carved, wooden cross fell out from between some sheets of paper along with an acorn. An extremely fine string attached the acorn and cross together into a necklace charm. I was certain that the cross, at least, had belonged to my mother. It matched the one I had seen in my vision in the Queen’s court as she danced with my father. I unfolded the letter. It said:

Dear Star,

I’m sorry I didn’t tell you before, but I thought it might make you think twice before stopping Elantra. She is your sister. When it became apparent that your sister could pose a danger to you, your parents sought my advice and they asked me to take you to a human family out of harm’s way. It wasn’t possible for anyone to watch over you vigilantly, night and day for the rest of your life, no matter how much they loved you. I ensured you were left in the care of a couple who would love you as their own, and I told your parents to act as if you were stillborn so Elantra would never know of your existence.

You might hate me now, but there’s a reason I did it. Elantra’s awful behaviour started with little “accidents” that always ended with bruises and tears. But your parents weren’t around to witness them, so no fingers were pointed at her. Not until one of your siblings drowned in a stream. Your parents were returning from visiting some friends when they found him there, unresponsive and face down in the water. Elantra was supposed to be looking after him, but when they approached her, she said, “I saved him from this world,” as if she was doing him a mercy.

Your parents forgave her. It wasn’t easy, but she was one of their own, so they gave her a second chance. Then your other sister was poisoned by one of my potions. Your parents wrongfully blamed me for quite some time, though I admit that I should have hidden them, as I had already begun to suspect Elantra, but I just didn’t think it would actually happen. She was learning to hide her shameful deeds from everyone.

When your other brother, the only remaining sibling in your family besides Elantra, was found with his wings ripped off and his body beaten, your parents finally accepted that it was Elantra all along, though your brother was too scared to speak out and accuse her. He was so broken in spirit that he turned away from everyone, refused to eat and drink anything, and died a few weeks later.

I’m sorry you had to experience another sacrifice. Blame it on me if it makes it any easier, but it had to be done. I wish it could have turned out differently, Stacy, and that I could have been with you for longer.

You probably want to know more about your parents. They were two loving people, as all fairies are by nature, but they were especially so, more than any other fairies I have ever met my whole life, and I was glad to know them as friends. They loved one another dearly and they loved you so deeply. They could hardly let you go, to be honest.

I haven’t been strong enough to thwart Elantra’s plans and if you are reading this now, I hope with all my troubled heart that you have managed to stop her. Of course you have, otherwise you wouldn’t be reading this. I could not have done it without you.

I pray that whatever happened when my spell on you wore off, did not discourage you from exploring what it is to be a fairy. I know it will be difficult combining your human life with this one. As one who has been living among humans for years, it is your choice if you hang up the newly fledged wings. You may not find much companionship as a fairy now, but even as a human, even looking and seeming human, you will always carry the heart of a fairy and the dreams of your parents. I am proud to have known you, if even for a brief time.

Your friend, Bower

P.S. The cross-necklace is your mother’s. She would have wanted you to have it.

By the way, fairies, beings of the air, don’t like swimming. I don’t know if you’ve ever wondered why you might not like being in water.

I hope you’ll remember all that I told you about dust. You are the only one with that knowledge now. Guard it carefully, and the Book too. I don’t want it falling into the wrong hands.

It ended on that note of warning and I sat thinking it all over, sick to my stomach that my own sister had done all those things. But I was also sick with a strange new feeling, almost mourning the loss of what could have been between us, if circumstances had been different. My breath escaped sporadically and strained. Would ever see her and the hart again?

Opening the Book of Knowledge, I found the spell that would set Bower’s ashes free, the tribute spell, that was what he’d called it. I knew Bower would have liked the idea. To me, the universe was just some huge chasm with no personality. But if he was the last wizard, which no one could know for certain, I was going to honour him as a great one. I thought of Bower and his eyes closing under my fingers. They had peered through dark centuries, without his wife and children. I imagined how they might open again to see the light that he longed for. I unfastened the string of the pouch and sunk my hand among his ashes as if caressing his hand and offering him comfort for the last time. I then started to read the spell out loud:

“Ashes to ashes,

Dust to stardust,

Man into the earth,

Ready for his second birth.

True wizard into the sky

Like a guardian on high

Showing God’s light,

Even in the darkest night.

Least all things be forgot,

They remain, they fade not,

Not into eternity’s blink of an eye,

Where the silence and emptiness cry.

For eternity was planted in their hearts;

Like man, one and the same, and all a part

Of God’s stream of life that knows no end.”

The ash flew up from between my fingers, like grains of sand whispering of a new life. It caught on the wind and vanished into the dark night air. I thought that nothing more would happen and I felt disappointed, even mortified that my power wasn’t strong enough to do even this for him. A few grey clouds hung like rags against a dark blue sky studded with luminous stars. Was some small part of him up there burning on, burning bright? What had I to cling to? It was like clinging to the thought of someone in a foreign land, that they were somehow OK, but never coming back. Had I been foolish to think his star would shine for all eternity?

Then, as if guided by the wind, the few clouds parted. Between the two brightest stars visible, a new star lit up like the opening eye of a wink. I smiled. Bower’s star was up there after all, glowing brighter than all the other stars. “Good night, Bower!” I called out, as if he could hear me all that way away.

There was no way to see him now, except through memory’s fading eye. Bower was young, but he was old, shifting and slipping into something new, his smile absorbed into the bright brilliance of a star.

## Chapter

I woke hearing the rain, dripping from a leak in the gutter outside my window on to the ground below. For a moment, I thought I was back to the miserable days before any of it had happened. In a way, I wanted my life to return to normal, but if things had been normal, I would never have met Bower. I would never have found out who I was. Things had changed.

I smelt pancakes cooking and I smiled. Since I had been back, I had moved into the bigger room and Dad and I had painted the walls a hot pink and assembled a wardrobe and shelving unit. On the shelves, objects representing the years of my human life were laid out. Behind my plethora of photos, were a few mementos and toys in a plastic box from when I was young. I had discovered these before moving. My telly had been set up and, to one side of it was my bestie bear, Mum had saved. Underneath my bed, in the furthest corner where no one but me would look, was a box keeping the lid on my fairy life. Inside it was the letter Bower gave me, the cross and acorn necklace and the cloak that belonged to my real mother, as well as the telescope.

The last few days, I couldn’t stop thinking about my fairy sister, the Queen. What she had trusted couldn’t have helped her and what a lie she had lived. There was no life in that. Maybe she was better off the way she was now.

I stood and stretched in the dim morning light from outside. Slipping my dressing gown on, I opened the curtains to see both cars still on the driveway. Both my parents were here today. Dad had taken to working from home and Mum had reduced her hours and even taken a day off for once. Bouncing down the stairs, I overheard them talking.

“I *think* we’re going to need an extension,” said Mum. I stopped to listen, leaning against the banister.

“Why?” Dad asked.

“I’m *pregnant*!” said Mum. I couldn’t believe it. I sat down on the stairs taking it in.

“What!” Dad said, “Why didn’t you tell me sooner?”

“I only found out this morning,” she said.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes. It was blue,” Mum said. She must have used a home pregnancy test kit. There was silence. Maybe they were kissing.

“I knew we could do it if we kept trying,” Dad finally said.

I didn’t know they were having problems. They had never told me they wanted a baby. Somehow knowing this was like a soothing plaster over a painful wound and it explained, in part, why they had been so uptight before I’d gone missing. I decided not to tell them that I knew I wasn’t theirs, that they weren’t my birth parents. It would no doubt hurt them to even mention it and for them to explain it to me. Not knowing what type of family I had come from would be agony to them. They probably thought rejection was the only reason that anyone would give up a child. They’d never imagine it could be for protection.

If my real parents were alive now, I might have had two families to choose from. Like a home from home, I would have a family from family. Some kids were less lucky than me though. I at least had a family who loved me, yet my ghost parents haunted me and it was strange being part of this whole other world of secrets and perverse things. It wasn’t the fairy part that was perverse. Like Bower had said, fairies were part of the natural world. It was Elantra’s false pretences: killing our parents, killing all the fairies and yet pretending the children of humans, the very people she hated and scorned, were fairies brought to life by her own magic. How she had called them, “my fairies,” was beyond me, but all that killing and for what? It didn’t save the trees, the woods, the forests. They could only be saved by the children growing into adults, learning to respect nature and protect it for future generations. Revenge would have only destroyed everything. With the stars extinguished from the sky and the sun gone, all the plants would have withered and died and, slowly, all that would have been left would have starved and died too without food.

I carried on down the stairs, taking two at a time. I crossed the hallway and headed towards the kitchen. Its door was ajar and I was about to push it open when I heard more.

“When’s it due?” Dad asked.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen a doctor yet,” Mum said.

“Wahey!” shouted Dad anyway. I entered and found them in the most involved, gross kiss, with tongues down each other’s throats.

“Ew!” I exclaimed, staring at them.

Suddenly aware of my presence, they pulled apart and Dad said, “Your mum’s pregnant, Stacy! You’re going to have a brother,” he joked, as he rustled my hair.

“No, she’s not,” said Mum to Dad, then to me, “We won’t know what sex it’ll be for a while.”

“No, seriously, I hope it’s a girl. If it’s a girl, it’s going to be as beautiful as your mother and look just like you, Stacy,” Dad said.

Mum quickly turned back to face the pan to focus on making more pancakes. She seemed flustered by Dad’s last remark, but I wasn’t going to make it any worse for her.

“You do realise it could be any gender in this day and age?” I couldn’t resist commenting.

“Of course. We just want it to be healthy,” said Mum.

“Congratulations,” I uttered. Though it wasn’t intended, it didn’t come out with much excitement.

“You won’t be jealous, will you?” Mum asked nervously.

“Of what, a little ball that poos and burps a lot? Of course not,” I replied.

“Hey! You were once one of those,” Dad said.

“Well, I’m not now, am I?” I grinning.

“You know that we love you, right?” Mum asked out of the blue.

“Of course she does,” said Dad.

“No harm in asking,” Mum said, waiting for an answer.

“I know you love me Mum,” I said.

“OK. As long as you know. Pancakes?” asked Mum.

“Yeah, yum!” Pancakes were my and Dad’s favourites.

“I was wondering why you were making them,” said Dad. “Anything else cooking we should know about? There’s not twins in your belly, is there?” he added jokingly.

“Don’t even joke,” said Mum.

Maybe we all did under-react, but as we ate, we let the sweet news soak in like the syrup into our pancakes. One day, perhaps, I’d be able to tell my young brother or sister I was a fairy.

## Chapter

My friendships with Jas and Anjali had grown from strength to strength and I’d been granted an extension with my exams, so until Christmas, at least, I’d still be at Deanview with them. It had given us all a bit of a breather to acclimatise.

It shouldn’t have come as a surprise that when I was finally able to visit the wood again, Autumn had come for the first time. It was late October. Halloween. My parents were at a baby scan and Jas and Anjali had been roped in to decorate the school hall for a Halloween charity event. I’d had more than my fair share of thrill seeking to last me a few years at least and I opted out of helping them.

The crisp orange, red and yellow leaves fluttered down sporadically from the boughs. Leaves already on the ground rustled and flew in a flurry as the wind picked them up and carried them and me forwards. At the stream, the earth was mostly bare, but I could make out the muddy footprints of adults, which stopped before it. Jumping over the stream, I clearly recalled my dream of drowning, though that felt like so long ago now. On the other side, I breathed in deeply the new mulched autumn scent.

I meandered through the trees, till I reached the rock altar on top of the grassy mound. It still caught me by surprise, seeing it in the light of day and my breath was knocked out of me. Around the altar were patches of blood and as I stepped over it, my foot trod on something abandoned in the grass. I reached down to pick it up. It was the dagger. After all this time, it was still here!

I drew closer to the altar and spotted dried flecks of blood laced into the altar’s surface. It had absorbed the stain of so many sacrifices. I still couldn’t believe Miya’s good fortune to be alive. Bower had said no power on earth could bring someone back to life, so how exactly was she breathing? Was it have been God?

I glanced around the wood. Even now that the eternal summer had ended with autumn’s natural arrival, it felt like a great sorrow blanketed the wood, each leaf falling like a tear on the ground for the sacrifices that had died before. The canopy was open and exposed to a white cloudy sky overhead.

Determined that no one would ever be sacrificed here again, I angrily drove the dagger into the altar, lacing the gesture with a magical strength. The blade clanged and the altar cracked loudly as it split in two. The blade broke too, sending a shock of vibrations through my hand to the bone. My fingers and palm were numb.

I touched the bloodstained soil with my other hand and let out a spool of my magic. Flowering vines grew up around the rock altar and out in all directions covering the glade with new growth. It still wasn’t enough to bring its usual eternal summer that the Queen had been able to summon, but it was quickly draining me. I stopped.

As the clouds began to part, I returned through the trees and came across a teenager sitting by the stream, his hoodie loose, down around his shoulders. Why was he here? I was caught off guard.

He was leaning forwards, dangling his hands in the water, which was now shimmering slightly in the bright sun breaking through the clouds. Little fish, sensing something unusual, darted away. The bank alongside the stream was bare, except around the boy, where dormant seeds were now flowering and wild roses grew up in tendrils from the soil. One or two even bloomed, quickly and effortlessly, red against the crystal clear of the water. Did he have the same powers as me? Did this mean he was a… I didn’t dare finish that thought.

As I advanced towards him, some leaves crunched under my foot. He turned to see who it was, his hand out of the water, his features stone cold.

I smiled at him, breaking the ice. Turning back to the stream, he smiled too.

“It happened here, didn’t it?” he half asked, half said, as if he didn’t expect a reply. He shuffled, making room for me to sit beside him. His loose, blue jeans, with the ends of the legs folded up and sewn into place, were obviously several sizes too big for him.

He seemed as unsure of me as I was of him. How could this teenage boy with magic be explained? I thought I was the last one. My hand trailed in the water, cooling off my sweaty palm. Was I right that he understood how I’d felt? Human life, fairy genes, what it was like to be ripped into two? Did he also feel like me, my clouds of thought eternally shifting between human and fairy and that nothing would ever make sense again? But that could wait. Surely finding someone like me was something to rejoice in. What would Bower say if he saw me, saw us, now?

“Yes. It happened here,” I said, though it was starting to feel more and more like a dream. Maybe the boy had sensed what had happened, but I could hardly believe I’d said it, this secret that I’d been protecting. And yet I hadn’t really admitted to anything. “It” could be all manner of things.

“Are you Star?” the boy asked, his voice soft but piercing, like he’d seen the secret I’d buried deep.

My breath caught, heart hammering as I wiped my wet hand on my trousers. “Why?” I whispered, fear and hope colliding. Had I been alone all this time, only to find someone who knew me, really knew me?

“If you’re Star, I have a letter for you,” he said, as he took an envelope out of a pocket in his hoodie and handed it to me.

It was unopened and fashioned of thick, slightly yellowed paper. “Star” was written on the front and for a second or two I thought it looked like Bower’s handwriting. It couldn’t be, but my heart beat fast and my hands grew sticky. The last letter I had read from him contained the heartache of finding out that what Elantra, my sister was capable of. Did I want to open this one? But it was torture not to know. The boy could see that something was wrong.

“You’re not Star,” he said, disappointed, and was about to take it away.

It would be so easy to say that I wasn’t. Bower had told me many things, but maybe it was best to not know them all. What good news could come from a dead wizard? I was sure it was bad, but if it was something I should know, some warning perhaps. There was no way out of it.

“I am,” I said, ripping open the envelope and taking the letter out. It began to rain and spots of rainwater soaked into the letter as I read it:

This is Caelum, one of the many fairy children I managed to save. They are everywhere.

Bower

I stared at the boy, Caelum, and began to laugh, hardly believing what I had just read. Caelum laughed too as he read it quickly and stood up. He took off his hoodie and then started to strip off to his waist. He was about the same height as me.

“What are you doing?” I asked, a bit amused, but mostly bewildered, as I saw his bare chest, with a hair or two forming. He didn’t seem embarrassed and, as his shoulders and back rippled, he let his wings release, unfolding them and spreading them out. Flexing his muscles, the wings gave off a sound that reminded me of Dad shaking his rain coat, when he wanted to get rid of the last drops of water before coming indoors.

“I’ve been waiting a long time to do this,” Caelum said, leaping into the air and somersaulting. “Come on,” he said, as the rain turned more violently into a downpour.

“I’m not taking my clothes off,” I said, loudly. Mum had been puzzled by the holes in my clothes when I’d returned home from the weeks away. I didn’t want to repeat that, but I could always hide them under my coat.

Caelum shrugged his shoulders in mid-flight, waiting for me to join him. “Suit yourself,” he said.

I’d soon be soaked, but I didn’t care. I took off my coat and dropped it on the ground, before coaxing my wings out. They were painful and stiff after all the time they had been bound, unused, inside my body, but it was totally worth it. Finally free, they tore through the back of my T-shirt.

Laughing, I chased Caelum, our wings like prisms through the droplets of rain, shining light on to the dull and wet around us.

### Author’s Note

Stacy finds and learns to trust her voice and my wish is that you’re inspired to find the courage to do the same.

If you enjoyed this book, I’d really appreciate it if you could please leave a positive review. Thanks for reading!

### About the Author

Jessica L Scott began writing poems as a teenager. She went on to study Creative Writing as part of her BA.

When she’s not writing, she’s usually in the garden or on the beach reading sci-fi or fantasy fiction. Sometimes she can be found on strolls and wondering what’s just out of reach down any long scenic road.

The Queen’s Dark Ambition is her debut YA novel.

To find out more about her writing go to

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