

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LEE ANN WARD



LIKE
MATCHES
FOR **WISHES**

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FOR WISHES

(A RETELLING OF THE LITTLE MATCH GIRL)

LEE ANN WARD

My Ever After Series Book 1

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Like Matches for Wishes

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This book is for my Lilliana, and every
princess brave enough to let her light
shine.

May your match never burn out.

You go away when the match burns out.

—Hans Christian Anderson

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CHAPTER 1

IT'S GETTING COLDER OUTSIDE. OF THAT FACT, I'M QUITE SURE. I discreetly cup my hands in front of my face and blow some welcomed warmth into them. The stately woman is taking quite some time to inspect the scarf I am desperate to sell. Maybe she'll actually buy something from me today. I've entertained this woman before, but with no good results. The proud lady has never bought a single item from me in the past, although she bothers to feign interest in my wares when I pass her in the streets. Rich people never cease to amaze me. But I'm usually up for a good challenge, so I smile and watch as she turns the scarf over and over, then pulls it closer to her face.

"This thing is a hand-me-down," the woman finally declares. "Look at the pulls in the stitching and the frayed edging. I don't want this rag."

"Please, will you not reconsider?" I ask. "It's getting colder out, and the particular blue in this scarf mimics the ocean hues in your eyes. It's not a rag, my lady, and it would look quite lovely on you."

The woman ignores my flattery. "It is a hand-me-down, and I don't want it. Speak to me again when you have something new to offer, girl. You've done nothing but waste my time." She tosses the scarf back to me and walks away.

I pull a bundle of matches from my pouch and tug the woman's sleeve when I catch up to her again. "My lady, how

about some matches? A match can never be a hand-me-down, that's for certain. See, I do indeed have something new to offer you. Five matches for a single bit, my lady. Quite the bargain, yes? What do you say?"

But the woman simply notches her nose higher into the crisp air and quickens her pace. I guess I can't blame her, though. I wasn't being completely honest. A match can indeed be a hand-me-down. Take me, for instance. I've been known as the match girl for as long as I can remember, resorting to selling my matches when all else fails. I am that one single match that has been burned and extinguished time and time again. And if I were alone in this wretched world, I probably would have allowed myself to burn out completely long before I reached these twenty seasons.

But I have Gram.

And she needs me.

So, I keep peddling my wares to put food on our table. I drape the unwanted scarf over my shoulder and go about seeking out another woman of means who might actually show some compassion and buy my secondhand nothing.

"Hello, Milla," the vegetable vendor calls to me as I pass his corner. I can smell the potato soup he has simmering in a large cauldron and my stomach growls. "Might I buy some matches from you? My woman will want a nice fire in the hearth when I finally make it home this evening."

"Most certainly," I reply. My smile is so wide, it hurts my face. The vegetable man usually buys two bits worth of matches at a time, and two bits means our bellies will be full

this night. And Gram needs the extra nourishment, to be sure. Her cough is getting worse of late, and nothing seems to give her relief. I nod when he places the coins in my hand and shoves the matches in his pocket. He tips his hat.

“Won’t you sit and have some soup?” he asks. “No charge for you, my dear.”

I’m quite tempted, but I won’t eat until Gram fills her belly, so I respectfully decline. “Thank you, kind sir, but I need to get to the bakery before sundown. I don’t want to be out after curfew. Stay warm this night, good sir.” I wave and move along.

I make my way towards the bakery. Hopefully, there will still be some olive loaf left. It’s Gram’s favorite, and I need something to tease her appetite. She keeps saying her cough will pass, that she’ll be as fit as a fiddle come the first snowfall, but I doubt her hopeful evaluation. But Gram is the strongest woman I know. But I suppose that’s really not saying too much. After all, she’s the only family I have.

At least I *think* she’s the only family I have.

Truth is, I know nothing about my lineage. I know that Gram is my biological grandmother—that’s the only knowledge she will afford me when it comes to our family tree. Over my twenty winters in this harsh world, I’ve asked, begged, pleaded, done almost anything to learn who we are and where I come from, but Gram refuses to enlighten me on the subject. She says, *‘You think knowing will somehow reveal your worth, but worth in that capacity is overrated. You are more than worthy now, my child.’* She thinks it sounds poetic,

but I think it simply confirms my suspicions that I came from nowhere. Maybe she really did find me under a bridge like she used to tell me when I was being a mischievous child and she was cross. But I have her quick wit and ready smile, and I can see myself in her reflection beyond the deep lines in her face. I just wish she wasn't so stubborn.

I stop in front of the dress shop when a lilac frock in the store front catches my eye. It's not a color that would complement my red hair and ordinarily blue eyes, but it is lovely in its own right. I look down at my simple peasant dress, and the heavy binding running across my chest that conceals my womanly features from unwanted attentions. I push a few stray strands of hair away from my face and tuck them under my bonnet. I could walk the streets of Timberness from now until eternity and still never sell enough scarves to afford a lilac dress with pearl beading and silked lace. I pull a match from my chemise and look toward the castle in the distance, its watchtower a foreboding dread that still manages to prickle my skin at the sight. I wonder if women who live within the castle walls appreciate the simple beauty found in the prospect of a lilac dress. I pull my flintstone from the top of my boot and strike the match.

"I wish I could wear a lilac dress one fine day and see inside the castle walls." I watch the flame burn until it almost reaches my fingers, and then blow it out. "Like matches for wishes," I mutter, knowing how silly and frivolous my wish sounds.

But wishes are supposed to be frivolous, or else they're not worth making in the first place. I retrieve my only three coins

from my pouch and head toward the bakery again. Gram needs an olive loaf, and I need to get my head out of the clouds.

CHAPTER 2

THE TOWN SQUARE IN TIMBERNESS IS ALIVE AND BUSTLING WITH traders. The streets are narrow and noisy. The town crier is wailing about roasted pig's feet and goose legs for sell near the mercantile. His words make my mouth water, so I avoid the area altogether. Soon the first snow will fall, and the brutal cold will stop production for a while for the vendors with no proper establishment. Only the merchants with actual shops will remain open. So now is the time that most folks stock up on peddled wares the best they can before the temperatures are too bitter to brave. But I will still sell my matches despite the frigid cold. The match girl is faithful, and hopefully my patrons will be as well. Matches are life for me and Gram.

The sun is setting in brilliant streaks of pink and orange that dance behind the castle as I stare across town and beyond the river. Life in Timberness is monotonous for me. I don't have to look down at the cobblestone streets that my feet know so well. They have forged this same path day after day and week after week. I could walk to the bakery blindfolded if I had to. I raise my water flask to my lips and take the last remaining sip. I peek inside the butcher's shop when I near the entrance. Fatted ducks are plucked and hanging, just ready to be roasted for some fortunate souls' tables. I wish I could afford one for Gram, but pickings are too slim today. Maybe the morrow will be better.

“Milla, how are you faring today, my lady?”

I know the voice as well as my own. *Master Burgess*. He owns the tannery and is about the purest soul God ever sent to Earth. The tannery is located on the outskirts of the village, well away from the day-to-day activities in the town square. His chosen trade is quite odoriferous, one filled with dead animal remains and skins. The pungent smells of rotting flesh and stagnant water assaults the nostrils as soon as the tannery is visible. I nearly fainted from the foul stench the one time I was thickheaded enough to think I could stomach visiting him there. I had the vapors until nightfall.

But Master Burgess is in his trading post today, a smile embedded in his gray beard and a glint in his kind, tired eyes. He sells his leather goods here—spending five days in the tannery and two days in the town square. His items are the highest quality in Timberness and the surrounding boroughs. He is a master at his craft.

“I’m not faring as well as I’d hoped, I’m afraid,” I say, hugging Master Burgess when I’m in front of him. I can still smell a faint whiff of the tannery on his heavy cloak, but I don’t mind. He’s more than a welcomed sight.

“So, no decent sells today?”

“To my misfortune, no.”

Master Burgess reaches in the deep pocket of his cloak and pulls out a large bundle of matches. “Well, no more fretting, my dear. Maybe these will turn that misfortune into reward, aye?” He places them in my hands and gives them a little squeeze.

“Thank you, Master Burgess. You sustain me and Gram, and we are ever grateful.”

He hides his face with his hand for a moment, my flattery always the cause for his blushing, then busies himself with a leather coin pouch he was stretching when I walked up.

“You never have to thank me for the matches, Milla. After all, you’re the one who has to sell them, and it’s a small gesture, considering how well your Gram tends my aching shoulder. Please thank her again for the fine poultice she blended for me the other morrow. It feels much better.”

“I certainly will. I’m so glad you’re feeling better.” I place the matches in my large pouch. “Thank you, Master Burgess. I should take my leave before the bakery closes.”

“Good evening, Milla. I’ll see you overmorrow, yes?”

“Yes.”

Master Burgess has supplied me with matches practically from the first morning we met when I was a wee girl. He had admired my effort to sell a deep cooking pot that was almost bigger than my person. He handed me a clutch of matches that day and said they would be easier to sell. He promised to ever supply me with more when I needed them.

And he has kept that promise to this very day. His friendship is a treasure.

When I’m almost to the bakery, I see a young girl sitting on the side of the street with a very small boy, most likely her brother. Their clothes are tattered, and the boy’s teeth are chattering. His face is dirty, except for two white lines running

from his eyes and down his sunken cheeks—no doubt his trail of tears. His sad testimony. His way of life laid bare for this cruel world to see, and yet still ignore. But not me. Never me. They are obviously hungry—much hungrier than Gram and I have ever been. I touch my coin pouch.

“Hello,” I say to the girl, bending down to meet her eyes. “My name’s Milla. What’s yours?”

“Collette,” she replies. “Are we offending you, mistress? We can move along.”

“No, not at all,” I say, her words pricking my heart like a splinter too deep to free. “I was simply wondering if you and the fine little gentleman here have had any nourishment today?”

“No, mistress,” she says, her voice like velvet and rain. “And we’re awfully hungry.”

I sigh and finger one of the blonde curls cupping her face. “Well, we’ll just have to do something about that, now won’t we?” I reach in my coin pouch and retrieve two of my three bits. “Here, take these. The vegetable vendor has made a fine potato stew. He will serve you each a bowl and give you three carrots for two bits if you join him on his corner before curfew. Enjoy the stew now for your supper and roast the carrots in the morning to break your fast. Sleeping on a full belly will be most pleasant, yes?”

The young boy smiles, his face looking as though it will crack from the dried dirt and smut that has accumulated there.

“We are ever so grateful to you, mistress,” the girl says. “I fear we will eat the carrots raw, though. I have no fire to cook them. But we don’t mind, do we, Tomas?”

The boy shakes his head. “Raw or cooked, I like carrots,” he blurts.

“Tomas...what a fine name for such a strapping young fellow.” I cup his chin and then turn to the girl again. I pull out five matches and hold them out to her. “Here, young miss. There are four matches for you to burn, but this fifth match here, well, it’s a special match.”

Their eyes resemble saucers, both hanging on my every word.

“Special?” Collette asks. “How so, Mistress Milla?”

I motion for them to move in closer as I hold up the single match. “Well, this one here, this one is a wishing match. Make a wish and then strike it. Watch it burn for a moment, and then blow it out.”

“And will the wish come true?” Tomas asks.

I connect eyes with young Collette, realizing that she understands the ritual more than her little brother ever possibly could.

“Maybe,” I reply. “And maybe not. But to wish is to hope. And we must always have hope. Now, be on your way. You have some lovely potato stew waiting for you.”

Tomas wraps his arms around my middle. “Thank you so much, mistress.”

Collette nods and takes her brother's hand. "I can never express our gratitude. Thank you so much."

"No need to thank me," I say. "But, if you ever need me, ask someone if they have seen the match girl. You'll be sure to find me."

She nods and they take their leave. I watch their backs as they head in the direction of the vegetable vendor. I reach in my pouch and retrieve the single coin I have left. Hopefully Jordy will have a little something extra for me today. *Oh, Jordy...*

The smell of the bakery makes me weak in the knees. It's like salt and spice, and every sweet sensation all at once. It fills my nostrils and rumbles my tummy until I rub my middle to relieve the pangs. Jordy's father meets me at the door and takes my water flask.

"Good evening, Milla. Let me fill this for you." He makes his way to the water barrel and dips the ladle until my leather flask is full. He hands it back to me.

"Thank you, Master Orwan. You are a life giver, no doubt." I take a quick drink of the tepid water, my dry lips so appreciative that I take a second mouthful and then wipe my mouth with my sleeve.

He grins before wiping his own hands on his wide apron and goes back behind the bread table. "Miserable day, aye?"

"Not really. Only a usual day, honestly. But I will admit that I'm keenly ready for an olive loaf and my feet resting under our table."

“Then I will not keep you waiting,” he replies. “I saved you an olive loaf in the back. Let me fetch it.”

“You are too good to me, sir.”

I watch as Master Orwan walks to the stock room, his round tummy parting the curtains before his hands reach the cloth. He is a robust fellow, jolly and pink in the cheeks, a sheen of sweat gracing his forehead, no matter the temperature. I smile when I think of Jordy, how he looks nothing like his father. Maybe he takes after his mother’s clan. I glance around for Jordy. *Where in the world can he be?*

“Aye, Milla. Good evening, sweet child. How’s your grandmother faring?” Mistress Orwan pulls me into a tight hug when she comes in from the back room. “I’ve been so worried about her.”

“Gram’s cough seems worse to me,” I say, “although she swears she’s getting better by the day. But you know her, as stubborn as a mule and as strong as an ox. She’ll outlive us all.”

“Aye, to be certain,” Mistress Orwan replies. “Tell her she’s in my prayers. Is Master Orwan getting the olive loaf he put back for you?”

“He is.”

“Good, good. And take this too. It will complement the bread quite nicely.” She winks and hands me a jar of butter. “Churned it myself this morning,” she adds. She pushes aside a lock of golden chestnut hair, the tiny lines around her eyes

crinkling when she smiles. It's obvious she was quite the beauty in her youth.

Jordy definitely takes after his mother.

“Thank you, Mistress Orwan. You do too much for me and Gram. Truly.”

“Nonsense,” she says, waving a hand in the air. “Your Gram does more for the people in this village than any individual I can recall. She's our healer, and some of us owe her our lives. I just wish I could do more.”

My throat's tight from her sweet words so I nod at first, then manage to croak out, “Thank you for the butter, mistress. Your kindness is greatly appreciated.”

“Here's the olive loaf,” Master Orwan announces as he bolts back into the room. He wraps it in an extra layer of parchment and hands it to me. “That'll be one bit, my lady.”

I retrieve the coin and place it in his chubby palm. “Thank you, good sir. I'll see you on the morrow.”

I'm almost to the door when Jordy steps in from the street, broom in hand. My heart thuds and my cheeks flame. I wonder if he has this same effect on every maiden he encounters.

“Where have you been, lad?” his father calls out to him. “This floor isn't going to sweep itself, you know.”

Mistress Orwan tugs Master Orwan's ear all the way into the stock room, whispering something the entire length of the bakery.

“Sorry about that,” Jordy says when his parents are no longer in sight. “My father has no tact.”

I hide my smile with the back of my hand. “Well, your father is very kind to me. I hold a high opinion of him.”

Jordy gives me a crooked smile that makes my knees go to mush. “Good to know.”

We’re quiet for a moment and Jordy begins to sweep up as his father requested. I steal glances as he works, admiring the line of muscles tugging at his white, linen shirt. Jordy is tall and thick-chested, and his skin is sun-kissed. His hair is resting against his chest, the color of molasses dipped in sunshine. His eyes are dark blue with brown streaks that remind me of the sweet called chocolate that he once let me try when his father bartered for it in the neighboring village.

I clear my throat when he catches me staring. “I suppose I should take my leave, Jordy. I’m sure my gram is hungry at this late hour. Very nice to see you today. Thank your mother again for the butter. It’s a welcomed treat.”

Jordy glances over his shoulder toward the stock room, then sets the broom aside. He clutches my arm at the elbow. “Well, if the butter excites you, wait ‘til you see what I have outside. Come with me.”

It’s hard to focus on anything but his hand on my arm. I wish the air wasn’t so chilled, that my arm wasn’t completely covered with thick material and layers. If it were spring, I might actually feel his touch instead of simply imagining it. But I will take what I’m afforded.

“Look, Milla,” he says when we’re outside, “I saved this for you. It was the extra that Father wanted me to barter with at market earlier today, but I sold some rye bread and honey instead. I hope you’re pleased. You should have enough for supper and to break your fast come daylight. I would have cast lots to get it for you or wrestled that bear in the traveling show. Whatever it took.”

Jordy reaches into a barrel and pulls out a slab of blue Stilton cheese. My arms are around his neck before I can contain myself.

“Oh, Jordy, I can’t believe we’ll have cheese. And it’s my favorite—”

“I know,” he cuts in.

He knows... I clear my throat. “Gram will be so pleased, Jordy. How can I ever thank you?”

He clasps my arms before I lower them and captures my eyes with his. “You just did. I hope you enjoy it, Milla. Now go. You need to be home before dark. I’ll see you on the morrow, yes?”

“Yes,” I say. “Until the morrow.”

Jordy goes back inside the bakery, whistling as he once again slides the broom across the floor. I secure the cheese and bread in my large pouch and wrap the unsold scarf tighter on my neck, thankful for my good fortune after such a slow day. But there is no time for idleness. Jordy’s right. I need to be inside with Gram before darkness falls and the bell rings for curfew. I head for home and the prospect of food in my belly.

My belly. I place a cold hand over it, but not to settle the hunger deeply nestled there, but to ease the flutters spreading across my middle when I remember Jordy's touch. He is a beautifully delicious man, the most eligible bachelor in Timberness. I know I'm not the only lass with impure thoughts when it comes to Jordy. I hear the stifled giggles and see the cupped hands around ready ears of the lasses when he is near them on the street. But whether it be God's grace or good fortune, I am the only maiden he seems to take a shine to. I'm not sure if I feel my cheeks pinking at the tingles now teasing my most delicate parts, or if I'm embarrassed at the knowledge that I have nothing real to offer a man like Jordy. My breath catches when the word pity enters my exhausted brain. For I hope 'tis not pity sweet Jordy feels for me. I dream of his belly filling with dragonflies with dizzying wings when I am with him too.

I manage to free my mind of Jordy when a chilled wind catches my skirts and reminds me that curfew is nearing. I focus instead on the thatched rooflines in the distance. Our home is in the center of those houses, just beyond the last store in town. Not much farther now. I cross to the side of the street nearer my home as shrill, mocking female voices draw my attention. I look toward the guard post and pillory where a foreigner in our town is being kept in the stocks. I notice her straight away. *Treena.*

It would be like Treena to assault a man who is already set to receive twenty lashes come sunup. His neck and wrists are trapped by the heavy wooden arm of the stocks. He's unable to lift his face upward to see who is tormenting him. Treena and

two other nasty maidens are using his plight as their folly, kicking dirt in his face and pulling his hair, all the while laughing hysterically.

“Go ahead, mage,” Treena teases the man. “Use your magic on me. Make me stop. Oh, that’s right. You can’t. Your magic probably isn’t real anyway, and now you’re going to be flogged for your jest. Pity.”

The other maidens laugh as Treena kicks more dust in his downward face. I use the unsold scarf to hide my own face before I pass them, disgusted by their cruel display. The man may be a wretched soul, a self-proclaimed mage who most likely didn’t know that magic is outlawed in Timberness. He may even be insane at this point. Those who practice magic are prone to madness, which is why King Urich outlawed it in our kingdom in the first place. But is this man not still human? He’s lost enough of his dignity already. Next morrow will see his dignity laid bare for all to witness. Treena is a worse wretch than he for tormenting him.

I ensure my face is completely covered as I pass Treena. The last thing I need is for her to recognize me. Then, most certainly, her cruelty will have a new victim. If I am out past curfew, I will be fined three bits and escorted home in shackles by an angry guard as my punishment. If Treena breaks curfew, she will be given a mild tongue-lashing and then escorted home with her hand cupped in the elbow of a doting guard as her *punishment*. Treena’s family is well-to-do, and she flaunts her finery at every opportunity. She is a spoiled, crooked-nosed knave who looks down on everyone who isn’t of her station. I’m the match girl, and one of her regular targets. But,

I have not the time nor the energy for her games this evening. I sigh relief when I make it past her unnoticed and feel sorry for the man who is still being tortured by the chuckling little twits. I hope he truly is a mage and causes Treena to grow a huge wart on the end of her nose. I quicken my pace and head for my door, pondering if a flogging is worse than being subjected to Treena.

CHAPTER 3

I OPEN THE FRONT DOOR OF OUR HUMBLE COTTAGE AND LATCH IT behind me. I see Gram's back and hear her humming as she leans over the table in her apothecary, busily mixing herbs with her mortar and pestle. Gram is a healer for the villagers who can't afford to pay the doctor. They pay her instead with anything they have—extra food, scarves, gloves, a worn pair of boots. She'll take whatever they have to offer, and never turns anyone away. We keep any items that we need, and I peddle the rest. Her patients keep us supplied with items to sell, and Master Burgess keeps me supplied with matches. We are rather fortunate that Gram has quite the knowledge of medicines and healing procedures, and that Master Burgess is the most generous soul I've ever known.

“How are you this evening, Gram?” I shake my bonnet out and hang it on a peg on the wall. “Are you hungry?”

She acknowledges me with a smile and a nod. She must be in the middle of mixing a poultice. It's delicate work when it's done correctly, so I need to let her finish. She pushes a few strands of salt-and-pepper hair from her brow that have managed to escape the tight bun the rest of her hair is trapped in. The deep lines in her forehead crease in concentration, and I admire her skill as she retrieves three jars from the shelf above her without looking up from her work. She knows the apothecary better than her own face. Her mastery is enchanting.

I go to the kitchen table and dump the contents of my pouch in the center of it. I arrange the olive loaf, butter, and cheese so Gram will see them when she joins me. I place the kettle over the flame. Gram keeps water in the kettle for me. Hot barley tea is always the first thing I desire on cold nights when we have the ingredients to make it. I toss the barley in to steep when Gram joins me.

“Oh, child, an olive loaf? And butter and that fine blue cheese you love so much... Your day was quite prosperous, I see. And, you know what? So was mine.” Gram reaches into a wooden crate near the fire pit and pulls out a linen sack.

“What do you have there, Gram?”

She drops the sack in my hands. “See for yourself.”

I reach in the bag. “It’s jerky! Praise the gods.” I lift a piece of the manna from heaven to my nose. “It’s...,” I take another whiff. “Is it deer?”

Gram retrieves the eating utensils and takes a seat at the table. “It is. Master Stephen left it when I tended his ankle today. It’s been so long since we’ve had deer jerky. And he left us a jug of ale as well.”

“That’s marvelous.” I pour some barley tea and honey into a tin cup and join Gram at the table. “You can enjoy the ale for now, Gram. I’ve been waiting all day for my tea.”

We are quiet at first, enjoying the food and the comfort afforded us both after a long day. I watch Gram savor each bite of the olive loaf, her wrinkled, yet nimble hands tearing small pieces and dipping them into the butter.

“I have a few baubles and a waist purse for you to sell next morrow,” Gram announces after her second sip of ale. “The purse is quite fetching. It should sell rather—” She begins coughing but relieves it with the ale. It takes her a few moments to catch her breath before continuing, “It should sell rather quickly.”

“Gram, are you truly all right?” I place a hand on top of hers when the coughing spell is through. “I’m fitfully worried about that cough.”

“Don’t fret over me, child. I’m fine—better than fine, actually. Are we not feasting here? Let’s enjoy our meal, aye?”

Gram doesn’t want me to worry about the cough she’s come down with since the warm season ended, but I can’t help it. She is everything I have in this world and losing her would be like losing the very air I breathe. She’s always been a little thick in the middle, although her shoulders are narrow and her breastbone prominent. I’ve noticed that the cough has weakened her appetite. Her stomach is flatter, her cheeks a tad shallow. But I know better than to mention my observations during our meal. I don’t want to ruin our supper, and she is eating heartily this night.

“Milla, this food is divine.” Gram leans back in her chair, savoring a bite of bread she’s still chewing. “I fear I cannot eat another morsel, though. I am more than satisfied.”

I smile and grasp her forearm, giving it a soft squeeze. “I’m so glad, Gram.”

And I truly am. It warms my very soul, knowing that I can provide nourishment for her. Throughout my life, she has

given me everything—a roof over my head, a warm bed to sleep in, a knowledge of herbs and healing, and she alone taught me to read and write. She has taught me everything about life, except who I really am. I let out a long breath when the question of my lineage fills my tired brain yet again. But I will not ask it of her this night. This night will see Gram only full and satisfied.

“Well, I think I shall take this full belly and finish up in the apothecary,” Gram says as she stands.

“Treena and her friends were teasing a man who was in the stocks,” I blurt. “They were kicking dirt in his face and assaulting him. It was quite the display.”

“Good heavens, where were the guards?” Gram shakes her head. “They shouldn’t allow that kind of tomfoolery. Poor man is probably just a hungry thief. It’s positively shameful.”

“No, he claims to be a mage,” I reply. “He’s to receive twenty lashes at sunup and be tossed from the kingdom.”

“A mage?” Gram sits in the chair again, the color draining from her face. “Twenty lashes? By the gods. There hasn’t been a mage arrested in Timberness in quite some time. You would think folks would know by now not to practice magic here. Poor soul.”

“Maybe his madness has taken hold and he can’t think clearly. Would be the only reason a fool would choose to profess magic here.” I plunk another piece of olive loaf in my mouth. “News of public floggings travels fast.”

“Madness, hah! Cockles and nonsense.” Gram pushes away from the table again. “Folks might believe me mad because I’m a healer, but it doesn’t make it so. Now, I have work to do. Keep your distance from that flogging come morn, and from Treena. I’d like to bend that girl over my knee and give her a sound thrashing myself.”

I chuckle and reach for the ale when Gram leaves the table. My barley tea is long gone, and I can’t resist one last slice of cheese. I stand to clear our plates when I finish the ale and startle when the sound of pounding fists assaults our door.

Thrap! Thrap! Thrap!

Gram’s eyes are wide when she comes back into the room. “Someone’s at the door at this hour? After curfew?”

I hurry to the door and unlatch it with Gram on my heels. Two young men push their way inside before I can speak, one of them being supported by the other.

“Close it, quickly!” the tallest of the two says to me. “Guard patrol is on the side street near the market square.” He looks at Gram. “Please, help my friend, mistress healer. He’s been stabbed through the arm. He’s lost a lot of blood.”

I take the injured man’s freed hand and help lead him to the table in the apothecary that Gram uses to tend her patients. We help him lay on the table, and all eyes fix on Gram.

Gram takes in a fortifying breath. “Milla, get me two buckets of water and tie on a clean apron. Wash your hands with the lye soap on the back porch. I’ll need your assistance.”

I nod and head into the kitchen. I open the lid to the water barrel and grab the buckets before setting to work on her requests.

“What can I do?” the other young man spouts, his voice panicked and breathy. He’s running his hands through his hair and pacing like his feet are on fire.

Gram’s voice is calm. “You can start by telling me your names and exactly what happened to your friend. I need to know the extent of his injuries. You’re not thieves, are you?”

“No, mistress,” he blurts. “We’re not thieves. My name is Kevan, and that there is Marcus. We work on the docks and were unloading tobacco from a cargo ship. We were nearly done and about to head to the tavern when Sir Malek and another knight approached and asked us to open one of the tobacco crates.”

Oh, Sir Malek. That explains a lot. Sir Malek is a knight and part of the king’s guard, and as horrible a human being as any unfortunate soul could encounter. He is devil spawn, but somehow manages to hold the king’s favor. He is a dreaded sight when he decides to walk amongst the common folk, something he takes great pleasure in doing. Our fear is his aphrodisiac.

“When Marcus spoke up and refused to open the crate,” Keven continues, “Sir Malek drew his sword and stabbed him in the arm, saying all the while that refusing his request was as much as direct defiance to the king. He spat on the ground and told Marcus he should feel blessed that he didn’t cut his arm clean off. But his words are untrue, mistress healer. We aren’t

allowed to open the cargo at anyone's request, only unload it. Opening cargo from a ship could get us hung. We aren't thieves, mistress. But Sir Malek is a monster. He laughed as Marcus bled, and then simply walked away." Kevan's mud-brown eyes are glassy and his voice is low and haunting. He puts a hand on Marcus' shoulder and gives it a slight squeeze. "The blade went through his arm and pierced his side as well. I don't think the cut in his side is very deep, but he's lost a lot of blood."

I hurry to the porch and wash my hands as instructed. I come back inside and carry the water to Gram. Marcus' shirt is already off and Gram is inspecting his side. Her brow tightens when she looks at me. She dips her hands in one of the buckets to wash them. She takes a cloth and wets it, then puts it on Marcus' forehead. He's moaning and seems feverish. Gram puts another wet cloth on his neck.

"I fear Sir Malek was using you to test out a new adornment to his blade," Gram says. She points to the blisters now forming on Marcus' punctured arm and side.

"What do you mean?" Kevan asks.

"Those whelps are from the toxic sap of the Turgoot tree. But the sap only poisons what it touches, so it is not in his entire body. The toxins in the blisters will cause a fever, though. Your young friend here will recover, but I will need to lance each blister to relieve his body of the toxins before I sew him up. Milla, get the ether. And, young man, I suggest you take a seat at the kitchen table and help yourself to some ale. I

doubt you have the constitution for the task we are about to undertake. I will take good care of your friend. I promise.”

Kevan nods and does as instructed. I put some ether on a rag and give it to Gram. She covers the patient’s nose and mouth until he’s sleeping. I toss the ether rag into the fireplace and join Gram again. I know the routine. We work in unison, sometimes with hardly a word spoken. She has taught me well.

“First, we take care of the blisters,” she says, her eyes scanning his arm and side as she makes a mental count of the whelps. “Can you stomach it, Milla? It will not be pleasant. The smell will be pungent.”

“I’ll be fine Gram,” I assure her. I draw in a slow breath, hoping my words are true.

Gram gives me a small, flat bowl to catch the sickness that will flow from the blisters. She uses a thin knife with a sharp point to prick the first spot, and what looks like water and blood flow from the sore. I put the back of my hand to my nose. Looks are deceiving. It doesn’t smell like water and blood at all. It smells like death. Gram nods as she quickly moves to the next blister, working like a woman still in her youth. She could shame a magician when she’s healing others, and I am beyond proud to be her granddaughter.

After a couple of hours, Marcus is relieved of the blisters and properly sewn up. His arm will need some time to heal, but the cut on his side isn’t very deep. It will heal nicely. We join Kevan in the kitchen when our task is through. Gram isn’t ready to rouse Marcus quite yet. The fever has broken, and he isn’t fitful anymore, but sleeping like a baby.

“How is he?” Kevan says when Gram joins him at the table. “Will he recover?”

I pull two tin cups from a cabinet and pour Gram and I some ale before joining them.

“He will,” Gram assures him. “But his arm will need to be in a sling. His side is bandaged and should heal nicely. Bring him back to me in a few days, just to ensure he’s healing properly, but I think he’ll be fine.” She hands him a jar of poultice. “Put this on his wounds twice daily. It’s mandrake and sage. It should ward off infection.”

“Thank you, mistress. Truly.” The tightness in his face drains and he reaches for his coin pouch. He dumps out five bits and a crown and pushes them towards Gram. “This is all I have, mistress healer, but it is yours. I cannot pay you enough for saving Marcus. He has been my friend since we were babes on our mothers’ knees. I was afraid he was going to die.”

Gram smiles, the deep lines in her face like trails of wisdom on a tattered map. “Keep the coins, young man. You will need them now more than ever. Marcus must not work until he’s healed properly, and he’ll need some tending over the coming days, which means you’ll be out of work too.”

“But you mended him—”

She is resolute. “I’ll not take those coins. Now put them away.”

His jaw clenches and he nods. “I will not forget this, mistress healer. I am in your service, whenever it is needed.”

He looks in my direction. “And yours as well, sweet mistress. Thank you.”



When Marcus is roused and able to stand, we walk the men to the door.

“Are you sure you don’t need to stay until morning?” Gram asks Kevan again. “Marcus can have Milla’s bed. She can sleep with me, and you can make a pallet on the floor. We have plenty of thick blankets.”

“You’re too kind,” Kevan replies, “but my home is two streets over, and we have no need to go near town square. Guard patrol will be busy in the market areas in this witching hour, looking for thieves—”

“Or drunks,” Marcus cuts in. “The patrol practically makes camp at the tavern.”

“Glad to see your wit is intact,” Gram says, giving his good arm a gentle squeeze. “You are looking much better. The pink has returned to your cheeks.”

“Thanks again for everything,” Marcus says.

She nods. “Go with God.” They head out the door and she latches it behind them. She turns to me. “I must get some sleep, child. These old bones are aching soundly. I’m proud of you, Milla. You assisted me beautifully.” She pulls me into a tight hug, and I sink into it like I did when I was a wee thing.

“I love you, Gram.”

“I love you too, sweet child. And evermore.”

I watch her slow gait as she makes her way to the bedroom door. She closes it slowly behind her. She patched up the young man as efficiently as any doctor, that's to be certain. But something about this fateful eve was different. It took a lot out of her.

And that scares me to death.

I make my way to the apothecary. Marcus' blood is still visible on the table and floor. If Gram were herself instead of ailing, this would be cleaned up by now. But I'm able-bodied and strong, and I'll do it. I retrieve a bucket of clean water and a rag. I have the table wiped down fairly quickly and set to work on the floor. My mind once again drifts to the bakery today and seeing Jordy.

Jordy...

Sometimes I wonder if he'd still speak to me if he knew the impure thoughts that consume my being when I'm with him, how my mouth gets dry and my knees weaken. My skin turns to gooseflesh and I imagine his bronzed arms wrapped around my body. They are not the thoughts of a proper maiden.

But Jordy isn't built for proper thoughts, and he has the face of a god.

I giggle at my boldness, obviously succumbing to mental exhaustion. I get back to the task at hand. I am on my knees, scrubbing the last of Marcus' blood away. I think about Sir Malek, stabbing that young man through his arm. His cruelty is beyond the pale. He is a monster.

The first time I saw Sir Malek in the village, I was a small girl, still clutching Gram's hand as we shopped. Malek and his companions were taunting a blind man who had accidentally bumped into him. The poor beggar was terrified, pleading with them to give him his walking stick and the few coins he had managed to collect. I remember the man's face as clearly as my own, the way the terror lit his eyes, his blindness showing his fear as if he were as sighted as me. And I pitied him. And I hated Sir Malek.

And do to this very day.

Legend has it that Malek can change form and become a raven, black as night and swift as an arrow. I don't know if the rumors are true, but I do know that he leaves a raven feather on every man he kills on the battlefield, or on the street, or in the tavern. The miller's son said that one time, Melak killed so many men in battle, the sky was filled with nothing but ebony feathers and screaming. He kills men for folly. He is a demon.

I toss the wet rags into the fireplace. We never reuse the ones that clean up the blood. I tiptoe into the bedroom, not wanting to wake Gram. We share our sleeping quarters, her bed on one wall and mine on the other. I'm so spent that I simply slip off my dress and skirts and slide under the covers in my chemise and bloomers. The goose feather pillow that Gram made me feels like a cloud on my face and I sink into it. But even before my weary eyes close, Gram coughs. And then she coughs again. She settles down quickly, the spell not lasting as long as usual, but that does little to ease my nerves. She is sick, and we don't know how to fix her, no matter how effectively she heals everyone else. I pull a single match and

my wee flintstone from the tiny pocket Gram added to my chemise. I sit up and strike the match, allowing it to burn for a few moments.

“I wish my gram’s cough would heal and she would be in full health again.” I blow out the match before the flame licks my fingers. “Like matches for wishes...”

CHAPTER 4

GRAM WAS RIGHT. I HAD NO PROBLEM SELLING THE WAIST PURSE. I've also sold a handful of matches and the scarf I was unable to sell last morrow, thanks to a kind lady's chilled hands and raw, pink nose. My coin pouch has six bits, and I still have some baubles I can sell next sunup. My work for this day is done and the sun is still high in the sky. This is a good day, and my soul is renewed. I set off for the bakery and the butcher shop, excited with the prospect of food that will last more than merely a couple of sunsets.

When I'm almost to the bakery, I take out the baubles. There is a blue one shaped like a fish. It's quite fetching. Jordy will adore it. He's always so generous about saving food for me and Gram, I want to give him the painted, blue fish. My belly tingles at the prospect. I've never given Jordy a gift before, and it's long overdue.

I'm almost to the door of the bakery. I can see Jordy through the opened door, his muscular arms lifting a long tray of bread for cooling. I watch the line of his jaw and admire the dusting of beard gracing it. He has a firm grip on the tray, his strides are steady and sure. He's always so serious, and yet he has a gentleness that makes me swoon in its glow. I hold up the bauble, wishing I had something to put it in that he could open. I try to yank the fish back when someone snatches it from my grasp.

Treena.

“What do we have here, match girl?” Treena turns the fish over in her hands. “Looks like a crudely-made bauble to me.”

“Then give it back,” I say.

Her smile is wicked, like it’s painted over a menacing scowl and is having trouble hiding it. “Give it back? Do you not sell the baubles, you wretch? Maybe I wish to buy it.”

“It’s not for sell,” I reply. *Even if I were starving, I wouldn’t sell Jordy’s fish to you.* But I don’t say it. Instead, I’m left standing in front of her like a statue, waiting for her to give the bauble back to me. Why does she entertain these intrigues? She is a young woman of means. She could be doing something productive instead of mocking and assaulting people. I will never understand the well-to-do.

She narrows her eyes on me. “Not for sell, you say? Everything is for sell, match girl. I would think you’d know that reality better than most.” She tosses a mahogany curl over her shoulder and stares me in the face, her icy eyes bluer than the fish ornament in her hands. Eyes that lovely shouldn’t inflict such cruelty.

“Give it back to me,” I say more forcibly this time. “It is mine, unless you regard yourself a thief.”

Her porcelain cheeks flame red. It’s hard to tell if she is embarrassed or enraged. Either way, I brace for her wrath.

“Are you suggesting that I am a thief, you pathetic little tripe?”

I step closer to Treena, not allowing her eyes to leave my face. “I hardly have need to suggest it when you ripped my

belonging from my hands. Is that not the work of a thief?"

Treena tosses the bauble on the ground behind her and stands in my path when I move to retrieve it. "Do not ever call me a thief again, or you'll live to regret it. That is a promise, match girl."

"Milla," Jordy calls out when he steps outside. "Is everything all right?"

Treena looks from Jordy to me, a twisted smile dancing on her lips. She assesses my dress and then runs a hand along the plunging neckline on hers.

She elevates her voice, ensuring Jordy will hear. "Such a shame you have to wear that plain attire, Milla. And the way you are forced to bind yourself." She leans over as if trying to look down the front of my dress. "Is there even a bosom in there, or does God in His infinite wisdom know better than to waste an ample bosom on a peasant? Then you would simply find yourself employed in the brothel, no?"

I glance at Jordy. His jaw is clenched, and he tightens the grip on the broom he's holding. There's no question why my cheeks are now streaked with the crimson I feel crawling over them. I couldn't be more humiliated. But embarrassed or no, I will not be silent.

"Well, in all fairness, between the two of us, you are the one who is dressed like she works in the brothel. Maybe she who casts the first stone shouldn't have her cleavage struggling to remain inside her bodice, *Mistress Treena*."

Jordy chuckles and resumes sweeping the piece of street in front of the bakery, shaking his head as he works.

“You will regret your remarks, match girl.”

“And you still resemble yours,” I say.

Treena turns to leave, crushing the fish bauble under her healed boot, and my soul along with it. I can't stop the tears that glass the rims of my eyes. Why is she so cruel, and life right along with her? I wanted to give the fish to Jordy, wanted to give him something to show what his generosity means to me. What *he* means to me. And Treena crushed it to dust.

“So, she of sharp tongue and a wit to match, are you coming inside?” Jordy asks, holding the bakery door open for me.

It is sweet of Jordy to pretend that Treena didn't truly best me. She may be terrible, but she's right. I am a peasant, and nothing more. I can't face him now, not like this. My feelings are too raw and hurt to hide.

“I need to take my leave for now, Jordy, but I will be back before the sun sets. I still need bread.”

“All right,” he replies. “I'll see you later, then?”

“You will.”

I watch Jordy until he's back inside. I turn and pick up the remnants of the fish, anger filling me like oil in a jar. Treena is of an affluent family, one she can trace back to her great-great-great grandparents and beyond. She is vile, and horrible, and miserable...

And validated.

And I am not.

I take the familiar trek toward home, my purse full but my soul empty. I need answers, deserve answers, deserve to know who I truly am and where I come from. And no matter how soundly Gram protests, I need her to tell me. *Now*.



The sound of the coin pouch dropping on the table startles Gram and she turns around, her humming stopping abruptly.

“Oh, Milla, I didn’t hear you come in. Sounds like you had a productive day, and the day is still young at that. Good for you.” She hums her cheery tune a few more seconds and then glances at me again. “Did you not buy any rations, child? Where is the food?”

“Gram, we need to talk,” I say. “And it cannot wait a moment longer.”

Gram folds her arms across her chest and leans back in her chair. I’ve done this before, thrown myself into a room like a wolf is at my heels, demanding to know my sir name, my mother’s name, anything at all really about who I am. I’m sure my dramatics are wearing on her nerves by now, but I will not back down this time. I need to know who I really am, once and for all. And this time, I will not yield.

“All right,” she replies. “Out with it. I’m listening.”

“Who am I?” I ask. “I need to know who I am.”

Gram sighs. “Have we not been over this, Milla? I’ve told you—”

“You’ve told me nothing!” I slap a hand on the table. “I’ve lived twenty seasons. I’m a woman now, not a child that you need to protect. And I need to know who I am. I’m begging you, Gram. Tell me something. Anything. Please.”

This is usually the moment when Gram gets upset and reminds me that she’s raised me from the time I was a babe, and that she is my family. And that’s true. But Gram did not spring from nothing. Somewhere out there is a family that Gram was once a part of—that I *should be* a part of. I look into her eyes, unwilling to blink. I need her to see how much this means to me.

“Please, Gram,” I add. “I need to know. My nothingness in this wretched world is ripping me to shreds. *Please.*”

Gram reaches up and touches the edge of my hair. “Hers was the same color.” Her eyes are on my face but looking well beyond it. She is faraway and distant.

“Who’s hair, Gram?” I ask.

“Your mother’s.”

Every nerve in my body is standing on end. She has never referenced my mother before. Not once. She has said that she was my maternal grandmother, but she’s never said *your mother*. I feel the tears in my eyes before they land on my cheeks.

“She had flames for hair,” she continues, “and eyes so azure they shamed the seas. Her skin was fair, like milk and

froth. Her lips were as red as velvet roses wet with dew. She was kind and strong. And I loved her, with every breath in my soul. My was my only daughter.” Gram looks me in the eyes this time, making sure I’m listening. “You are the spit of your mother, her doppelganger. For that, I am forever grateful. And she loved you beyond measure.”

“Is she still alive?” I ask, my voice barely above a whisper.

Gram clears her throat. “No, child. She is not. And that is all I will say. I have said too much already, so we will speak no more of it.”

She stands again, heading back to the apothecary, but I’ll not have it.

“I need to know more, Gram! What was my mother’s name? Did she die during childbirth with me? Where is my father? I need to know.”

Gram is resolute. “You need nothing. You have everything you need here with me. I have cared for you your entire life. Do you truly believe I would do something to hurt you with intention? If I were free to divulge our lineage, don’t you know that I would do so? Your happiness has always meant everything to me.”

I take a fortifying breath. “Treena humiliated me in front of Jordy today. She is a vile, nasty, toad of a person, but at least she knows who she is. Her family tree branches the expanse of our entire village. No matter her wickedness, she has roots, knowledge of her house. She has memories. I deserve memories, Gram, and yet, you will not share them with me.”

Her mouth turns down, the deep creases in her face narrowing. “It’s not that I won’t tell you, Milla...it’s that I can’t. I have to do what’s best for you, and you have to allow me to do it.”

I hear her words, but my heart won’t accept them. I say the words out loud instead that haunt me deep into the night. “Does anyone miss me?”

Gram’s shoulders sag and she touches my arm. “Once upon a time, yes. But not anymore.”

I nod and look away. There is so much I want to know about my lineage, a fire in my belly that can’t be squelched. I have to be more than this, need to be more than a peddler on the streets, day after day and season after season. I step out of our cottage for some fresh air, the thatched walls suddenly smothering me. I glance out into the distance, the top of the castle in full view beyond the market square. I wonder again about life in the castle. I’ve never been inside the castle walls, never been to court like the rich young maidens in Timberness. I long to see the grandeur, the absolute splendor. I want to see more than life as a peasant. Maybe there is a way that I can be more than a beggar.

“Gram,” I say, running back through the front door. “I have an education, can read and barter, and I’m extremely well-spoken. You have been an excellent teacher.”

“Yes, on every account,” Gram replies. “And you are stating the obvious, why?”

“Because maybe one day I could work in the castle. I could be a palace washer woman, or a cook. I could even be a

handmaiden. And you could come with me. You're an excellent healer—”

The color drains from Gram's face, her eyes scanning mine like she's looking for the venom she needs to suck out. “Where is this coming from, child? Your words are poison. And you will never work in the palace. It is absolutely forbidden. To hear such talk from you is beyond painful. It will never happen. Do you understand?”

Confusion ticks my brain. Why is she acting this way? My voice is quiet, “No, Gram. Actually, I don't understand at all. I am no longer a child. You cannot hold me here if I decide to seek employment in the castle someday.”

“Milla, listen to me. You will never work in the castle. It is forbidden. I am your elder, the only mother you've ever known, and I have spoken. You will obey me. This subject will never be discussed again, understand?”

“But, Gram—”

Her voice is a growl. “Do you understand?”

Gram has never yelled at me before, and it's frightening. *What is she so afraid of?* Whatever it is, it must be terrifying. So, I oblige. “Yes, Gram. I understand.”

She begins to cough, and I rush to the water barrel to get her a drink. When the coughing subsides, I collect my coin pouch and head back to the bakery, guilt stabbing my heart like a blade. The last thing I wanted to do was upset her enough to awaken her cough. So, I put the castle out of my

mind and focus on heaping our dinner table with a few of Gram's favorites. Life goes on, even if it's not in the palace.

I pull my match and flintstone from my chemise. I strike the match and watch the flame for a moment. I close my eyes and mutter, "I wish to know my lineage. Let the sky or the thin air show me a sign if that is all I am afforded."

I blow out the match and keep walking toward the market.

CHAPTER 5

“THAT WAS A THIEF’S JAB, JORDY.” THE YOUNG MAN RUBS HIS chest, no doubt relieving the stinging from Jordy’s blade and resumes a fighting stance once more. “You don’t play fair. I’ll be ready this time. Aye, let’s go again!”

“Thief or no, I can still best you,” Jordy shouts back. “Let’s go, then.”

I grip my basket tighter, keeping my distance, but still close enough to spy Jordy and a clutch of young men sparring with swordplay behind the bakery. There’s not a man in Timberness who can best Jordy at swordplay. I watch in eager wonderment as Jordy matches his opponent blow for blow. It’s obvious Jordy’s holding back, but the other lad is expending every ounce of energy. Jordy’s quickness is a sight to behold. I’ve never seen anyone as quick with a sword.

“Are there no better ways to occupy your time, Mistress Milla?” Jordy’s father asks when he spies me watching the intrigues. Master Orwan ushers me toward the bakery. “My son may never stop showing off if he sees you watching.” He winks. “I have plenty for him to do in the shop this fine day, and an olive loaf waiting for you.”

“Yes, sir,” I reply, but I notice the baker’s smile. Master Orwan professes much, but he is proud of Jordy’s skills. “I’ll be along shortly, sir. I think Jordy is about to make short order of his foe again. I don’t want to miss it.”

“Suit yourself,” Master Orwan replies, whistling as he steps through the bakery doors.

Jordy’s eyes dart in my direction and in one swift motion, he has his friend on the ground, the sword to his throat.

“Seven hells, I didn’t see that coming,” the young man says as Jordy offers him a hand and tugs him up from the ground. “Where did I go wrong this time? I saw your blade, lunged. I learned last spar that you lead left, and then—”

“You’d learn more if you’d keep your cakehole shut.” Jordy laughs with vigor. He extends a hand to his friend again.

His friend shakes his head. “Will that fire hand burn me if I touch it? Your hands are truly aflame when you are wielding a sword. Ole’ fire hands indeed.”

Jordy claps his friend’s shoulder. “These fire hands better make their way into some dough before my father scalps me. Same time overmorrow?”

“Indeed.”

Jordy slides the sword into its sheath and joins me. “Good day, Milla. I didn’t realize I had an audience. How long have you been watching?”

“Long enough to be impressed. You are quite skillful, Jordy. Good show.”

“Thank you, Milla. Shall we?” He points to the bakery doors. “I’m sure this was your intended destination before getting sucked into my tomfoolery.”

“Fire hands, aye?” I smile and try to hide the red heat now climbing up my face.

“Only with a sword I’ve been told,” he replies.

“Indeed.” But I know those hands alone could scorch my very soul.

“Good day, Milla,” Mistress Orwan says when we’re inside the bakery. “Come for your olive loaf, no doubt. I’ll fetch it.”

“Might I fetch it later this day?” I ask. “I’m actually on my way to gather thyme plants for Gram. Her cough is worse, and I know the thyme will help. I was wanting to ask you to hold the bread for me until this evening.”

“As you wish,” Mistress Orwan replies. “Jordy, might I have a word?”

I grip my basket tighter as they head into the stock room.



He doesn’t have to be this close to me. The thyme plants are scattered throughout this area of the forest in a bountiful plenty, but Jordy hasn’t left my side. The weather is getting colder, though, and my thin coat does little to stop the wisps of chilled wind that whistle through the trees in quick gusts. We have to pick the last of the thyme now before the first hard freeze.

I was more than surprised when Jordy offered to help collect the thyme leaves. I want to make a tea for Gram to help with her cough, and as long as we are already out here, Jordy and I might as well collect enough leaves to stock the

apothecary for the remainder of the winter. Gram will be pleasantly surprised, and I love seeing her happy. I still feel terrible for the words we exchanged yesterday, and her cough was worse during the night. Hopefully, the thyme tea will give her more rest this evening.

“It is getting a bit colder,” Jordy says, blowing a puff of warm air in his hands. “Some of these plants are showing the effects of it too. Good thing we came to gather these when we did. I fear they’ll be gone very soon.”

We both have white aprons tied on our waists, compliments of Jordy’s mother. The aprons gather in the front to create wide pockets to hold the leaves as we collect them with our free hands. Jordy also brought a large basket to put the leaves in when we’re finished.

Jordy leans close to a targaroot plant and lifts a couple of yellow leaves to his nose. “For Christ’s sake, Milla, these smell like sweated feet. That’s absolutely revolting. What are they used to aid?”

I grin. “The feet.”

“Come now, lass, you’re just joshing me.”

I sneak glances at Jordy’s arms as we work, his tight muscles visible through his white shirt. I clear my throat when he notices me staring.

“Are you all right, Milla?” he asks. I can see the grin he tries to hide with his hand. He caught me dead to rights.

“Quite all right, yes. But I will admit that I’m quite shocked that your mother encouraged you to help me today,

Jordy. I know you should be working in the bakery. Master Orwan said he needed you today.”

He empties his apron in the basket and wipes his hands on the tops of his pants. “Honestly, Milla, my mother thinks the world of your grandmother. When you told her the thyme was to help your gram’s cough, she practically pushed me out the door to help you.”

Jordy stands close to me again, busily picking the thyme. We reach for the same cluster of leaves and our hands touch. I move my hand quickly, then peek in Jordy’s direction.

“My apologies,” I blurt. “I didn’t mean to—”

“It’s fine, Milla,” he says. “Very fine.”

We work quietly for the next several minutes, the basket nearly full when Jordy says, “I think we have enough. Should we make haste?”

“Certainly.”

I empty my apron a final time and Jordy picks up the basket. We make our way through the edge of the forest when we hear voices.

“Who could that be?” I ask.

“I’m not sure,” Jordy says. “Stay close to me. It could be rogues.” He uses a hand to nudge me behind him.

We both notice the golden armor at the same time and instinctively duck behind a patch of shrubbery. The two knights are members of the king’s guard. Most of them are honorable, but a few can be difficult to deal with. We both

know it is better to avoid a confrontation, but Jordy has bravery in spades, nonetheless. He glances back at me and puts a finger to his lips.

He mouths the words in a hushed whisper, “If we are confronted, run. I will negotiate with them alone.” He moves his shirt aside, revealing a dagger in his waistband.

It is no secret that Jordy is masterful at swordplay. He used to duck out of his schooling to practice archery and dueling with the other young men in town, and his mother whacked him for it a time or two. But he never yielded. So quick is Jordy with a sword, it is surprising he is not a member of the king’s guard himself. His heart is wild, but mine is beating so fast, I fear the knights will hear it. Jordy reaches backward and puts his arm to the side to shield me. If ever I were to be safe in a situation like this, it would be in the arms of Jordy.

“I’m telling you, Rodrick, the king is evil,” the tallest of the two knights says.

“Your words are treason,” the knight he referred to as Rodrick replies. “They could see us both beheaded.”

“My words are the truth,” the tall knight says. “And I need you to hear me out.”

I peek around Jordy for a better view. The tall knight has his helmet off, his rich walnut eyes pleading and widened as he begs his friend to listen. His blond hair is streaked with lines of chestnut and red. His skin is bronzed, yet smooth, and his shoulders are broad, matching his height. He is a tower of a man, and keenly handsome.

“All right,” Rodrick says, annoyance lining his voice, “I’m listening. Explain yourself.”

The tall knight looks about for a moment then leans closer to Rodrick. “The king is evil. But that shouldn’t be any great revelation. Anyone who bolsters Sir Malek into a position of power can’t be anything short of a monster—”

“True or no, he is our king,” Rodrick replies. “We cannot defy the king—”

“And he is ailing. He has gone mad, I tell you!” The tall knight grabs his friend’s shoulders, desperate for him to listen. “There is more, Rodrick. It was many years ago to be certain, but I know what he did to the queen.”

Jordy’s head jerks back to face me as I throw a hand to my lips. Jordy mouths the words *What does he mean?* I shrug, confusion ticking my brain. Our queen has been dead since Jordy and I were wee babes. The tall knight looks young. How can he possibly know anything about such matters?

“You speak madness, and it could be the death of you,” Rodrick replies. “And speaking of such things will cost you your head if you’re caught, you know that.”

The knight stands firm. “You should know by now that I am not a man who speaks idle words. ‘Tis the truth, I swear it. And I can prove it.”

A trumpet sounds and I startle in response. I feel Jordy’s body jerk, and he pushes us even lower to the ground beneath the thick underbrush.

“We must take our leave,” Rodrick says. “We’ll speak more on this matter this evening. And I want to see this proof you speak of.”

The handsome knight nods. “Then you shall have it.”

The knights make their way out of the forest. Jordy and I watch their backs until all we see is sky and a line of dense trees. We’re sitting in the spot where we were crouching down merely moments ago, still and quiet like statues. Jordy is the first to speak.

“What do you think that was all about?”

“I’m sure I do not know,” I say, “but I’m afraid. If what that knight says is true—”

“It can’t be true,” Jordy replies. “Milla, do you know what that would mean?”

I do, and so I’m silent again. Jordy’s eyes move over my body and I resist the urge to clear my throat.

“You’re shivering,” he says. “Here, allow me.”

Jordy places his coat around my shoulders, his body closer to mine than it’s ever been. The gesture is so sweet that I can’t bring myself to tell him that I’m shivering from fear and not the cold. And if I’m being completely honest, I can tell he’s trembling too.

His face is close to mine, but he doesn’t back away. He’s so close to me now that our noses are nearly touching. We sit in the silence for a few moments, words seeming useless and small. I enjoy each nuance of his face, focusing on a lone freckle in the crease of his nose that I’ve never noticed before,

and the scar on his hairline where he fell in the horse stable as a boy.

“You’re so beautiful, Milla,” he finally says. “Do you know how long I’ve wanted to touch you?”

He runs a finger along my cheekbone and my stomach flutters and pinches. His touch is dizzying, his fingers like an artform long forgotten and now reborn. I feel I will wake and ruin it all.

“Your skin is as fair as bleached silk and ever as soft,” he continues. Jordy lifts the strands of hair from my shoulder. “Your hair is so fire-kissed, I’d expect it to burn to the touch. You are my very dream each night, and who I look forward to seeing each day.”

His words are enough to make me swoon. I can barely believe he’s confessing these feelings for me. I know my cheeks are flushed, the warmth now spreading through my middle as well.

“Did you practice those sweet nothings, my lord?” I tease, “Or, do you say that to all the fair maidens?”

He winks and I melt. “Only the ones who will listen.”

“Oh, is that so?” I lightly punch his arm. “I believe you to be the rogue, sir.”

But Jordy ignores the folly and stares into my eyes. “Milla,” he says, taking both of my hands in his, “may I kiss you?”

I swallow down the eagerness and smile. “Yes.”

He leans in, his lips so close to mine I can feel their warmth. He hesitates, but only for a moment, then his lips are on mine. My lips part, allowing him to taste my mouth. His hand cups my cheek as the kiss deepens, and then, ever so abruptly, the kiss is through. He is searching my eyes, his hand still on my cheek and his thumb lightly stroking it.

“Well, was that to your satisfaction, my lady?”

“I’ve never done that before,” I reply, “so I can’t say I had any real expectations. It didn’t last very long though, did it?”

Jordy smiles so wide his eyes squint. “And you judge the quality of a kiss by its duration, aye?”

“Aye, maybe I do.”

“Well, the lady shall have what the lady wants.”

Jordy captures my bottom lip swiftly this time, then takes my full mouth, crushing any words I might have spoken in protest, not that I have any objections. When our mouths are one, I close my eyes, my mind a dizzying sensation of warmth and pure satisfaction. I can smell his skin, like smoke and musk, and I slide a hand into his hair, deepening the kiss. I want him ever near me, never want the kiss to end.

But, like all good and fantastic things, it does.

“Was that more to your liking, my lady?” Jordy offers a hand to help me up.

“It was, my lord.” I ask him the only question that has ticked in my brain since the kiss was offered. I need to know, have wanted it to be so for a very long time now. “Am I your lady, Jordy?”

He lifts my hand to his lips and places a soft kiss on top of it. “You have been my lady since the first time you walked into the bakery.”

My voice is a quiet thing. “Me, Jordy? The match girl?”

His soulful eyes search mine. “You are no match girl, Milla. You are the flame that awakens the match, and I want you more than air.”

His lips find mine again, and I melt into his bronzed arms. If all we ever have is this moment, then I am contented in it.

Jordy wants *me*.

The match girl.

“One more,” he says when I straighten my skirts and inspect the thyme plants to ensure we haven’t lost any. “One more kiss before our rendezvous is over, now that you are declared as mine.”

“And if I refuse?” I playfully suggest.

“Aye, there will be no refusing. You are my lady. No time to be greedy with your affections now...unless you find my kisses a dull thing.”

I capture his lips before his words halt, never wanting him to think his kisses are anything less than magical, necessary, every dream I’ve ever dreamt since knowing him. I thread my fingers into his hair and tug his mouth deeper into mine. His large hand spreads across the small of my back, his other finding my cheek. He trails a thumb across it and I gasp.

“Is this to your liking, my lady?” he whispers against my lips.

“Don’t stop, sir. Just kiss me.”

He obliges and I melt against his touch, dizzying with tingles and shivers and every forbidden feeling only spoken of on side streets and tavern halls among the women more experienced than the likes of me. But it feels good, so I tremble for more.

What shall I ever wish for again?

CHAPTER 6

IF I EVER MAKE IT TO HEAVEN, I'M SURE I WILL LEARN THAT Jordy is an angel who has fallen down to Earth. He walked me to my door and kissed my cheek in the delicate way a gentleman does, not caring who saw. That is how I know his intentions are good and true. I am his lady. I think I shall wear this smile forever.

“Gram,” I say when I’m inside the door, “I have an entire basket of thyme, enough to stock the apothecary through winter. Come and see.”

I hear the cough before she enters the room. “Oh, child, you are a welcomed sight. Your efforts are most appreciated. Will you help me shelve it?”

“No,” I say, “I will watch you sit while I steep you some thyme tea, and then you will continue to sit and drink it as I stock the shelves alone. You will not lift another finger until that cough is tamed.” I pull a chair out for her and pat the seat. “Now, sit. Milla’s orders.”

The corners of her mouth turn up into a grin as she pushes a piece of gray hair back into her tight bun. “Yes, madam.” Gram taps my bottom with the back of her hand. “But I will admit, you are becoming a bit of a tyrant in your maiden years.”

I grimace and shake my head. I tuck a few of my own stray hairs under my bonnet and start breaking up the leaves to

steep. I join Gram at the table when the kettle is over the flame.

“So,” I say, “Jordy helped me pick the thyme today. I was surprised when he accepted my offer, but after what transpired on our escapade in the forest, I’m sure he will never refuse another offer to help me again.”

Gram raises an eyebrow. “Oh, and why would that be?”

I fetch her tea and set the cup in front of her before answering, “He wants to court me...and he kissed me.” I raise my eyes slowly, expecting a speech on decorum and decency. But instead, she’s still smiling.

“Jordy is a fine young man,” she says, “and from a good family. He is quite the catch, my dear. And very easy on the eyes, am I right?”

“Gram! What has gotten into you?” I clasp her forearm that’s resting on the table and give it a squeeze. “And to think, I was worried about getting lectured on my virtues. Maybe I should lecture you.”

Gram lets out a hearty laugh and sips the tea. “Well, it’s not like I didn’t expect this or anything. I’ve seen the way that young man looks at you. Even a blind man could see that he is smitten. And you? You are drawn to his wildness.” She grins. “But I do like Jordy, and I am happy for you, my love. It’s about time you had a beau. I fear you’ve spent most of your maiden years looking after me. You deserve happiness of your own. After all, you are a woman. No, you are not a child, no matter how much I wished to keep you my little girl forever.”

“Thank you, Gram.” I clasp her hand. “And I will always be your little girl.”

She sips her tea and I fetch some water for myself before joining her at the table again.

“Well,” I say, “as exciting as that was, it wasn’t nearly the most exciting thing that happened in the forest today. You’ll never guess what Jordy and I saw.”

“Oh, an intrigue,” Gram replies. “Tell me then. I’m all ears.”

“We saw two knights talking. We hid in the underbrush, so they didn’t see us, but one was telling the other that the king is evil. He also said that the king is ailing, but that’s not the most interesting part. What made my hairs stand on end was when he said that he knows what the king did to the queen so very long ago, and that he can prove it.”

Gram’s face whitens, horror gaping her mouth and glassing her eyes. “Milla, promise me you will never speak of this treachery again. Truth or no, it could get you hanged. Or worse.” Her hands are visibly shaking as she pushes the tea aside.

I hate seeing her so upset, so I try to lighten the darkness now consuming her thoughts. “Hanged or worse? What could be worse than hanging? Worse than dead—”

“Milla!” Gram snaps, causing me to jump. “This is no time for folly. I mean it. Promise me you will never speak of this treachery again, not even to Jordy. And caution him as well if he mentions it. Matters of the palace could see you both

punished, even if you are simply in the wrong place at the wrong time. You could pay with your life. Understand?”

Fear twitches at the hairs on my arms, and I rub them to relieve the tingles. “Yes, Gram. I understand. I will speak of this to no one. I promise.”



I’m not sure how long it took me to stock the apothecary after Gram went down for the night. I spent most of the afternoon finishing random chores in the cottage, anything at all I could do to help Gram after frightening her so badly with the revelation about the knights in the forest. Nothing could’ve prepared me for her reaction, and truth be known, I still can’t truly understand it. Matters of the palace have nothing to do with common folk. And Jordy and I would never spread eavesdropped speculations around Timberness. We know how dangerous idle talk can be. Gram’s reaction was beyond troubling.

What is she really afraid of?

I put on my coat and step outside for some fresh air. I switch my thoughts to Jordy—the way his lips felt on mine, the way his hand cupped my cheek, the way his mouth tasted. My thoughts make me feel giddy and mischievous all at once. He is a delicious thrill, better than food. Better than air. And he is mine.

I hear a muffled cry behind me and bend down to pick it up when I see it. The kitten is small, probably not too far weaned from its mother. It is a wee thing, tufts of shaggy, white fur

mingled with patches of copper and brown. I pity it immediately. But my pity will not fill its empty belly, and I know we cannot take in another hungry mouth to feed.

“Wait here,” I say, its tiny cries still filling the night air when I set it back to the ground.

I return a bit later with an old blanket, a piece of cheese, and a saucer of water. It's not much, but it will sustain the kitten until I can take it to the docks next morrow. Hundreds of cats live on the docks, filling their bellies with the remnants of fish that the boats drop from their nets while unloading their catch, not to mention the dock rats that live there for the exact same reason. The docks are a cat's paradise.

I wrap the kitten in the blanket when it is satisfied from the cheese and snuggle it close for a minute or two. I sit on the cold steps leading into the back of our home, the kitten now nestled in my lap. The sky is blanketed with stars, and I watch one streak across the pitch like a lighted bird in flight. But I do not make a wish. A thousand souls could be wishing on that falling star this very moment, under the illusion that its magic is solely for them. But the light of a star cannot be contained, can never be completely glowing for a single person who dares to wish upon it. So, I reach into my chemise and retrieve a match and my flintstone. I strike the match and watch the glow until it nearly reaches my fingers.

“I wish for Gram to have a peaceful night.” I blow out the flame before it reaches my fingers.

When nothing else in the world is your very own except the flame of a single match, it becomes a magical thing. It is

the magic you create for yourself, and it is powerful. So, I save my wishes for matches. Let the others keep the stars.

CHAPTER 7

SWIRLS OF DUST TICKLE MY NOSE, BUT I KEEP SWEEPING.

Master Burgess sometimes pays me to clean his trading post. I know he doesn't need me to clean it, but he knows I need the work, so he obliges.

"So, Milla," Master Burgess says, draping a hand over my shoulder, "are you going to the harvest dance on morrow's night?"

"If Gram feels up to it," I reply. "Why, kind sir? Are you asking to take me?"

He lets out a laugh that comes straight from his belly. "Now, could you just imagine an old codger like me arriving to the dance with you? Tongues would wag, my dear." He shakes his head, still chuckling. "How is your gram, by the way? Is she feeling any better?"

"She has her good days and bad." I lean the broom against the wall and step closer to Master Burgess. "Might I ask you a question, good sir?"

"Anything."

I clear my throat. "How long have you known Gram?"

"Well, now, let me see..." He puts a hand to his chin. "I've known your grandmother for at least twelve seasons, ever since I opened the trading post. Why, dear? Me thinks this isn't simply curiosity's handiwork."

Master Burgess has no idea how far beyond simple curiosity this goes. “I was wondering if she’s ever spoken to you about her family, where she’s originally from, places she’s lived? Has she told you anything at all about our people?”

“No, child, I can’t say that she has.” His eyes narrow. “Are you saying that your gram has never told you anything about where she comes from, where *you* come from? Do you not know your kinsmen, child?”

It is a hard thing to admit, but I let the confession flow as freely as water. “My gram has never told me anything about my lineage. I’ve asked so many times, and each question is met with silence or a lecture about how my heritage doesn’t define me. Gram doesn’t understand my longing to know, my need to know where I truly belong. It is a cruelty, keeping my lineage from me.”

Master Burgess lifts the broom from against the wall, then leans on it as if pondering every question life holds. “You know, maybe your gram not telling you isn’t a cruelty at all. Maybe she’s protecting you from something.”

Protecting me from something?

“So,” he continues, “you did a fine job with the cleaning, Milla. Mighty fine. Wait here while I fetch your payment.”

His words swirl in my head. Why has this observation never occurred to me? Could it be possible that Gram is simply protecting me—*from our family*? How can that be?

Master Burgess pulls me from my thoughts. “Here you go, Milla. All plucked and ready for the flame.” He hands me a

cleaned duck and a fistful of matches.

“Oh, you are too kind. This is too generous for simply sweeping—”

“Nonsense. You and your gram enjoy the duck. You’ve definitely earned it.”

I put the duck in my large pouch and the matches in my pocket. It’s hard to swallow past the lump in my throat. Words are even harder to form, but I manage somehow. “Thank you, Master Burgess. You’re the best friend I’ve ever had.”

He claps a hand on my shoulder, his glassy eyes nearly as bright as the white of his beard. “Milla, my dear, I’m flattered, but you may need to find new friends.”

We both laugh, needing the frivolity in the moment. I thank him again, hitch my pouch on my shoulder, and set out toward home. I walk two streets down and hear it.

“Milla.”

The voice is behind me. And I know it’s Jordy.

“Do you need help with that?” He catches up to me and takes hold of my pouch. “I can carry that for you, my lady.”

I allow him to take the pouch and accept his elbow when he extends it, tucking my hand in the crook of his arm.

“So, do you plan to meet me every morrow and carry my pouch when I’m peddling my wares?” I wink. “Not very practical, aye, my lord? How will you work in the bakery?”

His lips graze my cheek. “All right, not every morrow, but I can carry it for now.”

I sigh and lean my cheek on his arm. “Thank you, my lord.”

We stroll silently for a few moments, the chill in the air not nearly as sharp since the sun decided to make an appearance when the clouds forgot it is nearly winter. I love the feeling of being so near Jordy, him holding me close to his side as we walk. He glances at me.

“Milla, are you planning to attend the harvest dance on morrow’s night?”

He’s asking me to the dance! My heart’s racing faster than a runaway stallion. “Why, Jordy, you’re the second gentleman to ask me that very same question today.”

He stops to face me, his eyes wide and searching. “Someone else asked you to the dance? Who? What did you say?”

I stand on my tiptoes to be nearer his face, a smile I can’t contain spreading across my lips. “I’m teasing you, silly goose. Master Burgess asked if I was going, but he wasn’t inquiring to take me.” I lean even nearer his lips. “Are you inquiring to escort me to the dance, kind sir?”

“Well, the only way I’ll attend is if you’re by my side, so yes. Milla, may I escort you to the dance?”

His words are music. The moment, perfection.

“Yes, Jordy, I would be delighted.”

He lifts the back of my hand to his lips and places a soft kiss on top of it. “I’m glad Master Burgess was only jesting

about taking you. I'm sure if he had been serious, you would've chosen him over me."

I giggle and lightly punch his arm. We continue towards my cottage to the sound of bird song and the breeze. We near the middle of market square, and Jordy stops stone still. Sudden shouting breaks our tranquility.

"I challenge you to a duel!"

"But, sir, I'm begging you! It was an accident. I didn't see you."

Sir Malek and two other knights of the king's guard are standing in the middle of town. Sir Malek has his sword drawn on the blacksmith's son, challenging him to a duel. The boy is only sixteen seasons, his mother's pride and joy. There are swords spilled on the ground near his feet. Something is dreadfully wrong.

"What's happening?" Jordy says, dropping my pouch and stepping closer to the street. "Why is he drawing his sword on Philip?"

"Jordy, stand down." I clutch his arm and try pulling him back, but he's holding firm. Jordy is twenty seasons, and twice the size of Philip. I fear what will happen if he draws Sir Malek's attention.

"You soiled my boot, boy. Do you know the value of these boots, a boot belonging to a knight in the king's guard?" Sir Malek lifts his blade to the young man's nose. "They are worth more than your whole wretched life."

Panic lines Philip's voice. "It was an accident, Sir Malek. I didn't mean to step on your boot. I was carrying a bundle of swords to the blacksmith—"

"And you would be wise to pick one up to defend yourself." Malek lowers his sword and uses it to point to the swords on the ground. "Pick one up, now!"

The other knights are laughing. "He may soil himself worse than he soiled your boot."

"Please, sir. I don't wish to duel. I have no skill with the sword." Philip is terrified, tears now filling his cheeks. "I'm begging you."

"Never beg," Malek replies. "It's pathetic. Now everyone knows you're weak, and a coward."

Malek sweeps Philip's legs in one swift motion and he falls to the ground. Jordy tugs away from my grasp and heads toward Philip just as Philip's father runs up to Sir Malek.

"Here," Philip's father says to Malek. He drops a coin purse in his hand. "That is a week's wages, and I am offering a new sword to each of you as well." He nods toward the other guards. "But, please, don't harm my son. He's a good boy. He meant no disrespect."

Sir Malek bounces the coin purse in his hand and then looks at the other knights. "You men interested in new swords?" They smirk and nod. He looks at the blacksmith again. "I would think a blacksmith would have a son more capable in the art of swordplay. What a pity."

Sir Malek places his sword back in its sheath and turns as though he's walking away, but then kicks a heap of dirt in Philip's face. Philip coughs and rubs his eyes as Jordy and the boy's father help him to his feet. Malek and the guards break out in raucous laughter.

"Aye, Sir Malek," Jordy calls out, and I lose my breath. "I would think that the king's guard would have better things to do than assault a boy of sixteen seasons. You have a kingdom to protect, no? And at this moment, you are protecting it from what exactly? The blacksmith's son?"

Peals of laughter break out from the crowd that has gathered. Malek glances at the crowd as Jordy picks up one of the scattered swords that Philip and his father are frantically gathering.

"This looks like a good sword," Jordy says, turning it around in his hand. He swings it a few times, swooshing sounds slicing the air. He points it toward Malek, then drops it to his side. "Yes, this is an excellent sword. Perhaps you'll choose one like it for your repayment for not killing an innocent lad, aye, Malek?"

Sir Malek looks Jordy up and down from head to toe, his eyes resting on Jordy's tall stature and muscled arms. "Who are you?" Malek asks, his hand across his waist and resting on his own blade.

"Merely a citizen of Timberness," Jordy replies. "Nothing more, nothing less." Jordy hands the sword to the blacksmith and nods his head toward Malek. "I'm simply a helpful neighbor."

“Do not ever oppose me, lad,” Malek says. “It will be the last thing you ever do.”

Jordy makes his way back to me and takes my hand. He turns toward Malek again. “I would never dream of opposing you, Sir Malek. I mean, what match would a simpleton like me be against a knight like yourself?”

“Fire hands! Fire hands!” a couple of the onlookers shout in unison.

Sir Malek glares at Jordy, and then his dark eyes meet mine. I want to shrink behind Jordy, the weight of Malek’s stare as heavy as an anvil around my neck. Malek isn’t as tall as Jordy, but he is a hulkish man in his own right, with a bald head and neatly trimmed goatee. He is many years Jordy’s senior, and cruel to his very core.

“Let’s get to those swords,” the blacksmith says to Malek, doing his best to break the tension.

Malek looks at me again, his jaw clenching before he spits on the ground. “Mind your place, young man,” he says to Jordy. “The only reason you’re not dead where you stand is because I honor your bravery. But there is a fine line between bravery and stupidity. Do not err on the side of stupidity again. I would hate for something unfortunate to happen to you...or your fair maiden there.”

Jordy moves forward, but I put a hand on his chest to stop him. Malek chuckles and follows the other knights to the blacksmith’s shop. The crowd begins to disperse.

“He is a vile, evil dog,” Jordy says. “How can the king condone a knight like Malek? Wanting to duel with a boy? He has no honor in him, a complete disgrace.”

“I do not know,” I say, “but he’s moved along now. Shall we keep walking?”

Jordy picks up my pouch again, muttering about Malek the entire walk to the cottage. When we reach the door, he grimaces and then kisses my cheek.

“Milla, I’m sorry about what happened with Malek. Maybe I shouldn’t have interfered, but I couldn’t stand by and let him hurt Philip.”

“I know,” I assure him. “And you wouldn’t be my Jordy if you weren’t brave, or if you didn’t speak your truth. Those are the very things I admire most about you.”

This time, the kiss is on my lips. It is warm, and soft, the scent of musk and leather filling my nostrils and my soul.

He looks full on my face when the kiss is through. “I shall see you on the morrow’s eve, then? At the harvest dance?”

“Aye, you shall.”

I shake the dust from my skirts and step inside the cottage. “Gram, guess what I have for us? Master Burgess paid me with a cleaned duck. I’ll set to roasting it now. I can taste it already. Oh, excuse me,” I say when I realize she is with a patient. “My apologies for going on and on.”

“No need for apologies at all,” the man says, buttoning his shirt. “Your grandmother is all finished with me. And I would be excited about roast duck too. Sounds delicious.”

His cheeks are rosy, and his smile is pleasant. I've seen him in the market square before but can't recall his name.

"Here you are, mistress," he says to Gram. "My thanks for your expertise."

Gram jiggles the contents in her hand. "Coins? I don't usually get paid with coins. This is too much."

"It's not enough," the man corrects. "You are a fine healer, better than the doctor I would dare to say. And you listen to your patients. I am eternally grateful to you." He tips his hat in my direction. "You and your grandmother enjoy the duck, mistress. Good morrow."

"Good morrow," Gram and I say in unison.

Gram coughs the moment he's out the door, like she's been holding it in. And this cough is rough and deep, like her throat is full of sand.

I rush to her side. "Gram, are you all right?"

She holds a hand up to ease me. After several seconds, the coughing fit is through.

"I'm fine, child," she manages to croak out, but her face says something different. The coughing spells are taking more out of her, and it frightens me. Her skin is ashen and pale, her color as lost as her voice.

I take her hands in mine. "I have the duck for us. Allow me to start the roasting, all right?"

"Sounds heavenly, dear."

I step into the kitchen before she sees the tears. The thyme tea isn't making as much progress with the cough as I'd hoped. I'm running out of potions to try, unsure of what else might cure her progressing cough. I know as sure as breathing that I can't lose my gram.

But I don't know how to heal her.



I plunk the last bite of duck in my mouth, savoring the flavor I haven't enjoyed in a while. Gram baked some pears for dessert, and I sigh when I take the first bite of the sweet goodness.

"You spoil me, Gram," I say when she sprinkles the rest of my pear with the last of the brown sugar.

"Nonsense. You landed the duck."

I take her hand from across the table. "I mean it, Gram. You spoil me, love me, take care of me. You've filled my head with more knowledge than most of the maidens who've had proper schooling. I know I don't say it enough, but thank you for everything you do for me, for what you've done for me my entire life. I love you, Gram."

"And I love you, my precious Milla. I'm not sure you'll ever really know just how much I love you. Now eat your pear before it gets cold."

"Yes, mistress." I take another bite, then tell her the news I've been waiting to share. "You know, Jordy asked me to be his escort for the harvest dance morrow's evening. Do you feel up to going?"

The smile lights Gram's eyes before it reaches her chafed lips. She used to smear on beeswax to soften them, but she hasn't bothered in days. She is fragile and bruises almost to the touch, but she still works in the apothecary like a woman in her youth. Her skin is so wrinkled, at times it looks as though it could slide right off her tired face. I feel guilty for asking her to go to the dance, but the smile is now wide on her lips as well, although no words have escaped them.

“Yes, we will go to the dance,” she finally says. “I wouldn't miss it. And, since I was paid with coins today, I see no reason for you to sell at market on the morrow. You will stay home with me and we will get you ready for the dance. And with those words, I have something for you, Milla. Wait here.”

I wait for several moments, rather impatient as to what Gram could possibly have for me. Maybe some bauble or trinket I can pin on for the dance. Gram is rather sentimental with her trinkets and pins. I make swirls on the table with my finger, the anticipation maddening. I am excited at the prospect of being home with Gram for a full day to prepare for the dance. Time spent with her is time I cherish.

“Now, close your eyes,” Gram calls into the room. “And cover them with your hands for good measure. No peeking.”

I do as she instructs. “I'm not looking, I swear it.”

After a moment she says, “All right. Open them.”

I open my eyes and lose my breath. Gram is cradling a silken gown in her arms.

“Oh, Gram, what have you done?”

I meet her in the middle of the room, touching the soft, gold fabric. The bodice is beaded, and the sleeves are long with a sheer overlay that comes to a point on the hands. The skirts are full and flowy with beadwork mingled throughout them like diamonds scattered on the ocean. It is the grandest gown I have ever seen, too beautiful to be real.

“Gram, it is simply stunning. I can’t believe it. Do you really want me to wear it?”

“Of course, dear,” she says, placing the dress in my arms. “It’s yours now. Try it on in case it needs some minor alterations.”

My head is spinning. “Mine? How can this dress be mine? Where did you get it? It’s fit for a queen.”

Gram touches the hem of the dress and smiles. “It belonged to your mother.”

CHAPTER 8

IT'S NEARLY TIME TO GET DRESSED FOR THE DANCE. I SPENT THE entire day with Gram, drinking ale and admiring the dress. And even in our folly, she never told me another word about my mother—only that the dress belonged to her. I tried it on, and it fits like it was made for me. So, although I learned none of the details I've craved about my mother since I was a child, I do know that I am the same size she was when she wore the dress. And that fact is oddly comforting.

Gram joins me in the bedroom.

“Oh, Gram, you look beautiful,” I say when she's fully in the room.

And she does. She's wearing a red dress with silver trim, and her hair is down and in loose curls hanging about her shoulders, a style she rarely wears.

“Thank you, dear. Now, let me help you with your dress. We need to leave soon.”

When the dress is on, Gram stands behind me and laces it up, cinching it in to define my waist. I'm standing in front of the looking glass, still finding it hard to believe that this dress was worn by my mother. I feel as though I could swoon. I take a match and my flintstone from the dressing table and tuck them into the small pocket in my chemise. Gram stands back when the dress is completely tied.

“I've been saving this dress for you for so long,” she says. “I knew one day the appropriate time would come for you to

wear it. With my health failing, I knew the harvest dance was the perfect occasion.”

“You’re going to be fine,” I say, but she places a hand on my forearm and keeps talking.

“My sudden poor health coaxed me into allowing you to wear it tonight. I wanted to see you in your mother’s dress before I die. And you are a vision. Looking at you is like looking at your mother.”

I’m so touched by her words that I can’t speak. So, Gram leads me to a chair and sets to work on my hair. She makes a braid across the top of my head that resembles a crown, humming the entire time. She leaves the rest of it loose and flowing down my back. She adds color to my lips, a bright crimson stain, and pinches my cheeks to pink them.

“You are a vision,” she says when she is finished. “The very spit of your mother.”

I stand in front of the looking glass one last time. I look every bit the princess. I doubt Jordy will recognize me.

Gram extends a hand. “Shall we?”

“Let’s.”

The air is chilled, but not biting. We drape our shawls across our backs and set out for the assembly hall. Fortunately, it is only four streets down.

“Curfew is lifted this eve for the harvest celebration! Curfew is lifted, goodfellows and maids!” The town crier tips his hat when we pass. “Curfew is lifted...”

The harvest dance is a celebration for the poor and wealthy alike in Timberness, a time of togetherness and thanks for a blessed and bountiful harvest. The assembly hall is lined with lanterns and wreaths, and a huge table is stretched across the back wall heaped with meats, a fully roasted pig, and a cornucopia of fruits. The musicians are playing harps and bagpipes, and a flute for good measure. Gram joins some townfolks more her age and station and I set out in search of Jordy.

I am aware to keep my posture as I walk about the room, back straight, arms to my sides, resting delicately on my silken skirts. I smile and dip my head to the gentlemen who acknowledge me, hoping that I don't tip over. I feel like an angel too clumsy to balance her halo, but no one seems to notice.

"Milla, by the gods, is that you?" I hear beside me. "Why, it is! You are an absolute masterpiece, child." Master Burgess takes my hand and turns me around. "Let me look at you. That gown is simply stunning. I hardly recognized you. You look like royalty, my dear. Sold quite a bit of matches to afford that adornment, to be certain." He winks and places a kiss on top of my hand.

I lean nearer his washed and shining face. "You'll never believe it, Master Burgess, but this 'twas my mother's dress."

He rubs his chin, the ruffles on his overcoat nearly bigger than his hand. "Your mother's? By all that is holy, you don't say. So, did your grandmother finally reveal your lineage?"

“No, she simply gave me the dress, said she’s been saving it—said she wanted to see me wear it before she dies.” My eyes glass, tears threatening to fall.

“No tears, my dear,” he says. “You are too beautiful for tears. And your gram is strong. She’ll outlive us all. Now, go. The eve is young, like you. Find your Jordy and dance.”

I give him an inquisitive look. “And how do you know I’m looking for Jordy?”

He whispers, “The entire village knows you’re looking for Jordy.” He claps a hand on top of mine and squeezes, wittiness ever his companion. “Enjoy the dance, my sweet little match girl.”

I walk the expanse of the room again. Jordy is nowhere to be seen. I glance back at the food table. It is now piled high with wheat loafs and sweet bread, which means Jordy is here, just indisposed. Now would be a good time for some ale. I make my way toward the beverages.

“Your majesty,” an elderly woman says, falling to my feet and extending her hands. “Blessings, your highness.”

“I’m sorry,” I say. *What is she doing?* “I’m not royalty, madam. I don’t even go to court. You have me confused with someone else.”

“Begging your pardon, my lady,” an older gentleman says, obviously her husband. He hurriedly pulls her up by her shoulders as she protests.

“That’s the queen, Eldridge,” the old woman shouts near his ear. “Can’t you see that’s the queen? Show some respect.”

“She has her good days and bad,” her husband says. “She gets so confused. Please, forgive us, mistress.”

“Nothing to forgive,” I say. “No harm done.”

“Thank you for understanding.” He gives me a twitchy smile and shuffles her out of my way.

I fluff my skirts and head for the beverage table and notice Treena the moment she spots me. She is standing with a group of maidens, all ladies of the court. And all eyes are on me.

“Milla?” Treena calls out, “Milla the match girl?” Shock lines her face at the sight of my gown, but she breaks into robust laughter after several moments. “What gentleman has paid for that adornment, and what does he expect in return?”

The other maidens cover their mouths with gloved hands, hiding their giggles or shocked surprise. It’s never easy to discern which one.

“A gentleman?” I feign misunderstanding of her implication. “Did a gentleman purchase yours for you, dear Treena? If so, he has good taste. It is quite lovely.”

The maidens do little to hide their reaction to my observation, laughter pouring through their fingers. Treena runs a hand down the front of her tasteful, but flowy blue gown. It does match her eyes, and her chestnut hair is in perfect ringlets that cup her face—the face of an angel that hides a devil’s soul. Had she not been insulting me I would believe her rather fetching this evening. But her ugliness has nothing to do with the way she’s dressed.

“Gentleman or no, at least my gown isn’t *stolen*,” Treena replies. “You’ll probably be in shackles come sunup when your treachery is revealed.”

“I am no thief,” I reply. “I am simply a victim.”

Treena smirks. “A victim? Of what, pray tell us your position?”

“A victim of your cruelty,” I reply. “Much like the mage I saw you taunting while he was in the rack. Set to be flogged come sunup, and you were taunting him.”

Treena shows no remorse or humility. “The way I see it, I was doing him a favor. What other time in his wretched life would he be surrounded by beautiful lasses who were actually paying attention to him, aye? Probably why he was pretending to know magic in the first place, to attract the attention of beautiful maidens.”

My mouth weighs down into a frown and I shake my head. “I suppose you would see it that way.” I fluff my skirts. “But the attention of a beautiful lass is the last thing I need, so unless you’re pointing out that my dress is a vision, you can turn your attentions to another. You see, this gown was a gift graciously shared to me from my grandmother. It once belonged to my mother.”

“It *is* a vision,” one of the girl’s says as she glances in Treena’s direction. “Well, it is,” she points out again when Treena huffs an agitated breath.

“Speaking of a vision,” one of the maidens interrupts, “look who is strolling over here. The baker’s son. That man is

fiercely handsome. I wonder if he'll dance with me."

"See, Milla," Treena says, "now that is what a gentleman looks like. And he is coming over to speak to us. Step aside, match girl. You may be adorned in finery, but it does not change your station in life."

My back is to Jordy, my chest swelling with the delicious thrill of what will transpire when I turn around. Treena has needed her comings up for a while, and I relish in giving it to her. I turn around and meet Jordy's eyes. He ignores Treena and the maidens and takes my hands in his.

"Milla, you are so beautiful. You take my breath away and my heart with it." Jordy nods his acknowledgment to Treena and the others. "Good evening, ladies."

Treena's mouth is agape, her cheeks redder than the over-ripened apple stuck in the roasted pig's jaws. She turns and walks away in a huff.

"Shall we dance, my lady?" Jordy asks.

I curtsy. "I would be delighted."

Jordy is dangerously dashing, his signature white tunic covered with a rust brown overcoat that matches the streaks in his eyes. His square jaw is gracing a light dusting of beard that he's neatly trimmed and groomed. His firm grip leads me to the dance floor as the bagpipes play a quick-paced tune. He takes my hand and twirls me on the edge of a dream.

And I never wish to awaken.

When we're both a little short of breath after several melodies, Jordy leads me off the dance floor.

“Are you thirsty, Milla?”

“Aye, some ale would be lovely. You’re quite the dancer, Jordy.”

“Well, dancing is a pleasure when you have the most beautiful woman in the room in your arms.”

I’m blushing, but I don’t try to conceal it. I feel as though I never have to hide anything about myself from Jordy, and it’s beyond comforting. He is a breath of fresh air after years of not breathing.

I see Gram as we make our way to the beverages and she nods and smiles. She’s surrounded by elders who enjoy her company and seeing her ease of speech and laughter fortifies my spirit. She’s happy, and I’m grateful. We both needed this outing.

“Here you are, Milla.” Jordy hands me a cup of ale and then pours one for himself. “Shall we step outside a moment? It’s a beautiful night, and the stars are numbering the hundreds. It is something to behold.”

“I’d love to.”

Jordy extends an elbow, and we stroll outside, the stars every bit as magical as he’d described. We find a bench well out of view of the assembly hall, but the muffled sounds of the music are still drifting through the air.

“Milla, I wish I had the proper words for your loveliness.” Jordy lifts a piece of hair from my shoulder. “Every feature you possess is perfection, right down to the last streak of golden amber running through your fiery hair.” He cups my

cheek, dragging his thumb back and forth across it. “You are magnificent.”

“This dress is stunning, aye?”

Jordy smiles. “It has nothing to do with the dress.”

He places his hands on my face, smoothing his thumbs over my cheeks. The sparkles in his eyes are resting on my lips and I suck in a breath. My tummy flutters with pinches of anticipation of his mouth covering mine. The kiss starts gentle, Jordy’s mouth capturing my bottom lip, and then it deepens. He is woodsmoke and embers, leather and bread flour, all the scents that make up his day’s labor. I’m trembling, but he’s firm. He is a stone-still statue, and I am a wind-drift feather of quivers and jitters. I am exactly where I want to be, and it scares me to death.

“Do you want me to stop, my love?” Jordy whispers as he rubs the gooseflesh away from my arms.

“No, good sir,” I manage through ragged breath, my boldness shocking even myself, “I never want you to stop. Keep loving me, my lord. And may the stars shine down on us in witness.”

My words excite Jordy. He tugs the fabric down from my shoulder, his warm lips finding my neck. My body heats in secret places I barely knew existed and I squirm to relieve the sensations now ruling my body. I cry out when his tongue trails along my neck and finds my shoulder. He pulls me nearer and I flatten a hand on his chest. He reacts to my touch and kisses me again before taking both of my hands in his.

“I fear if I do not stop, we’ll never make it back to the dance,” Jordy says. “Your gram will miss you, and I don’t want to wrinkle your most beautiful dress...or your virtues. I apologize for my wanting of you. Sometimes I feel you are my every thought. Will you forgive me?”

“There is nothing to forgive. I am every bit as guilty.”

We laugh and Jordy kisses my forehead before helping me stand. He glances over my shoulder. “Look, Milla, a shooting star. Make a wish.”

“I don’t wish on stars,” I say. “Here, I have a better way.”

He watches in fascination as I reach into my bodice and pull the match and flintstone from my chemise.

I hold the match in front of Jordy’s face. “I will show you my secret magic, but the wish is yours to make. When I strike the match, say your wish. The flame will hear it.”

I strike the match and Jordy says, “I wish this night could last forever.”

Tingles tease my belly as I nod my agreement. “Like matches for wishes,” I say, and blow out the flame.

“But what about a wish for yourself, Milla?”

I touch his face. “I don’t need to make a wish. Mine already came true.”

When his lips find mine again, I melt. His kiss is everything tangible in my life, everything good and righteous. It is the kind of kiss that tricks the stars to glowing until the greedy sun is forced to extinguish their light. And if I have a

say in it, I will kiss this man through eternity, and every starlit night for the rest of my life.

CHAPTER 9

THE SUN REFUSED TO BRIGHTEN THE CLOUDY SKY THIS DREARY morn, so I pulled on a second overcoat and set out for town. The day has dragged along slow and unproductive. I have a parasol to sell and a passel of matches. I have a lady inspecting the parasol, still deciding whether or not it is a wise purchase. I need her to make haste. Gram has been ailing since the dance two morrows ago, and I need to get back to her before nightfall. I rub my freezing hands together, hoping the fire is still stoked at home, and that Jordy is in the bakery when I stop by to see him later. My stomach still flutters when I think about the dance, his hands on the small of my back and his lips on mine. He is the perfect escape.

“Four bits? A little pricey, don’t you think?” the lady states.

I take a fortifying breath. “The threading on the edges is silk, and it is four colors. It is made of bamboo, satin, and silk. Four bits is a fair price. You would pay six in the dress shop.”

“Aye, but in the dress shop, it would be new.”

“It is barely used, my lady. No defects at all, not even as much as a snag. I can assure you, the price is very fair.”

“Match girl? Might I inquire for some matches?” The gentleman approaches when I wave my hand in his direction. I sell him two handfuls and turn back to the indecisive lady of means. She glances up when I fold my arms across my chest.

“I’m still not sure if this is a practical purchase,” the lady says again, turning the parasol around in her hands a final time. “I have one very much like it at home. But I do adore the ruffles on this one. They are decadent. I truly can’t decide.”

“A parasol is never a practical purchase,” I say quite boldly. “A parasol is a frivolous, cheery, impractical purchase. A parasol reminds you that you deserve the finer things in life, my lady. And I can tell that you are quite the lady of finery.”

I can also tell that the flattery is working when she clutches the parasol tighter and reaches for her coin purse.

“You are quite right, my dear,” the lady says, “and quite the persuasive peddler. I’ll take the parasol. What matter is it that I own three already?” She places four bits in my hand and makes her way down the side street, opening the parasol before she reaches the dress shop.

I put the coins in my pouch and make my way to the bakery to fetch an olive loaf for Gram. No need to peddle more matches this eve. The six bits in my coin pouch will last us three days in food. I think I shall be a little frivolous as well and purchase some sweet bread. Hopefully, it will be a treat that Gram won’t refuse. Her appetite is waning, but I do my best to peak it.

“Mistress?” I hear when I pass an alleyway beside the livery. “Match girl, might I see your wares? I am in need of matches.”

A palace knight is in the alley, motioning for me to approach. Why do I get the most inquiries on the days I am ready to be home with Gram? If we were starving at this very

moment, no coins would come my way. I sigh and head in his direction. The sooner I sell him the matches and get to the bakery, the better. But I stop dead still when I'm in front of him. I recognize the handsome face and tall stature. He is the same knight that Jordy and I saw in the woods, making accusations against the king. I know my eyes give away my sudden fear. I can feel how wide they are in their sockets. I'm holding my breath when he speaks again.

“I am not interested in matches, Milla. I apologize for my dishonesty, but I do need to speak with you. It is of utmost urgency.”

Panic grips me. “How do you know my name? Who are you?” I glance behind me, afraid that the king's guards could encircle me at any moment.

“My name is Sir Victor of House Winston, and I know more than simply your name, my lady. I know who you are, Milla—*who you truly are*. I can explain everything to you, but we are not safe on the streets. Won't you come with me somewhere safe so we may speak?”

My head is a swirl of terror and confusion. How does he know my name? What does he mean? Jordy and I saw this knight in the forest, we heard the treasonous words he spoke. *I know who you truly are?* Nothing makes sense. What is happening?

“Milla, please. If we could simply speak—”

He reaches for my arm, but I back away, remembering Gram's warning. “I'm sorry, sir. I can't.” I turn around and quicken my pace toward the street.

“Stop!” he shouts. “Please, I’m begging you. Don’t you want to know who you are? The tales I have to share are true, and it will change Timberness as we know it. Your story is more than your station in this world, mistress. And I can tell it to you if you only dare to listen.”

Fear wills my feet to keep moving, but my heart stops them cold. I have wondered about my lineage my entire life, begged my gram to share with me any shred of history she would willingly spare. And now I have a man seeking me out, willing to tell me what he believes to be my story.

And I’m running away.

I turn and face Sir Victor again. I step cautiously towards him, fully aware that this could be a trap, revenge for Jordy’s very vocal exchange with Sir Malek over the Philip fiasco. But I am willing to take that risk.

I let out the breath I’ve been holding. “All right, Sir Victor. I’m listening.”

He moves in closer, his blond hair glistening against his tanned skin. His eyes are copper-colored and his height and hefty build almost match Jordy’s. There is no denying it—he is a beautiful man.

“I thank you for hearing me out, Milla. There is much to say. Perhaps we could—”

“Sir Victor! Halt!”

I startle as Victor’s head jerks toward the voice. He tries to draw his sword, but three knights of the king’s guard have him

surrounded in a matter of moments. And their swords are all pointing to his heart.

“Did he harm you, mistress?” one of the knights asks.

I take a breath to aid my racing nerves. “No, not at all, sir.”

“Very good,” he replies, “then ‘tis best to be on your way. Good morrow, mistress.”

I lock eyes with Sir Victor. He doesn’t blink, doesn’t move. But he nods, ever so slightly. Chills prick my arms. If I didn’t know better, I’d believe him to be smiling. I turn on my heels and head toward the street.

“Sir Victor,” a guard shouts, “you are under arrest for treason for falsehoods against the king.”

They drag him away, and I run as far and as fast as my feet will carry me.

CHAPTER 10

IF I GO TO THE BAKERY NOW, I WILL NEVER MAKE CURFEW. So, I turn toward home with an empty belly and a head full of questions. My heart is kicking so hard in my chest, I fear I may collapse. Who was that knight, and how can he know anything about me? Maybe he is simply a lunatic, rambling nonsense once again like that day in the forest. The villagers know I'm the match girl—it would've been easy for him to learn my name. But something in my soul is still uneasy. This Sir Victor was speaking of my heart's only desire, the very thing I've longed for throughout my entire life. That is the one truth about his words that I can't so easily dismiss.

I stop at the vegetable stand and purchase an assortment of items for a stew. I buy some apples as well. Gram enjoys baked apples. I need to get home, busy myself with the stew and forget about the rogue knight. And as badly as I want to tell Gram about my encounter, I know it would only upset her. So, I will keep this day's events to myself and make my way toward home.

"Gram," I call into the cottage when I enter. "Gram, where are you?"

I look in the apothecary, but she's not there. I drop the pouch of vegetables and apples on the table, and I hear it. A deluge of coughing assaults my ears. She has never sounded so terrible.

I rush to her bedside. "Gram, I'm here."

But she doesn't hear me. Her head is so hot, it burns my hand when I touch it. I tug the covers up to her chin. She is unaware of my presence. She is mumbling nonsense, the fever obviously in control of her faculties. I need to tame the fever, need to ease the coughing.

I run to the kitchen and retrieve the rags from the cabinet. I dip them in the water barrel and carry them back to the bedroom. I place a cool rag on her forehead and neck. She startles from the coldness but doesn't remove them. I add another layer of blankets. She needs to sweat the fever out. If I don't get her temperature controlled soon, I fear the worst could happen. Fever can equal death, and I'm not losing my gram. Not this night.

Her cough is still prevalent, but I must control the fever first. I find the fever elixir I need in the apothecary and manage to get some into Gram. I remove the rags and freshen them, then place them back on Gram.

“Thank you, Milla,” she mumbles.

There she is. Good, we're making progress.

I hurry to the kitchen and start the vegetable stew to boiling. Gram will need a hot meal when the fever passes. I go between the bedroom and kitchen, checking on Gram and tending the stew. I stoke the fire in the hearth, keeping the cottage warm and free of drafts. It's going to be a long night. I steep some thyme tea. It will aid in quieting Gram's cough once the fever dies. I'm still busily stirring the stew when I hear Gram say my name and then cough.

I join her, pulling a chair near her bedside. “Gram, how are you feeling?”

Her voice is frail, “How long have I been sleeping?”

“I’m not sure, but you were feverish when I arrived home from market.” I feel her forehead. “You’re much cooler now, praise the gods. You had me worried.”

She starts coughing again. I fold my hands in my lap, waiting for the fit to pass. They are becoming more frequent.

“I’m sorry,” she says when she musters the strength to speak again. “I know ‘tis an annoyance.”

Her apology shatters my heart. “Never be sorry for being ill, Gram. It’s not your fault.”

“Your compassion is a gift.” She reaches for my hand and I take hers, placing it against my cheek. “What is that heavenly smell?” she adds.

“Vegetable stew, and I steeped you some tea.”

“You are a godsend. Will you fetch me a bowl please, dear? I am famished.”

“Of course.”

The glassiness in her eyes is not from tears. It is from the illness and her age, and it frightens me more than Sir Malek and an entire legion of rogues. My gram is slipping away a little more with every morrow. No matter how tightly I hold to her, time is the perfect thief.



I open the jar of black beetroot, the smell wafting around my nose and I fan it away. I take a bite from the bowl of stew on the apothecary table in front of me. I was starving by the time I got Gram settled. She is finally resting. Her cough is better but still not completely quiet. The beetroot and honey poultice should help. I am beyond exhausted, but she needs the poultice, so I will remain in the apothecary, blending the ingredients until the paste is the right consistency. The pestle is digging into my hand, but I press it harder against the mortar. No rest for the weary. I lift the bowl and drink the broth from my stew, my rumbling stomach ever grateful after practically gnawing through my backbone all day.

My mind drifts to Sir Victor and the look on his handsome face as the guards surrounded him. What will happen to him now that he is accused of treason? Surely he is a madman. That is why he is now in the custody of the guards, even though he was considered one of them merely hours ago. His words to me were surely falsehoods, as much as his words about our good king. He doesn't know me, has no knowledge of my lineage. How can he know me when I don't even know myself?

When the poultice looks to be ready, I wipe my hands on the front of my apron and take a fortifying breath. I pull a match from my chemise and strike it against the flintstone on the table. I watch the glow for a moment and close my eyes. I keep the wish inside my head, in the secret places that are mine alone. I blow out the glowing flame before it reaches my fingers. *Like matches for wishes...*

I pick up the poultice and make my way to Gram. I light the candle on the bedside table and gently pull up a chair beside her. Her nightdress is already opened. She says it eases her breathing, no matter the nip in the air. I set the poultice beside the candle and cup my hands to my mouth, blowing warmth into them. I do not wish to touch Gram with cold hands. She's resting so peacefully that I hate to touch her, to disturb her sleep in any way. But she needs the poultice, so I set to work.

In little time, I have the poultice rubbed into the deep crevices of Gram's chest and neck. Hopefully my efforts will make it easier for her to breathe this night and ward off the dreadful coughing. I recline in the chair for a moment, taking a fortifying breath. I watch Gram's chest rise and fall. I study her hands that are resting on her middle, one on top of the other. I recall the lives she's saved with those faithful hands, the medicines she's mixed, the healing elixirs by the hundreds. I place my own hand on hers. They are the same, minus the age lines and dark splotches. She rouses a little and I pull away. It is not my intention to wake her. She stirs when I stand, her eyes blinking furiously.

"Will..." Gram mumbles. "Will..."

"Will, what? What is it, Gram? I will do anything you ask of me. What do you require?"

But her eyes close again, gentle snoring filling the room once more. I blow out the candle and creep back into the kitchen. I'll pray for her healing for the dozenth time, and hope the gods be merciful.

CHAPTER 11

THE SMELL OF THE BAKERY IS NEARLY MY FAVORITE THING IN THE world. Jordy's mother is hard at work, taking the last of the yeast bread from the wood stoves and refilling the water barrel she uses to soak her aprons.

“Would you care for some assistance, Mistress Orwan?”

“Nonsense, sweet Milla. Sit. Eat. You can't tell me that you would refuse sweet bread.” She sets a plate in front of me. “Eat, child.”

I tear away a piece of the sweet bread she offers and plop it in my mouth, closing my eyes to savor the bite.

“Is it to your liking, Milla?” she asks. “I made it fresh this morning.”

“It is absolutely sinful, Mistress Orwan,” I reply. “I shouldn't be eating it. Gram and I broke our fast before I left out this morning. But I can't resist sweet bread. If I worked in the bakery, I would weigh fifteen stone.”

“Well, Lady Orwan used to be a wee bit smaller than she is now as well, if I recall.” Master Orwan grins like the goat who ate the rosebush.

“Oh, poo poo on you, you old troll. I am the same size I was on the very day we met,” Mistress Orwan blurts, but she's smiling, nevertheless. She leans close to my ear. “I taught my Jordy better manners than his father, to be sure.”

I hide a smile with the back of my hand and finish my bread.

Jordy joins us when he finishes in the stock room, taking a piece of the sweet bread for himself and placing a kiss on my cheek. “I’ve missed you, my lady. How is your gram faring? Father said her nights have been very disagreeable. It saddens me to hear of it.”

“Her fever has broken, but the cough persists. She has taken to her bed these last two morrows, but plans to rise when I return from market. She is as stubborn as a mule and strong as an ox.”

“All fine qualities, Milla,” Mistress Orwan reminds me. Her tone is soft and reassuring. “Never fault her for her stubbornness. It’s the very thing that keeps her going.”

I know her claim is true, and it elicits a smile. “Well, but at times she can be—”

My words are interrupted by trumpet blasts. My heart thumps in my chest. *By the gods! Could it be?*

“That can’t be coming from the gallows,” Master Orwan says when the trumpets silence. “There are no wretches awaiting a hanging, aye, Jordy?”

“None that I know of,” he replies. “It would have to be a murderer, or a blasphemer—”

“Or a traitor to the crown,” I say matter-of-factly.

Jordy’s head jerks towards me. I raise an eyebrow, realization hitting him like a balled fist.

“Shall we go to the gallows and see?” Mistress Orwan asks. She looks out the bakery door. “Others are already walking in that direction.”

We all start for the door. Jordy takes my hand, giving it a light squeeze. I make a face he wasn't meant to see.

“Is something wrong?” he asks.

I whisper into his ear, “What if it's him, the knight from the forest?”

Jordy is firm. “It could be. He was in direct defiance of the king, after all, and not exactly quiet with his speech. Anyone could have heard his treachery and informed the king.”

I nod and we keep moving.

I haven't told anyone about Sir Victor speaking to me or his claims to know my true lineage. I feel a little guilty for not telling Jordy, but I believed the man to be mad. And maybe he is. He may not be the one awaiting the hangman's noose.

A large crowd has already gathered when we reach the gallows. Two of the knights of the king's guard are standing on the gallows with the condemned man between them. I recognize him immediately—the blond hair, tall stature, and perfect physique. I have no doubts it is Sir Victor. I glance at Jordy's clenched jaw and serious expression. He seems to recognize our knight too. My stomach knots and my chest aches. If Sir Victor's claims of my lineage hold even a shred of truth, could my life be forfeit too?

A few guards are standing on the gallows behind the accused, and a priest is holding a scroll, waiting for the crowd

to finish gathering. The executioner is standing behind Victor, wearing all black and a full black hood that hides his face and hair. Gram once told me that the executioner wore the black hood so he could remain unrecognized by the villagers, be free to shop in the market square and live a normal life after his ordered killings were through. Even as a child her explanation baffled me. How could anyone live a normal life after taking another? Did the black hood hide the demons that would torment his soul or possess his dreams? Would the ghost of the condemned not know him in the afterlife, unable to recognize who to haunt in this one? Funny that a black hood holds all that sway.

“Good people of Timberness,” the priest begins, “I stand here before you with the accused, Sir Victor of House Winston, knight of the king’s guard, and citizen of Timberness. He has been spinning tales regarding King Ulrich, speaking lies that hold no merit and are treasonous in nature. He shows no remorse for his transgressions and was brought before the king himself for a swift and fair judgment. It has been decided and decreed by the king’s own hand that Sir Victor has committed high treason and is a traitor to the crown. The penalty for these charges is death. May God have mercy on his soul.”

I am frozen in fear, paralyzed by the notion that Sir Victor could call me out. He said he had knowledge of me that could change Timberness as we know it. I lean next to Jordy, attempting to hide my face against his arm. Jordy puts his arm around me in response. The gods forbid Victor sees me. I wish to be invisible.

“Such a shame,” a maiden standing next to us says to her friend. “That knight is as handsome as Adonis himself. Quite the waste of good male flesh to hang him.”

“Yes,” her friend replies. “Maybe they should simply lock him away in a tower, and I with him.”

They giggle and Mistress Orwan scolds them, “Show some respect, you insolent tripes.”

“Do you have any final words?” the priest asks Sir Victor.

“Aye,” Victor calls out. “Aye, I do.” Sir Victor looks around at the crowd, his face stoic and proud, like that of a nobleman instead of a condemned man. I straighten my posture and lean forward, suddenly curious to hear his words. If he is nothing else, he is brave. And bravery at least deserves an ear.

“Good people of Timberness,” Sir Victor shouts, “I will die this day an innocent man. No falsehoods against the king have ever passed my lips. Truth cannot be a falsehood. I do not deny saying that the king is evil. I do not deny saying that he has been deceiving you all for years. Saying these things are not an act of treason because they are the truth. He does not deserve the throne, but I know who does. I know the—”

A guard claps a hand over Victor’s mouth, then shoves what would have been his blindfold inside it. They tussle with him and then stand him erect again. The priest starts saying his last rites, and the executioner puts a bag over Victor’s head and the noose around his neck.

“Sir Victor,” the priest says, “you will be hanged by the neck—”

The sound of arrows pierces the sky, flying from every direction. One hits the executioner dead between the eyes, followed by arrows that find the hearts of the guards on either side of Sir Victor. The crowd starts to disperse, women’s screams and men’s shouting filling my ears. Jordy and I cower with his mother and father, unable to safely move amid the chaos. Jordy and his father shield us with their backs and outstretched arms. Men on horseback wearing black hoods of their own ride toward Sir Victor, yelling phrases like *Revolt against King Ulrich*, and *Restore the rightful heir!* They best the remaining guards with little effort, and one rider takes Sir Victor by the arms and pulls him onto his horse. Victor grasps his arm as if he’s injured, but it does little to slow his motions. When his binds are broken, Sir Victor tugs the bag from his head and yanks the gag from his mouth.

“We will release the kingdom from tyranny!” he yells. “I swear it with my life!” He and his rescuers ride away in different directions.

Jordy helps me to my feet when the dust settles. Villagers are milling about, stunned and mostly speechless over the events that have played out before us. The patrol and constable set out on horseback, no doubt on the heels of the hooded riders who managed to rescue Sir Victor. Several men run to help the downed guards and executioner, knowing full well that they are now with the angels.

“Are you all right?” Jordy asks, aiding me as I shake out my skirts.

“I am well, Jordy. Thank you. No need to fuss over me. Assist your parents. Your mother looks troubled.”

Jordy turns to his mother and father and offers comfort. Mistress Orwan is talking without stopping for a breath, chattering away like a bird in a tree. Jordy and his father do their best to calm her, and finally take her by the arms, one on each side, as they lead her back to the bakery. I follow behind them, Jordy looking back at me every few seconds. His smile is weak but true.

As frightened as I was seeing Sir Victor on the gallows, fearing he would point me out as some strange piece in his treasonous puzzle, I was never happier to see his rescuers. Part of me knows that deep down, I was more afraid of him dying and never revealing his truth to me—the truth that offers me a real name, a family line, a history bigger than the one I’m forced to exist in now. Those hooded riders saved his life and with it, gave me hope.

Funny how those black hoods hold all that sway...

CHAPTER 12

IT TAKES SOME TIME TO SETTLE MISTRESS ORWAN, BUT WE manage. Jordy and his father close the bakery for the remainder of the day, much like the other shop keeps in the market square. With traitors roaming free on horseback spewing talk of revolt and treachery, and a rogue knight free of the hangman's noose, folks are taking to their homes. And it is never easy to stomach the sight of bodies being removed from the gallows, especially when those bodies are of the executioner and the king's guards. Word has already gotten around that the owner of the local tavern is the executioner. I can't say that I frequent the tavern, but I do sell matches to the owner on occasion. His name is Cletus, and he has a dog. Loves that dog better than his own soul. Funny, I never pictured an executioner as loving a dog. I shake off the thought. This day has been wild and different, but even the wagging tongues find it safer to talk around their own kitchen tables than on the bloodied streets of Timberness.

Soon, Sir Malek and the remaining members of the king's guard will be filling the streets to investigate how horribly the hanging went wrong. No one wants to be questioned by Sir Malek, myself included. The sooner I am back home with Gram, the better.

Jordy is closing the bakery for his folks, storing the remaining breads to sell on the morrow and locking the stock room and front doors. We walk out back when the tasks are through and the bakery is secured.

“Milla,” he says, “please allow me to walk you home. I feel a bit of unease with rogues on the loose. I need to know you’re safe and sound.”

“Aye, yes. That would be nice, Jordy. Thank you.” We start to walk, but I touch Jordy’s arm and stop him. “Jordy, wait. I need to tell you something, and it can’t wait another moment. Do you mind if we sit? This won’t take long.”

He looks confused but agrees. “All right.”

Jordy looks around the empty lot behind the bakery and finds two crates for us to sit on. When we are seated, he takes my hands in his. “All right, Milla. I’m listening, my lady.”

I take a breath and relax my shoulders. “Jordy, you did recognize that the rogue knight on the gallows was the same knight we saw in the forest, right?”

“Aye. Indeed, I did,” he replies. “But I’m not at all shocked. He is a bold blasphemer. We heard his deceit with our own ears, and now everyone else as well.”

“We did,” I agree with him, “but there is more I haven’t shared with you, and after the events from today, I fear what my future my hold.”

His hands tighten around mine. “Your future? I don’t understand.”

It’s hard for me to continue speaking, images of the hurt and concern in his eyes haunting deep within my soul, although a confession has barely been made. I never want Jordy to believe me deceitful, to think that I would keep something from him to hurt him in any manner. But I know

he'll understand when I divulge my truth, so I'll tell it and pray he hears it with his heart and not his head.

“I didn't tell you the day it happened because I thought his rantings were that of a madman, but the same knight, Sir Victor, he approached me two morrows ago. He knew my name, and said that he knows who I really am.”

“Who you really are?” Jordy says under his breath. “What does that mean, Milla? I pray you forgive me, but I am lost to these words. I fear I do not understand.”

“I have told you how I have no idea of my lineage, how Gram has kept that knowledge a secret my entire life. Well, this Sir Victor, he called me by name and said he knows my lineage, and that it will change Timberness as we know it when it is revealed. He said I am more than my station in this world. He wanted me to go with him somewhere safe so he could share his knowledge with me, but the guards caught up with him and arrested him before he could say more. I watched the guards drag him away. I feared when I heard the trumpet blasts this day that it would be Victor on those gallows. And aye, it was.”

Jordy is silent at first, obviously considering my confession. “This sounds like tomfoolery,” he finally says. “Surely you know how this sounds, Milla.”

I do know how it sounds, but I also know that Jordy has parents, and grandparents, and a family tree with roots so deep, not even the devil himself could uproot it. I have but a single leaf, one perfect leaf to call my own in this wretched world. And when that leaf withers and dies, I will not possess

as much as a twig. Jordy doesn't know that feeling, and I thank the gods for it.

“I know, Jordy, but don't you think it could be possible? Do you think I could be someone of importance? Maybe my gram has kept my lineage a secret all these years because she had to. Could it be that she was protecting me from someone?”

Jordy cups my cheek and pushes aside a stray hair that has escaped my bonnet. I can tell he's holding back. He has more to say but is choosing his wording delicately. I brace myself when his lips part.

“Milla, one of the qualities I admire most in you is your ability to dream, to make wishes and holdfast to the belief that those wishes will come true. I will not go so far as to say that this knight's claims could not possibly hold any validity, but it is almost too incredible to believe. You have to see that, right?”

I do see it, but it still hurts to hear the doubt in Jordy's voice. “Well, if his claims have no truth, then how did he know my name?”

Jordy places a kiss on the top of my hand before speaking. “Milla, you are the match girl. Do you know how easy it would be to learn your name, how many people in the market would tell him your name if he pointed you out? I honestly believe that this Sir Victor is simply a defector and was saying anything to have you go with him. I am certain he had impure intentions with you, and he was scheming to have you. I know I am being blunt, but it is the only way to tell you what I believe. I'm sorry if it sounds harsh, but you cannot put stock

into a rogue's words, Milla. You are only hurting yourself by doing so."

What hurts is the way he's looking at me, like I'm a fool for believing that the knight's words could be true. Like all I'm good for is to be a knight's conquest.

"So, you think I'm not made for greatness?" My voice is a little louder than I'd like it to be. "You can't believe, even in the slightest measurement, that Sir Victor's words for me could be true?"

Jordy swallows hard but speaks no words.

I stand and head toward the street. "I think I shall go. People may be frightened by the day's events, but they still need warmth. I can at least offer them that...if nothing else."

"Milla, wait." Jordy takes me by the hand. "I love that you are a dreamer, that you have a fire in you that searches for your family line. I know you feel that you are more than what this life has afforded you, but you do so much for so many already. You are kind and strong. You have a good heart, Milla. Everyone adores you. That has to count for something. Now come, let me walk you home. I wish to keep you safe amid this chaos. And I do not want you running into Malek on these streets alone if he arrives."

I know what he's trying to do, but my heart is aching and the tears I feel behind my eyes won't stay contained much longer.

"I will see you on the morrow, Jordy. I'll be fine. I'm used to walking these streets alone, remember? I am the match girl,

after all.”

“Milla, wait!”

I turn my back on him and put a hand in the air. The tears are sliding down my face before I even round the corner. Jordy believes me a fool, and maybe I am.

I’ve never felt more foolish in my life.

CHAPTER 13

HAVING JORDY DOUBT THAT I COULD EVER HOLD ANY GREATNESS wasn't what I had expected when I told him about Sir Victor today. Honestly, I'm not sure what I expected, but crushing my soul most certainly wasn't on the list. I keep telling myself not to be so hard on Jordy, but the ache in my heart isn't listening. I keep thinking back to when Sir Malek challenged the blacksmith's son for a duel. I was more than a little terrified that Jordy would join the fray. Not because I believed Jordy didn't possess any greatness, but simply because I know exactly how great he is, honorable to a fault. I knew he would defend Philip, would never back down from a fight. I wish Jordy could see the greatness in me.

Gram has been sleeping since darkness fell. Her coughing was merciless but seems to have left her now. She barely touched the food I offered her earlier, and her hands and feet are cool to the touch, warmth not seeming to embrace them. But she still insists she's fine. I know I should be resting, but I can't seem to find sleep. My mind keeps drifting to the events of the day, Sir Victor escaping the noose and my revelation to Jordy that went so terribly wrong. But maybe Jordy's right. Maybe Sir Victor did simply have impure thoughts and was trying to coax me to go with him. It would make more sense than him knowing my lineage. Maybe I was a fool to believe any portion of his words in the first place. I will apologize to Jordy come first light and try to push the knight's words out of my head.

I remove my apron and hang it back on the peg when I finish the dishes. I stoke the fire and peek into the bedroom to check on Gram. She's sleeping and her cough is quiet. I'm glad the cough is gone for now. I feel a little guilty, but it's nice not to hear the heaving and hacking. They have become the most irritating sounds. I would never say it to Gram, but sometimes I step outside for fresh air simply not to hear the coughs.

A knock on the door startles me, and I hurry to open it. I don't want Gram to awaken. It's probably a patient I will have to turn away unless their ailment is within my expertise. I open the door to three knights, and Sir Malek is one of them.

My chest tightens, but I take a fortifying breath. "Yes, my lords, may I help you?"

"Sorry to trouble you, mistress," one of the knights says, "but we are checking all dwellings for the rogue knight, Sir Victor, and his comrades. Might we take a look around your home?"

It hadn't crossed my mind that the search would extend to our homes.

"Well, no one is here but my grandmother and myself. I would never allow a rogue in my home."

"All the same, mistress, but we still need to have a look around."

Objecting will do me no good, so I oblige. "Why, certainly, my lord. But may I state that my grandmother is very ill and has taken to her bed. Will you mind being quiet for her?"

“Oh, for Christ’s sake!” Sir Malek says. “Move aside and let us in, girl. This exchange has taken too long already, and we have a lot of homes to search. Do you have a barn?”

“No, sir,” I reply. “We have no animals to tend.”

“Very good, then.”

I stand aside and the knights enter. There isn’t much for them to search. Sir Malek still looks out back, even though I assured him that we have no barn. He can look in the outhouse for all I care. The shortest of the three enters the bedroom and is quiet as requested. He drops to the floor and looks under both beds, then rises to his feet.

“There is no one here except the ladies. We can move on.” He looks at me. “Thank you, mistress. I hope your grandmother feels better on the morrow.”

I nod and head back to the kitchen. Sir Malek is in the apothecary and the other knights join him. He has the beetroot poultice held up to his nose and grimaces as he inhales it.

“What in the devil’s hell is this? It smells like dung and dirt.”

“It is a poultice that eases a cough,” I reply. “I’ve been using it on my gram.”

Sir Malek sets the poultice down and points to the shelves lined with jars. “And you and your grandmother create all this witchery? Where is the black cauldron you brew it in?”

I try to suppress the anger rising in my chest. “’Tis not witchery, my lord. It is used for healing.”

His dark eyes bore into my face. “This is all witchery and incantations. The doctor is for healing.”

“Not if you’re poor,” I snap back.

He stares a moment longer, a smirk now lifting the sides of his black goatee. He runs a hand over his bald head. “I remember you now, girl. Your tongue is as sharp as your man’s. You belong to the lad that chided me in the streets, the one who disagreed with my choice in a dueling partner.”

I keep my posture and my wits. “I belong to no one.”

The twisted smile he wears causes the hairs on my arms to take notice.

He huffs. “I can see why no man can keep you. The fire in your tongue matches the flames in your hair.” He puts the lid back on the poultice and shoves it in his pocket.

“That is my gram’s medicine,” I say. “Please do not take it, Sir Malek. I will need it if her cough returns before the morn.”

He steps closer to me. “Well, it looks as though you have enough witchery here to make her some more. I would get to work if I were you.”

The knights head out the door, but Sir Malek hangs back, his eyes cutting me to the bone, but my shaky legs manage to hold firm. I stare into his eyes right back, refusing to cower.

“Let me see this woman who raised such a feisty lass,” he says, heading towards Gram’s room.

“Please do not disturb my grandmother, sir. She is very ill.” I take hold of his arm to stop him, but he yanks it away.

“Unhand me, girl, or you will lose said hand,” Malek threatens.

“Please, sir. She’s an elderly woman—”

Malek ignores my pleas and steps into Gram’s room, his eyes more folly than curiosity. He pulls a cloth from his chest plate when he is nearly nose-to-nose with Gram.

“She reeks of death already, girl. Are you sure she’s not rotting in this bed?”

My palm crushes against Malek’s cheek at his disrespect and he grabs me, pulling me out of the bedroom and into the apothecary.

“I could have you whipped for that, girl,” Malek says through clenched teeth. “But seeing that you are in a delicate state of affairs with your grandmother, I will show mercy. But the way I see it, you do owe me at least this.”

Malek’s lips crush mine and I struggle to free myself from his filthy grasp. He pulls me closer, and I bite his bottom lip. He pulls his lip slowly through my teeth, like my bite has no effect at all. He takes my face in one hand, pinching my cheeks, then slides a hand to my breast.

“I’ll take you here and now if you entice me like that again, lass. I like my women unbroken. I make you this vow, though. I’ll break you. I’ll break you in real nice.” He releases me and dabs the blood from his lip with the back of his hand.

“Be mindful of this, a little blood never hurt anyone, lass. You have fire in your belly. I like it. Keep that up and I’ll be

calling on you again. Unfortunately, I have a rogue knight to hang this night.”

“Get out of my house, and never return!” I try holding back the hot tears now threatening to fall. “Leave now or I’ll find a way to kill you. I swear it. I am a witch after all, remember? You said it yourself. You never touch a witch uninvited.”

Malek chuckles. “Yes, lass. I remember.” He heads for the door, then turns and faces me once more. “Warn your man not to cross me again, girl. Had he held his tongue, your grandmother would still be in possession of her medicine, and you your virtues. I, myself, have no use for dung and dirt. I have no desire to reek of her stench. But I will take her remedy, nonetheless. Will make a good joke for my men when I shove some in their boots.”

My hands ball into tight fists, but I keep them tucked against my thighs, struggling to keep the angry words in. I have no desire to entice the devil to remain in our home any longer. I want to scream through my teeth and spit in his face that he is a demon, but I bite my tongue instead, holding the truths in. Malek is an evil man, yet the dog accuses me of witchery? I hope the poultice singes his nostrils and closes his throat.

He finally leaves and I latch the door. I head straight for the water barrel near the cookpot, my legs threatening to buckle. I scoop handfuls of water onto my mouth and scrub it until my lips plump and sting. I gulp a handful of water and swirl it around my mouth before spitting it into an empty cup. I want every hint of the demon free from my body, my face. I touch

my breast and release it from my garments. I grasp a rag, dipping it into the barrel. I rub the coolness across my flesh, tiny lines of gooseflesh forming in response. I dare the tears to fall when I think about him touching me. No, I will not give him the satisfaction of occupying my mind. I refuse to let him possess me in the slightest. I make my way to the door again to be sure it is latched. For I will not open it again this night, no matter who declares to be calling.

I survey the apothecary for more beetroot, but weariness wins out in the end. I'll make more poultice in the morning, but the events of the day are weighing heavy on me at this hour. I put some thyme in the kitchen and fresh water in the kettle for Gram's tea if it's needed. She's still quiet now, so I step out of my day dress and into my bed. I fall asleep to the sound of her breathing and the weight of the heaviness in my heart. What if Sir Malek comes calling, makes good on his threat to break me?



Her coughing jars me awake and I am at her bedside in an instant.

“Gram, are you all right?”

“No, child,” she says through coughs. “I am not.”

I hurry to the apothecary, then remember that Sir Malek took the poultice. I dump some thyme into the kettle and put the kettle over the flame. I dip a cup in the water barrel and hurry back to the bedroom.

“Here, Gram. Take a sip of this water.”

I gently lift her head and give her a drink. When I lie her back on her pillow, I notice it right away. Her eyes are glassy pools, like the waters in the ocean of her life are collected there. She doesn't see me, only the water that she cannot seem to blink away.

“Gram,” I say again. “Can you hear me?”

Her skin is pale and cold, like all the blood in her veins is now ice. Her cheeks are hollow, and her wrinkles are hanging, like her flesh is struggling to remain on her bones. I sit on the bed beside her, afraid my knees will fail me if I don't. I know what I am viewing, hate what I am seeing. Death is a cold thing, a silent thing that creeps in like a bandit in the night. It doesn't scream, doesn't draw attention to itself. It is the whisper that settles in the ears, the shroud that covers you in its clutches. And it has come for my gram.

“Gram, what can I do?” My tears burn my face and fall on her cheek.

“There is nothing you can do, my Milla. I am dying. I'm sorry, my sweet child. I do not wish to leave you.”

She coughs again and I give her more water. She drinks until the cough subsides. I hold her hand against my chest, trying to warm it, but it will not accept my offering.

Gram clears her throat and looks me full in the face. “Milla, I am so proud of you. I need you to make me a promise.”

“Anything,” I say.

“Promise me that you will never stop wishing. Wishes are a good thing. Dreams are a gift. Keep dreaming, my Milla. Now, I have something for you.”

She reaches into her chemise and pulls out a single match. She places it in my hand.

“I put that there the first time I watched you wish on a match, a constant reminder that my girl still makes wishes, even when we had no food to eat. My girl still dreams, even though I have little to offer her.” Gram smiles and slides a finger over my tears. “Never stop making wishes, Milla. Even when something is hard to believe, believe in it anyway. Promise me.”

“I promise, Gram.” I slide Gram’s match inside the small pocket in my chemise and hold her hand again.

Gram nods toward the spot on my chest where I placed her match. “Now, when you make that wish, call on me, and all the love and faith I have in you will guide you.” She takes a breath for strength. “No matter where I am at that moment, my heart will be with you.”

It’s hard to get the words out, “You will always be with me, Gram.”

She closes her eyes, as if she were waiting for those exact words from me. “There is something else.” She clears her throat. “Reach under my pillow.”

I slide a hand under her pillow and a sob rips through me when I recognize the object from its feel. “Oh, Gram, I can’t —”

“You can and you must. You’ll need it soon, Milla, and now you know where it is.”

The death bell and clangor are under her pillow. The bell serves one purpose—to alert the other villagers that someone has died in our house. She must have stuck it under her pillow while I was at market today. She knew this was going to happen, knew she was going to die this evening.

She’s quiet for several moments. I’m looking at her face, committing every line to memory. So many thoughts are running through my head. Our lives together fill my mind in flashing images—her teaching me to read and write, teaching me about plants and herbs, how to wrap a wound, and how to cook. I recall her braiding my hair as a child, wiping my tears when I stumbled, singing me to sleep at night.

“Milla,” she says, her voice weak and strained. “I’m sorry I never told you about our lineage. It was wrong of me to keep it from you.”

My chest is suddenly tight, my heart beating like it will leap clean through it.

“But I need you to understand. I never kept it from you as a cruelty. I did it for your own good, to protect you.”

I release the breath I’ve been holding. Master Burgess was right. My gram has been protecting me...my entire life.

Gram coughs again and I panic. I see the blood trickling from the sides of her mouth, but she seems unaffected.

“I need to get you a wet rag—”

“Milla,” Gram says. “No, dear. There is...no time. Listen to me. Your mother...my daughter... She loved you very much. She made me promise...to protect you. I’ve kept that promise.” Her breaths are shallow, her eyes hollow. She reaches her hand out. “Milla, I can almost touch the sun.”

“Gram!” I cry out. “Gram, please don’t leave me! You can’t leave me here alone.”

Her ragged breaths are slowing.

“Gram, please,” I beg, “take me with you. I can’t be worlds apart from you. I’ll never make it alone.”

She touches my face. “No matter the distance, child...I will always be with you. Your mother...she was a powerful mage, yet unaffected by madness. And her name...was Willow.”

Willow.

“Is she truly dead, like you told me before?” I ask. “Or were you protecting me?”

“Yes, child. I told...no falsehood. Your mother, my daughter, is dead. But I see her...in you. She...she... I see her still, right before my eyes.”

Gram’s hand leaves my face and falls back to the bed. She is spent. Her life is forfeit. I lay across her chest. Sobs tear through me that rip my guts and shred my heart. It’s hard to breathe, hard to move. How can I go through this life without Gram? She is gone, and all I want is her back. I will myself to rise after several minutes, my legs betraying me as I stand. I glance at the floor and notice the raven feather. It must’ve fell from Malek’s chest plate when he entered her room earlier. I

retrieve it with shaky hands. He took her poultice, my only possible way to make her well just a little longer. I place the feather on the bedside table.

“This feather will grace your dead body, Sir Malek. I swear it.”

I reach under her pillow and retrieve the death bell and clangor. I stumble, the room now spinning. I hang on to the wall as I leave the bedroom. I need to make it to the front door. I pull the latch when I reach the door, an icy blast of air assaulting my arms and face, but I ignore it. I hold the bell out and strike it with the clangor.

“Please, help me!” I scream. “It’s my gram. Please, help! Help me!”

I ring the death bell more violently as our neighbors’ doors begin to open. They are running towards me now.

And I just keep screaming.

CHAPTER 14

GRAM'S BODY IS ON A WOODEN RAFT THAT'S STREWN WITH flowers and resting beside the riverbank. I refused to allow the women to prepare her body. I wanted to ready her, the last act I could do as her granddaughter. I chose the red dress she wore to the harvest dance, remembering how beautiful her smile complimented the dress and the way she seemed so happy in it. I left her hair loose, and fashioned a braid to create a crown, lining it with the little pink flowers she loved so much. I dabbed some color on her lips. She is at peace. No coughing to haunt her. And wherever she is now, I hope she's with her daughter, Willow. My mother...

I turn and look at the crowd behind me. Candles. Everywhere. As far as the eye can see. And flowers. So many flowers. The villagers are lining the river, lit candles and flowers in their hands. All eyes are on me, the lone girl with posies in her hair and a torch in her grasp. I feel their pity. It is smothering me. They whisper their words of woe, but I hear them just the same. Pity is hard to silence, no matter how low the voice.

The priest has said his words, all the kind things he could muster about Gram. He spoke of her healing and the countless lives she made better. He spoke of the lives she helped bring into the world, becoming a midwife when no other was available, never saying no to assist anyone in any way. He spoke of her knowledge and patience, of all the things the

audience in attendance knows of her. But it all sounds cold to me.

The priest touches my shoulder. “Do you have some words, Milla?”

I nod and face the crowd of black dresses and trousers and overcoats. The flowers look out of place in the bitter cold of winter. The village greenhouses are probably bare, but it is no matter. The flowers are for Gram. All of this is for Gram. I spy Jordy and his parents. His mother is crying. Jordy is staring at me, the hurt in his face as plain as the gray clouds fluffing the sky. I give him a small nod and take a breath.

“She liked olive loaf,” I say, my voice shaking from the cold and nerves. “No matter what you sell today, Milla, bring home an olive loaf, she would say. And she hummed as she worked in the apothecary. She hummed all the time, when she was happy or sad. It made no difference, really. Sometimes she preferred to take cold baths rather than warm ones just to know that she was alive. She had patience in spades, but little tolerance for tomfoolery. The bagpipes were her favorite instrument, and she played the flute when she was a girl. She made a promise to my mother to protect me and to always care for me, and she did. Always. And one of the last things she said to me in this world was this.” I lock eyes with Jordy. “Even when something is hard to believe, believe it anyway.”

Jordy’s face falls and he looks at the ground, wearing his shame like a death shroud of his own.

I place the lit torch I am holding back in its brace by the river and make my way to the raft. I give Gram a final kiss on

the cheek.

“I love you, Gram. Your work is done. Rest well.”

I pull some posies from my hair and place them in her dress pocket. I back away from the raft and take the torch again. I nod to the priest.

“For this godly woman we have gathered, and now I commend her spirit. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust...”

A few men gather around the raft. Master Burgess is with them but stops when he reaches me.

“I am so sorry about your gram, Milla. If you need anything—”

“I know, Master Burgess.” I grasp his forearm and give it a light squeeze. “I know.”

He places a kiss on the top of my hand, then joins the other men.

The men who have gathered pour oil along the sides of the raft, dousing the sprays of flowers and Gram’s body as well. They push the raft into the river, a trail of oil behind it. I go to the riverbank and touch my torch to the water. The flames ignite the oil and reach the raft, engulfing it. I watch the burning raft floating on the river, the castle tower in the backdrop like a silent observer. The villagers blow out the candles they are holding and walk to the river one by one, dropping their flowers into the water. I turn my back on the display, unable to watch any longer. The pain of losing Gram is too great and threatens to consume me. I look at the tree line in the distance as I head for higher ground and see a face from

behind a tree that resembles Sir Victor's. I stop and blink, looking at the tree again, and he's gone. My mind is playing tricks. What I really need is sleep.

"Milla," Jordy says, running to catch up with me, "wait."

I stop and turn around. His face is wet from tears and it humbles me. He reaches for my hands and I allow him to hold them.

"I am so very sorry about your gram. Truly. I never wanted you to lose her. I know what she means to you."

"She is everything I have in this world."

Jordy slides his thumb across my cheek and places a delicate kiss on my forehead. "Not everything, my lady. I'm sorry I doubted what the knight said to you, Milla. Whether it hold no truth at all, or be as right as rain, make no mistake...I know your worth. Your worth is something you will never have to prove to me. The knight's words are hard to believe, but I believe them anyway."

And I believe him. "Thank you, Jordy."

He extends his elbow. I loop my hand inside it but pull back a little when he starts to walk. We both turn around and gaze at the river one last time as it lights up the sky, flowers dancing on a sea of flames.



The cottage is too quiet. I miss Gram's humming. Waves of emotion wash over me when I think about her coughing that wore so soundly on my nerves when she was here. I never

thought it could be so, but I miss the coughing. Gram has departed this world, has settled into her eternal slumber. So, what am I left to do now? I have never been more alone in my life. I'm not sure how to exist without her, how to exist so completely and utterly alone.

Although I know it is wise to keep normalcy, I will not be going to market to sell my wares on the morrow. I wish to stay in the cottage for one more day, surround myself with Gram's things and grieve the only way I know how. I had hoped to find more items that belonged to my mother, or maybe writings that Gram had kept with more details about our lineage, but there are none. My mother's dress had been kept in a locked trunk that Gram never opened until the very day she gave the dress to me. Gram's final words keep running through my head. *She was a powerful mage, yet unaffected by madness.* Could Gram have been speaking madness herself? There has never been a mage that did not lose their mind to madness. The more powerful they became, the more their minds slipped away from them. That is why the king took the magic away from Timberness. Magic is declared witchery, and witchery is forbidden.

Every time I think about my mother, I wonder what truly happened to her. Gram said my mother made her promise to take care of me, to protect me. She also said my mother died. Maybe she was sick, knew she wasn't long for this world. But why did Gram have to keep her a secret, keep my entire bloodline a secret, if my mother was merely sick? And where is my father? Is he dead too? I still crave answers, and I am no closer to finding them. I may never know the entire truth about

my mother, may never know my family, and it eats at me like locusts in a field. Did my mother succumb to the power of magic? My mother... A mage?

What happened to you, Willow?

I reach into my chemise and pull out the match Gram gave me. It gives me an odd sense of comfort. I hold it for several seconds, then put it back. I need to grasp my situation, need to assess how I am to proceed in this life without Gram. One thing is certain, I can not give in to a single drop of rest. I must survive in my predicament, somehow.

My rations are the first order of business. I busy myself taking stock of my food supply. Jordy's mother sent over an olive loaf and sweet bread. Master Burgess sent some salted meats, and I still have the apples I picked up at market. I have butter and three carrots. There are two bottles of ale and a jug of cider. I have enough tea leaves to brew tea for weeks, and enough spices to make any dish taste divine. The vegetable stew has gone rancid in the pot. I carry it behind the cottage and dump it near the outhouse. The village cats will be grateful. There won't be a smidge remaining by morning.

I wash the cooking pot and set it back over the fire pit. I will not cook this night. I will help myself to three slices of olive loaf and butter, and a piece of salted meat. I will wash it down with a cup of ale and have half an apple for dessert. I can bake the other half of the apple to break my fast come sunup and treat myself to a piece of sweet bread. Hot tears wet my cheeks when I think of how much longer the food lasts with just me.

Just me.

I lose my breath. I am now truly an orphan.

When my meal is through, I go into the apothecary. I haven't stepped foot in here since Gram died. I lift the bottles one by one from the shelves, examining the labels inscribed by her hand. I admire how intricately she organized each medication by the illnesses they treat. I glance at the basket that holds the items that Gram received for payment. There are only enough wares to count on one hand. I still have a few coins left, and I know I can sell some of Gram's things that hold no sentimentality, but that doesn't add up to much. Gram and I share most of our valuables, neither one of us having very many items that are ours alone. Without Gram's talent for healing, I will have no wares to trade, except the matches Master Burgess so freely gives me.

Will folks still come to me when they are ill or hurt and expect me to treat them? I do know some techniques and remedies for healing illnesses and setting broken bones. Gram was an excellent teacher, but I'm not Gram. I was her apprentice. There is still much for me to learn. Trial by fire. That was what Gram used to say. She learned to be a healer with a little trial by fire. I suppose if folks trust me, even knowing that I am as green as fresh Spring grass, then I will heal them as best I know how when the need arises.

I lift the jar of beetroot and recall the night that Gram died. Sir Malek stole her poultice to make a statement to Jordy. And his statement killed my gram. I wonder if it would have made a difference if I had stayed up that night and made Gram some

fresh poultice. Would she still be here? I know it is a silly notion, but I loved her, so I question everything—every step I made the night she was dying that might have made a difference. I do know one thing as sure as I know there are clouds in the sky and leaves on the trees. Had Sir Malek not taken her poultice, I would've used it on her, and it may have prevented her coughing from becoming so violent. His thievery caused her to suffer more. Maybe one day, I will make him suffer too. I remember the raven feather on the bedside table. I step into the bedroom and retrieve it. I turn it over in my hand, then tuck it inside my chemise next to my flintstone. This black feather will find Malek again. It is my solemn vow.

I go back into the apothecary, enjoying the comfort it wraps me in as I slide my fingers along the rows of small jars on the stocked shelves. I read the names of the herbs and leaves, the roots and pungent spices. I wonder how long each of the ingredients will keep. Gram was always the one who did inventory, knew the shelf life of each one by heart. I think again how I am a weak substitute for Gram. I glance at the top shelf. Gram keeps the least-used remedies there. Some of the jars are dusty from neglect. They probably need to be thrown out. I retrieve a step stool and take down the six jars that Gram left there to perish. I read the labels and lose my breath when one hits my brain.

Willow's Wisp.

But to my disappointment, the jar is empty. Why have I never seen this before? Nothing Gram has ever used in my presence has been labeled Willow's Wisp. I set the jar on the

bottom shelf. Could this jar have belonged to my mother? Held one of her spells, if she were indeed a mage like Gram professed? I'll find out all I can, scour Gram's notes when exhaustion isn't my bedfellow. There is nothing more I can possibly will myself to discover this long night.

A yawn finds me. I rub my eyes, finally feeling as though I could sleep for a bit. I check the latch on the front door and secure the new lock Jordy put on it when I told him of Sir Malek's threat. I go into the bedroom and take off my dress. I pull Gram's match and my flintstone from my chemise before lying down and set them on the bedside table. I leave the feather, will not remove it until it meets its purpose. I climb into Gram's bed and pull the covers up around my neck. I sink my head into her pillow, then bury my nose in it. The pillow still smells like Gram's hair, a mixture of rosehips and lavender. And I will savor her scent for as long as it remains.

CHAPTER 15

MARKET SQUARE HAS BEEN BUSTLING THIS DAY, AND I HAVE SOLD every item I brought with me except one—a hand-me-down scarf. I spy the woman of means who has never purchased anything from me. I should simply pass her by. I recall her reaction the last time all I had to offer was a used scarf. Everyone has been quite generous of late, so I don't need her charity or the aching in my head she normally generates when I encounter her, so I keep walking.

“Match girl,” she calls out when I pass her by. “May I see your wares today?”

I sigh and put on a smile. “Sure, kind lady, but I am afraid that all I have to offer is a scarf. I do recall that hand-me-downs are not your pleasure. This day has been a prosperous one, however, so the scarf is all I have to offer.”

“I still wish to see it,” she insists.

Odd, but I play along. I give her the scarf, and she barely looks at it. “I'll take it. How much?”

Shock steals my voice for a moment. Has the wealthy woman hit her head? Had a spiritual awakening? Lost her mind?

I find my voice, “Umm, that will be three bits, my lady.” I'm still surprised. This sell was too simple. What is her game?

“Thank you, match girl. Here you are.” She places the coins in my hand. The lady of means gives me a weak smile.

“I heard about your grandmother. My grandmother raised me too. I was devastated when she went to be with the gods. I know your loss, and I am truly sorry, lass.”

I nod. “Thank you for your condolences, my lady.” Her softer side is nice. She should show it more often.

She moves along and crosses to the side of the street. She hands the scarf to a beggar who looks frightfully cold. A grin parts my lips. There is indeed a warm heart in her narrow chest after all. The thought makes my smile widen. Miracles do happen.

The scarf was the last item from my basket, and I have sold every single match. Selling my wares has been simple of late. Sympathy has been at play. The sun will be setting within the hour and I have nothing left to barter. I have never seen a day like this and will likely never see it again. I reach in my coin pouch. Ten bits. And I still have food at home. This will give me extra coins for oil for the lamps and maybe a new bonnet. My old one has a small tear on the left side. I found some fabric Gram was saving for a new day dress. I will start on the dress tonight. Sewing helps pass the time when there’s no one to talk to. I’m excited to see if Jordy will like the new dress. The fabric is green. Gram says green is my color. Maybe I can buy a new bonnet to match the dress.

There is no time left in the day to sweep the trading post for Master Burgess. I will need more matches to sell and extra work once my coin pouch is light again. I have a bundle of matches back at the cottage, but the only match I have on my person is the one in my chemise that belonged to Gram. No

one thus far has come to me for healing, so I may have to find another means of survival in the coming days. But that is of no consequence. I am alone now. My life is mine to provide and care for. No one will miss me when I'm not at the cottage. The thought crushes my heart.

There's still time to see Jordy before curfew. He'll not believe that I earned ten bits in a single day. I dangle the empty basket down by my side, feeling most accomplished. I am almost to the bakery and stop when I see them. Jordy is standing outside of the bakery, and Treena is standing in front of him. It looks as though they are making pleasantries, but Jordy keeps glancing inside the bakery like he's in a hurry. I step a little closer. Maybe she is keeping him from his duties. She's leaning in so he can get a full view of her bosom if he so pleases. It is a disgusting display. I think I shall brave her wrath instead of avoiding her this time. My Jordy needs a rescue, but he will owe me a bushel for this one. I step closer and Treena glances in my direction. She looks back to Jordy and laughs at something he says. She reaches up in one swift motion, clasps his cheeks and tugs his face to hers.

And she kisses him.

Full on the mouth.

I can't breathe.

Can't move.

I drop the basket and run toward home as fast as my legs will carry me.

After a couple of streets, I see an empty alley and run to the end of it, my hands hitting the wooden wall, the pain reminding me that I'm still alive. I press my back against the wall and allow my body to slide down it. It's hard to see past the tears. How could Jordy do this to me? With *her*? Out of all the girls in the village, why would he pick Treena to be unfaithful with? He knows the tensions between us, knows how she enjoys torturing me for sport. Is Jordy trying to hurt me? How could he do this to me?

I've been trying so hard to climb out of the darkness that's consumed me since losing Gram. The loneliness has threatened to choke me, suffocate me, snuff me out until I am no longer a thought in anyone's mind. And in the blackness, when I felt that no one truly needed me, that no one would notice if I vanished into nothingness, I would remember the one soul who would think of me...

My Jordy.

Jordy was the one promise, the one stronghold I held to when I felt like my life was of no consequence, no value. I was his lady, and he recognized my worth. Jordy was mine when I had Gram and mine when I had nothing else. How do I pull myself up again with no handhold?

Nightfall is nearly here. Curfew is looming. I know I should be heading home, but I can't move. I'm paralyzed, broken, nothing. Would the patrol even notice me if I were stumbled upon anyway, or would I simply be as disregarded as the nothing I have become? My logic fights my shattered heart, but I allow the brokenness to win.

Maybe this is my path—the path that has been set before me since birth. I am the child of a mother who sent me away to be raised by my grandmother, never to know her. Never to know my father. Never to know my lineage. I was unwanted. Unloved. Forgotten.

I have been orphaned and betrayed, loved and rejected. I try to stand but fall to the ground again. My heart is crushed and aching. I am the blackness that consumes me. I feel the hot tears that cool as soon as they traverse my cheeks, the cold air bitter and my heart nothing more than a dull ache. I need to be void of thought, void of feeling, but my mind betrays me.

I recall the first time I met Jordy. We were children, and Gram had taken me to the market square for a marionette show. Jordy was there with his parents, passing out sweet cakes to the children in attendance. His father was maneuvering one of the marionettes, and his mother was none too proud. Jordy personally handed a sweet cake to me, commenting on my hair.

“Did it hurt?” he’d asked.

“Did what hurt?” I’d replied.

“The fire when it danced in your hair?”

No one had ever referred to my hair as fire before, and his words confused me. I wasn’t sure if he was mocking me or complimenting me. But when he took a seat next to me when the show started, I noticed him staring at my hair, admiration in his eyes. Then, right before the show was over, he touched a lock of my hair. It was on the end, and ever so slightly, but he’d touched it. The boy truly believed that my hair was fire-

kissed. I suppose he'd expected me to burn him. Funny, I never expected him to burn me.

The cold surrounds me and my face is numb. My hands betray me, shaking violently. I force myself to come to my senses. It's dark and I need to get home. Patrol will be out soon. It's hard to see when I stand. I pull Gram's match and my flintstone from my chemise and look around for a stick or piece of wood to burn as a makeshift torch. But after a few moments, I think better of it. There's no way I'm striking Gram's match. I'd rather die than burn out the wish she gave to me on her deathbed. I will join her in eternity first. I tuck the match back into my chemise and rest against the wall again.

I close my eyes and give in to the silence now surrounding me. I only need a few moments to rest and gather my thoughts. I know these streets like the back of my hand. I don't need light to maneuver them. I sink further into the darkness, and I see Gram's face. This can't be real. *How is she here?*

“Gram, take me with you! I want to be with you.”

She is silent and smiling. No movement, no words.

“Gram!” I scream again. “Take me with you!” But she is gone.

I am in the abyss. Alone. Searching. The logic in my aching brain reminds me that Gram isn't really here. And no matter how badly I want to remain here and conjure her memory, I have to get to the cottage. I will die in this alley if I stay here. I have seen souls who have frozen to death. I cannot allow that to be my fate, no matter how solidly my heart is

broken. The air entering my lungs is icy and sharp, but I take the needed breaths anyway. I open my eyes wider, a lantern on the street in the distance is the only light I see. I reach behind me and place my palms on the cold wall. I slowly creep my hands along the splintering wood, lifting myself to my feet again.

“This feeling is the cold overtaking you, Milla,” I mutter. “Move beyond it or you will die.”

I urge myself to move. Once I am up and walking, my limbs will find their life again. I take another step and my feet fail me. I have remained in the cold too long. My face hits the ground and I see stars behind my eyes. The lantern light from the street is close now. I try to open my eyes, but a swirl of dizziness grips me. I feel strong arms lifting me from the cold earth.

“You are safe now, my lady,” the male voice says.

It is familiar, but it is not Jordy. It is the last coherent thought I manage before succumbing to the blackness.

CHAPTER 16

I STRUGGLE TO OPEN MY EYES. THERE IS LAMPLIGHT, BUT IT IS dim. My head feels like it has been split with a mallet. I smell fresh hay and cow dung, not an appealing combination. There are chickens below me. I can hear their soft clucking. Confusion ticks in my brain. *Where am I?* I try to sit up when I see mounds of hay around me and the shadow of a man on my right.

“Please, don’t try to sit up, mistress. You took a nasty—”

The scream shoots from my throat as his hand cups my mouth, crushing my lips against my teeth. Panic swells in my belly. What is happening?

“Please do not scream, Mistress Milla. Do you want the guards to hear you?”

Yes, actually I do! But I don’t say it. I am laying in a bed of straw, and a blanket is covering me. I am fully dressed, right down to my stockings and boots. Thank the gods I have not been defiled, although I feel like I have been trampled by a team of horses. I’m struggling to piece together what events have brought me here, in what is apparently a barn.

“Who are you?” I instinctively ask, but I recognize Sir Victor before the words are fully out of my mouth. His spiked, blond hair is a dead giveaway.

“Sir Victor of House Winston,” he replies, “and we have met before, my lady.”

“Indeed, we have.” I push up on one elbow and place my other hand on my throbbing head. “But, as I recall, the last time I saw you, you had a noose around your neck. And the time before that, the king’s guards were dragging you away, accusing you of treason. So, explain to me why I shouldn’t be screaming at precisely this moment?”

He runs a hand through his blond spikes and sits down in the hay next to me. His muscled arms are even bigger than I thought. He could snap me like a twig if enticed, yet I oddly feel completely safe with him, no matter my fervent questioning. He wears his goodness like a cloak. He reminds me of my Jordy.... Then I recall the kiss, Treena’s hands on Jordy’s face and her lips on his. Maybe I shouldn’t trust this Victor in the slightest. Even men clothed in goodness are rogues.

“Well, for starters,” Sir Victor announces, “I saved you from freezing to death in that alley. You’ll need to explain that one to me later, by the way. I am curious to know how you found yourself in that predicament. And secondly, because I can tell you exactly who you are, and I can show you proof that my claims are true.”

It’s hard to allow myself to believe his words. I push myself up to a seated position. My head is still pounding, but a little more bearable. Sir Victor doesn’t look like a knight at all, in his plain white shirt and brown trousers. He looks to be ever the commoner, which I know is his intention. He is a wanted man, after all. How can he know anything at all about my lineage?

“Here,” Victor says. “I brought you some tea. It is no longer hot, regrettably, but you don’t drink it for the taste, you drink it for the medicine. I knew you’d need something for your head when you awakened, and this will do the trick. It was indeed a nasty fall you took.” He touches my cheek and I pull away. “I’m afraid you have a bruise on your cheek, mistress. You can thank the icy ground for that. You’re lucky I came along when I did.”

His words prompt a sharp laugh. “I’m lucky you came along when you did? I do believe that was no accident, Sir Victor. Tell the truth. You were following me.”

“Aye,” he admits. “Aye, I was. But ‘twas for good reason, and I still saved your life, nonetheless. You would have frozen to death in that alley.”

No matter his lack of humility, I still can’t deny that he saved me. “Well, I do thank you for saving my life, and for the tea, sir.” I extend a hand for the cup and take a long sip. “So, where are we exactly?”

“In a hayloft on McGregor Dooley’s farm. I’ve been posing as a farmhand and hiding in the hayloft. It’s a good cover for avoiding the other members of the guard until we can set things right. And McGregor is already one of us. It was Mistress Dooley who made you the tea and gave me the blanket for you. They want to see things set right as much as I do, and that all starts with you, my lady.”

Why does he keep saying that? And who is this man sitting beside me, besides being a dangerously handsome devil? And

if he wasn't a traitor to the crown, he'd be quite charming to boot, although I would never admit it to him.

“Start by telling me who you are,” I say. “And not your name again, but *how* you know me. Explain to me exactly how you are not a traitor to the crown who escaped his rightful punishment, if you please.” I take another sip of tea and nestle down a little snuggler in the straw.

Victor looks into my face, a slight smile turning up his mouth. “You look so much like her,” he states matter-of-factly. “From the fire in your hair, the eyes as blue as the ocean's depths, and the skin so frothy white, it resembles bedsheets. Yes, you are her twin.”

“Who's twin?” I say, not masking my agitation. “Who do I look so much like?”

“Your mother.”

I'm frozen, unmovable, hanging on his every word.

“I was merely a boy of five seasons, and you were still in her belly, but I remember her as vividly as the meal I had last night. I have always wondered what really happened to your mother.”

Tingles run on my arms and my chest feels as if it is being crushed by bricks. Everything I have waited for my entire life is finally coming full circle. He is here. He knew my mother. I am rapt in his words.

“You see, my father was the head of the royal guards. I grew up in the castle. My father was King Urich's advisor, but

he never trusted the king. He said the king had a darkness about him, a darkness that was capable of unspeakable things.”

“Begging your pardon,” I say, “but I still don’t see what any of this has to do with me.”

He is resolute. “You will, dear Milla. I found some writings that belonged to my father when he was killed last season. Those writings confirmed my suspicions. It took me time to locate you, but now I have. And now order can truly be restored in Timberness, all because of who you are.”

I sit up straighter. “Who am I?”

“Have you not figured it out yet, sweet Milla? You are the princess.”

CHAPTER 17

“PRINCESS?”

Maybe I died. My body is no doubt still lying on the frozen ground in that alley. This can't be real. I am no princess.

“Yes, my lady. You are the crown princess of Timberness, the only rightful heir to the throne. King Urich is ailing, his light will soon dim. We must restore you to your rightful position.”

I touch Gram's match in my chemise, recalling all the times I had wished on a match and wished to see the inside of the palace, to be more than my station in life. And now that Sir Victor is offering me that wish, it is too unbelievable to conceive.

“You must know how your words sound. I am the match girl. And now I am alone in the world. I have no lot in this life. And now you are telling me that I am a princess? It is too much.” I look him fully in the face. “How do I even know that I can trust you?”

He is firm and direct. “You don't, but I am telling the truth. Others know it too. Who do you think saved me from the gallows?”

My words are trapped in my throat. I shrug, listening to nothing but the sounds coming from his mouth.

“Those were the resistance fighters,” he continues. “They all know the truth, and they are forming an army to overthrow

King Ulrich as we speak.”

“An army?”

“Yes, an army, from neighboring villages and from here within Timberness. But that task will be more easily accomplished if the people know they are fighting for you. You are beloved, Milla. The villagers depended on your grandmother as their healer, and now they will depend on you to be their savior.

My head is reeling. It is a lot to take in. I consider the possibility that it could be true. I recall not very long ago when Gram forbade me to speak of the palace, said I was never allowed to work there. And she did say that she hid my lineage to protect me. Could it be true?

Sir Victor is quiet, allowing me to process his revelation. But it is a weak revelation at best. I need more, need to know about my mother. Then it hits me.

“If I am the princess, then that means King Ulrich is my father?”

“No,” Sir Victor says. “He is not.”

Confusion pokes at my already aching head. “You need to explain, Sir Victor. I feel that you are making me the butt of a very intricate joke.”

He goes into the story without hesitation. “Your mother was the blood-born queen of Timberness, the only child of King Girard of House Starling of Timberness and Queen Isabel of Veilbrook. Upon King Girard’s death, your mother was crowned as the ruling queen because Queen Isabel was

queen by marriage only. At the time your mother was crowned the new queen, she was madly in love with a knight and powerful mage, Sir Waylen, and her father was supposed to betroth them because Waylen was not royalty, no matter his magical prowess. Waylen had also recognized the magic your mother possessed. He taught her how to use her powers, and she was considered the most powerful queen Timberness had ever known. When the king fell ill, he had no time to formally announce the betrothal of Sir Waylen and the young queen before his passing.

“However, this was of no real consequence to the new queen. Now that she was the rightful heir and sole ruler, she was going to simply choose her own husband and disregard the traditions of the hierarchy. And Queen Isabel, the former queen and new queen mother, was in full support of their union. But the queen mother was unaware of a treaty the king had signed when their daughter was a child, promising her hand to Prince Urich of Enverness.

“When Prince Urich came calling, the new queen told him of her love for Sir Waylen, and how she was going to break tradition. The prince was furious. He vowed that only the king could undo what was signed by his hand, and she was of no authority to undo a betrothal that had already been forged and a dowry long since paid. His persistence was rewarded with a trial, and the high council decided that the queen’s marriage would be decided by a feat of strength. A joust was held between Prince Urich and Sir Waylen. To even the odds, Sir Waylen was not allowed to use his magic—”

“But you said I am the daughter of Sir Waylen,” I blurt. “How can that be when King Urich is the king of Timberness?”

“It is indeed true that Prince Urich won the joust, much to the horror of your mother. She had to watch her beloved Sir Waylen bested and killed by Urich. But the prince was unaware that Waylen had already bedded the queen. You were snug in her belly when that joust took place, my dear. It was then that the queen confided to Prince Urich that she was already pregnant with her lover’s child. Prince Urich believed her a liar, until the midwife confirmed it. The queen thought surely this would free her from a marriage to Prince Urich, and even if it hadn’t, she was going to find a way to use her magic to free herself from Urich once and for all. But it was not to be. The high council had ordered that the winner of the joust would marry the queen and be the new king consort, and so it was decreed. The wedding and coronation of the new king consort of Timberness, Urich of Enverness, took place that very evening.

“In their bed chambers on their wedding night, the queen attempted to place a spell on Urich now that she had him alone, but Urich was wise to her. He’d had a wizard of his own place a shield spell on him, and the queen’s magic took no hold on his mind or flesh. However, it did soundly infuriate the new king consort. Urich taking his proof of her spellcasting to the high counsel had your mother deemed unfit to be sole ruler of Timberness, and he was then named king. The new king punished the queen by saying she could not keep a bastard child. He promised a swift death upon your

arrival unless she was willing to give you up. So, the queen asked her own mother—your maternal grandmother—to take you to the village and raise you as her own. The queen mother agreed to be your guardian for as long as there was breath in her bones, and she vowed to never return to the palace. So, on the day you were born, your grandmother, the former Queen Isabel, drastically altered her appearance to blend in with the commoners and so as not to be recognized. She took you, a full coin pouch, and a few meager belongings into the market square area of Timberness to start a new life—one in which you would be safe from King Urich’s treachery. Everyone in court was told that the queen mother died of the pox and that you were stillborn, but my father knew better. He was King Urich’s royal advisor and captain of the royal guards. He was sworn to keep the king’s secrets, and he never spoke a word of his treachery while he drew breath. But he kept a journal. And upon my father’s death, upon his request, I read it. That is how I am able to tell you of these events. My father was duty-bound to keep King Urich’s secrets in his life, but death held the power to loose his tongue.”

I try to stand, and Sir Victor assists me. It is hard to hear of the evils, hard to fully grasp what my mother and Gram went through. And as much as I want to believe that everything Victor just told me is true, one question pricks my brain like a hot needle.

“Sir Victor, I have always been taught that the queen’s name was Millicent and that she died of a failing heart.”

“It was,” he replies. “And she did. She sat in the watch tower for hours, trying to catch glimpses of you and her

mother. She was stripped of her magic on the threat of harm coming to you. She lived with a shattered heart until it was no longer able to beat.”

My shoulders drop along with my hopes. “Then you have been following the wrong maiden. She is not my mother. My gram told me my mother’s name, and it was not Millicent.”

He steps in front of me. “Well, she was known by an affectionate nickname by those who loved her most. Those the closest to the queen called her Willow, like the mage fairy in children’s stories.”

A sob tears through me and I fall into Sir Victor’s chest, clinging to him before I realize what I’m doing. Every drop of relief is surging through my veins. I have a lineage, a bloodline, something to call my own, no matter how much turmoil has befallen my family. I am whole, important.

Validated.

But when I think about what my gram sacrificed, what she gave up for so many years to raise me and watch me grow, I can barely comprehend it.

Gram was the queen.

Then the queen mother.

And she gave it all up.

For me.

So many emotions are coursing through my body, I need time to process all that Sir Victor has revealed. I have to get out of this hayloft, get back to the cottage. I need to think.

“Sir Victor, I need to return to my home. I have more questions for you, but I need to clear my head. Will you meet me at my home later? I’m sure you know where it is, considering you’ve been following me.”

“I will admit, I know of your cottage, my lady,” he replies. “And I will be there at the witching hour.” He reaches into a bundle of hay and pulls out a leather-bound book. He holds it out in front of me. “This is my father’s journal. Take it with you. Read it for yourself, I beseech you.”

I clasp the book and choke back tears. The beauty and pain of what I am holding is not lost on me. My entire existence is in my hands, and I’m consumed, overwhelmed...and grateful.

“Be discreet when you arrive at my cottage,” I remind Sir Victor. “Avoid patrol and the guards.”

“I am nimble,” he says. “I will not be detected. And be sure to heed your own advice, mistress. And take this.” Sir Victor retrieves the blanket from the straw and wraps it around my shoulders. “It’s bitterly cold outside. You’ll appreciate the extra layer.”

“Thank you, good sir. I will see you soon.”

I tuck the journal under one arm and climb down from the hayloft. I start out across the farmer’s fields, questions flooding my brain and rejuvenation filling my heart. There is still much I need to know, and I will learn it all. I take the streets I know are seldom patrolled once I’m closer to market square as to avoid any confrontation.

One phrase keeps sounding in my head.

I am the princess.

Me.

The match girl.

CHAPTER 18

SHE BURNED BECAUSE OF ME. I FLOATED HER IN THE RIVER ON A raft, encased her in flowers, and set her aflame. My gram was Queen Isabel, blood-born princess of Veilbrook, and queen of Timberness for nearly twenty years. Her body should be in the palace crypts in Timberness next to her beloved husband, King Girard, forever. But it is not, and it is because of me. Because of my existence, my grandmother gave up royalty, her name, her physical appearance, and the only way of life she had ever known. I begged her from the time I could speak to tell me about our lineage, and all the while she had walked away from her bloodline to keep me safe. I think about how torturous it must've been, to have me remind her over and over again of what she'd lost—what she'd given up to simply give me a life. And yet, she loved me beyond measure.

She was indeed a queen.

I run a hand along the leather binding of the journal. Thank the gods for Victor's father, and for his honesty and goodness. I've been reading, parts of the writings so painful that I have to stop for composure. I touch the match in my chemise—the cherished match that Gram gave me. I recall the times I'd wished on matches, begging the wind, the air, the sky, for anything at all in this wretched world to show me a sign of who I really am. The universe provided me a rogue knight with a treasured book, a book that completes me. The universe has a sick sense of humor.

The light knocking on the door pulls me from my thoughts. I know it is Sir Victor. I open it quickly and usher him inside.

“Good evening, mistress,” he says, shaking the dampness of the night air from his coat and tugging off his hat and gloves. “Might I set these in front of the fire?”

“Absolutely.”

I secure the latch on the door and lock the top for good measure. Part of me is afraid that the king’s guard will show up to search the house again. I think about Sir Malek and feel the bile back up in my throat. The gods forbid he ever try to make good on his threats to break me.

“May I help myself to some water from the barrel, mistress?” Sir Victor asks.

“Oh, where are my manners? Yes, most certainly.”

I watch his motions as he drinks. He is tired, and it shows. I carry his father’s journal to the kitchen table when he’s had his fill.

Sir Victor notices the apothecary. He steps in front of the shelves, running a finger along a few of the jars. He opens one and sticks it to his nose. He grimaces when the smell hits his nostrils and I hide my smile with my hand.

“She was a remarkable woman in the art of healing,” he observes. “My father used to tell me a story about a time when King Girard was injured on a hunting trip. A wild boar had gored his leg. The queen stopped the bleeding and treated his wound before the castle doctor even made it to the king’s

quarters. My father told me that story often. It was one of his favorites.”

His words give me pause. Hearing him speak of my gram in casual conversation and address her as “the queen” and talk of her with a husband, my grandfather... I’m not sure I will ever grow accustomed to it. It is new, and bizarre, and strangely comforting.

And still, an invisible weight pushes against my chest, a longing that keeps me asking questions about everything to do with my kinsmen.

“King Girard, my grandfather, what can you tell me of him?” I ask. “I knew my gram better than anyone in the world, and I know nothing about the man she loved.”

Sir Victor leans against the apothecary table. “Well, let me see. According to my father, he was a good king, and the villagers loved him. And you and your mother, you received your fire-kissed hair from the king. His hair was as red as bloodfruit.”

I swipe the tears away from my cheeks. I can’t count the times when I was a child that townsfolks would ask me where I found my red hair. My gram’s hair was brown before it grayed from age. It meant the world to me when Gram confided that my mother’s hair was red. But knowing that we both received our fiery locks from my grandfather is more details than I ever thought I would be afforded. And it means everything.

“Thank you for that, Sir Victor. Now, will you sit? There is food if you are hungry.”

“The water was sustaining, my lady. Thank you.”

I still have many questions, so I waste no time with further pleasantries. “I’ve been reading your father’s book. Might I ask you some questions?”

He clasps his hands in front of him and leans in like he’s been waiting for this exact moment for a lifetime. “I was counting on it. I’m listening, my lady.”

“You said that you remember my mother? How old were you, then?”

“I was five seasons, mistress. And you were a babe in her belly. I am twenty and five seasons now, which makes you—”

“Twenty.”

“Aye, twenty.” His jaw clenches and his eyes never leave my face. “I hold a vision of your mother in my head, and the first time I saw her. It was the first time I had ever been so close to a queen. She was in front of me, and she bent down and took my hand. She said I was a strapping young fellow and that my father should be proud. Her hair smelled like gardenias, and her hand was soft, her eyes were gentle. I will never forget it.”

Tears glass my eyes. “Because she was so kind, my lord?”

“No,” he replies. “I mean, yes. She was kind, that is true. But it was because she was so beautiful. I had never seen a woman of such refine. Even at a tender age, I knew that her beauty was rare.”

He is still staring and my cheeks pink.

“You look like your mother,” he says. “Fire-kissed hair and porcelain skin, eyes so blue, they shame sapphires. Rose red lips... Beautiful. And her kindness, you possess that as well. It baffles me that the villagers never recognized you—the power that a peasant dress and bonnet holds for eyes who will not see, it boggles the mind. But I saw you. No simple clothing could hide the rareness of that beauty from me.”

I clear my throat and divert my eyes. It is hard to talk to him when he looks at me like that. “But the villagers were told that I was stillborn. Seven hells, I was taught from the histories that the only princess and true heir to Timberness was stillborn. Do you know how it feels to be taught your whole life that you’re dead? The villagers were never looking for a lost princess. How could they ever see me as anything but the match girl?”

“I suppose,” he replies. “But I still believe them daft.”

“And my mother,” I continue, “she died of a failing heart? That is what the village children were taught, what I was taught. You said ‘tis true?”

I hear the reluctance in his voice. “It is true, but her heart did not simply give out at her tender age. The full truth is that she died of a broken heart, my lady. She could not bear losing her child and missing her mother. And her beloved Sir Waylen was gone. And as if that wasn’t enough, King Ulrich took her magic away. She was a broken thing after you were sent away. And she detested King Ulrich. My father said that the queen existed with a heart that was shattered until it took its last beat.”

“I killed my mother,” I mumble. “By the gods, I killed my mother.”

“What, Milla? What are you saying?”

“I killed my mother. Had she never been expecting me, she would be alive now and Gram would’ve never been forced to leave the palace. Gram may still be alive too, may not have gotten so sick. She would’ve lived had she still been a queen. All of it is my fault.”

Sir Victor leans across the table and takes my hand. “You mustn’t do this to yourself, Milla. Your grandmother loved you. Look at all she gave up to keep you safe. It takes a strong love to do that. And your mother never regretted having you. Make no mistake about that.”

My throat tightens, but I fight the tears. “Those are pretty words, Sir Victor, but how can you know that?”

He reaches into his shirt pocket and retrieves a small, rolled up piece of linen paper. He sets it on the table and pushes it with his finger until it stops to rest in front of me.

“I know because your mother summoned my father to her chambers when she was on her deathbed. She knew that he was still loyal to her father, knew how he truly felt about the new king. He promised to give this to you if he were ever afforded the opportunity. God rest my father’s soul, he made sure the opportunity would arise by keeping a journal and leaving it to me. If you look on the last page in his journal, it instructed me where to find the note from your mother. It is still sealed by her hand, my lady. No one has opened it.”

My hands are shaking when I touch the note. My mother wrote it, held the paper in her hands, and sealed it with her signet. I break the seal and unroll it, every nerve in my body reacting to the magnitude of the moment. I glance at Sir Victor when it is opened. He isn't moving as much as a flinch, totally rapt in the moment. I know what he has sacrificed to find me, is still a wanted man on the run. He deserves to know what is in this note as much as I do. I focus on the paper and read aloud:

My dearest Milla,

If you are reading this, it means that you have been found and the time has come for you to take your rightful place on the throne. It is my dying vision to see you on the throne and our family restored. Urich is evil, and he will stop at nothing to keep Timberness under his rule. But it is yours, my darling. Show this note to the church. The priests will confirm my signet and script in the eyes of God and the good people of Timberness. They are our people, Milla. We must restore Timberness to its rightful ruler.

Let it be known to all that you are the daughter of Queen Millicent and her beloved Sir Waylen who died in a joust trying to win my hand in marriage. You were not the stillborn babe that was presented at court. You were cast away by King Urich, and the queen mother with you to keep you safe. If they check the crypt for Queen Isabel's body, they will find an empty crypt. You are the blood-born princess, and Urich has no reign as long as you are in the world.

I love you, Milla, more than anything in this world. You are the sole surviving member of House Starling. Challenge Urich's reign, restore order to the kingdom. King Girard, your grandfather, his blood flows through your veins. My blood flows through your veins, as does your father's. You are the child of two powerful mages. Harness your own magic, my love. You are from a long line of rulers who have given their very lives for Timberness. Waylen and I were using our magic to help our people prosper, until King Urich stole our magic forever. Rise up and challenge Urich, and we will be with you in your endeavors.

Godspeed, my precious daughter.

By my hand,

Queen Millicent of House Starling

Sir Victor breaks the silence, pure excitement lining his voice. "We can show this to the priests. They cannot ignore it. This is more than the proof we need to prove that you are the princess, the rightful heir to the throne. Milla, are you all right?"

I touch the note and look at Victor. I push down the flood of emotion threatening to overtake me. My mother wants me to restore our bloodline, wants me to reclaim our legacy. And I will do it, no matter what it takes. I will do it for my grandfather and my gram, I will do it for my father, the brave knight, Sir Waylen, and my beloved mother, Queen Millicent. And I will do it for myself and the people of Timberness. I am the flamed-kissed match girl, forged in fire, the last remaining member of a bloodline that is the heart and soul of

Timberness. My family tree has roots that run through every inch of this ground, and I will restore our reign with my rule, no matter what it takes.

“Sir Victor,” I ask, “how was it that King Urich was allowed to remain on the throne after my mother died? He is not a blood-born king.”

He takes my hand. “Because you are truly the last remaining member of House Starling, my lady. After your mother died, King Urich fell into a frenzy. For many years, he was desperate for an heir to secure his bloodline in Timberness and replace yours. He wanted to ensure before marriage that a potential wife could bear him a son. He bedded dozens of maidens, but none of them ever became with child. Fearing that God was punishing him for his treachery against Queen Millicent in forcing her to give you up, and stealing her magic, he vowed to never remarry and to simply remain the sole ruler of Timberness forever. He keeps his favorite knight, Sir Malek, very close. If anyone ever challenges his competence, Sir Malek makes short order of them.”

Something else has been puzzling me, so I ask Sir Victor before he can continue. “I do have another question. I was told that my mother was a mage who did not succumb to madness. How can that be? All magical beings are eventually plagued with madness. That is why magic was outlawed, why magic no longer exists in Timberness.”

Sir Victor’s eyes soften. “You don’t see it, do you, sweet Milla? Don’t you realize that it was all a ruse? Madness was never a trait of magic. King Urich concocted that symptom to

effectively steal your mother's magic. He put fear in the hearts of the kingdom, saying that our sweet Willow was mad, wouldn't accept that their child was stillborn. He said that she used her magic to try and resurrect her lost child. He even used the corpse of a dead babe to secure his lie. And it was quite effective. He is evil to his core."

"My poor mother." I can't stop the tears, barely able to allow my mind to imagine what she went through. "The king is a madman. I will roast his very bones. And Sir Malek is a wretch. He is no knight. He is a monster. I will see him hanged for his treachery."

Sir Victor puts a finger to his mouth. "I'm glad to hear you say that. There is something else."

I take in a breath, not sure my soul can bear another revelation this night. "What is it?"

"King Ulrich is ill. He will soon be unable to rule. Word in the palace is that he will soon name Sir Malek as regent. And future king."

"Sir Malek?" I mumble. "No."

"We must restore the kingdom before that happens," Sir Victor continues. "If Malek is named regent and seated, it will be hard to dethrone him. We have to restore you now, Milla."

I nod and move to the window, needing a moment to process his words. He gives me a few moments of silence and then joins me.

He touches my shoulder and I turn to face him. "Milla, I need to know if you are willing to take your rightful place on

the throne. We must make haste. We cannot allow Malek to rule Timberness. His evil has no boundaries. He would be the death of us all.”

I touch his arm and he winces.

“Sir Victor, are you all right?”

“What say you, princess?” he says, ignoring my concern.

I look him full in the face. “I am Princess Milla of House Starling, the daughter of Queen Millicent and Sir Waylen, granddaughter of King Girard and Queen Isabel. I am the rightful heir and future queen of Timberness, and I will fight to restore my rightful place on the throne. I will need a general for my army. What say you, Sir Victor?”

Victor drops to one knee and lowers his head. “I swear my allegiance to Princess Milla and recognize no other king or queen. My knee shall bend only to you, and I will lead your army to victory. God save the princess.”

“Thank you, good sir. I name thee Sir Victor, High General of the Starling army and defender of the realm.”

He stands. “Thank you, Princess. I will not fail you. I must go now. I need to let the others in the resistance know your intentions. They will be more than pleased, and they will pledge their loyalty to you, I swear it. I must meet with the priests on the morrow. Once we have them on our side, we will present your claim to the villagers. I have no doubt we will meet with their full support.”

I smile. “I hope you’re right.”

“I am certain of it,” he says, although his hands give him away. I can see the slight trembling in them. “Princess, I will need the letter from your mother. I must show it to the priests. I will keep it safe, I swear it on my life.”

“I understand, and trust you will,” I say. “Let me get it for you.”

I know he must show the letter to the priests, but my heart is breaking. I have just found my mother, and now I must let her go again, if even for a little while, and it aches me to my core.

“Here you are, Sir Victor.” I place the letter in his outstretched hand.

“Thank you, princess. It is of the utmost importance that you remain here with the door locked until I come for you. We must keep you safe.”

“I understand,” I reply. “And I will stay put.”

He nods and retrieves his coat, gloves, and hat from in front of the fireplace, and his father’s journal from the table. “I’ll take my leave now. I will see you on the morrow. Godspeed, princess.”

“Godspeed.”

I lock the door when he leaves and watch him through the window as he makes his way back to town, slithering low to the ground as to not attract attention from the guards. I back away from the window when he is out of sight. I sink to my knees and let out the cries I’ve been holding in. This is not a wish or a dream. I am the princess, the heir to the throne, and I

will have to fight King Urich to reclaim my kingdom and restore my family.

And our kingdom's magic.

I pour myself a cup of ale and sit at the table again. I know I should be sleeping, but there will be time for that later. I take a hearty swig of ale and think of Jordy. I wish I could run to the bakery now, tell him all the things that have transpired... But then I recall the last time I saw him, Treena's mouth on his lips and my heart in pieces. *Why did he break my heart?*

I pull Gram's match from my chemise and mutter into the air, "You knew this day would come, didn't you, Gram? Are you watching me now? Please come when I need you. Stay true to your word."

I kiss Gram's match and shove it back in my chemise. I finish the ale and make my way to the bedroom, knowing that I should try to find some rest. I sit on the bed and retrieve a match and flintstone from the bedside table. I strike the match and watch the flame.

"I wish to best King Urich and restore my kingdom. Sir Malek be damned."

I blow out the flame before it reaches my fingers. I smile when the thought hits me. *I woke up in the morn a match girl, and I go to my slumber a princess.*

CHAPTER 19

IT TOOK SOME CONVINCING, BUT SIR VICTOR WAS ABLE TO GET the priests to agree that I am the rightful heir, the only true princess in Timberness. The journal wasn't a high selling point, but the letter from my mother was indisputable, even though two of the priests still tried to argue a bit. Sir Victor had to bring an elder priest to my cottage to *see this so-called princess for himself*. He is a man who watched my mother grow up. He was grumbling when he walked through my door but showering me with blessings upon his exit. He said I am a vision of my mother. The elder priest made no haste in speaking to the constable and the village patrol, informing them that I am indeed the blood-born princess and it would be a sin against God and the church to oppose me. It is good to now have God and the law on my side.

The villagers are assembling in the town hall at nightfall, under the guise that the king is imposing a new tax and all not in attendance will be picked up by the patrol. Sir Victor will be here soon to escort me there. My stomach is filled with broken-winged butterflies that are looping instead of flying. What if the villagers revolt and never accept me as their princess?

I sit in front of Gram's looking glass and open her painting case. I dab a bit of color on my lips and pinch my cheeks for pinkness. I leave my hair long and falling about my shoulders. I will not wear a bonnet. They need to see a woman of court,

so I will not cover my hair. I hear a knock on the door and stand to answer it.

“Who is it?” I ask through the door.

“Sir Victor, your highness.”

Your highness. I will never get used to that.

I open the door and Sir Victor is standing in the doorway with a dress draped across his arms.

“Your high—” He stops and takes me all in. “By the gods, Princess Milla, you are a vision.”

“Thank you, kind sir. What do you have there?”

He remembers his task at hand and holds out the dress. “A dress for you. You are the princess. You can’t be wearing peasant clothing. Go and change into it. We need to be on our way.”

I take the dress and go into the bedroom, closing the door behind myself. The dress is a dark blue with gold threading running through the bodice and down the sleeves. The sleeves are a little long, but I’ll make do. I will admit that the dress is rather royal, and I feel more important in it, for whatever silly reason my brain has for thinking it. I join Sir Victor in the room again.

“I’m ready.”

He smiles when he sees me. “And so you are. Do you ride, my grace?”

It has been a long time since I’ve ridden a horse, but I can. “I do.”

“Then, shall we go?”

I follow Sir Victor outside. The horses are tied to the porch and Sir Victor offers me a boost up on mine. When I am mounted, he grins.

“Begging your pardon, highness, but the princess rides side saddle.”

I cut him a look. “Not this princess.”



No one is talking except a priest and a knight from the resistance. I am seated in front of the town hall and Sir Victor is on my right. Jordy is in the crowd, seated between his parents, mouth agape, staring at me like I’ve grown a second head.

“So you see, good citizens of Timberness, if we do not join the resistance and restore Princess Milla to her rightful place on the throne, soon Sir Malek will be king. I would dare say that no one in this room wants that.”

“But what you are proposing is treason,” a man in the crowd yells out. “You are asking us all to betray our king.”

“We are asking no such thing.” Sir Victor stands and addresses the crowd. “Urich is the king of lies. He claimed that the princess was stillborn, yet there she sits. He gave Queen Millicent, our beloved Willow, a choice—death to her newborn daughter, or banishment. So, the queen mother fled the castle with the child and lived amongst you all for years in an effort to save the princess’s life. And from what I hear, the queen mother saved a lot of your lives as well while she was

alive. She was a generous healer and a righteous woman, as is the princess. You cannot commit treason with a king who is seated based on corruption of the crown. Princess Milla is the true, blood-born princess, the rightful and last remaining heir of House Starling. You know her. You love her. Will you not follow her into battle against Urich and restore order to Timberness once and for all? Or will you cower and fall under Sir Malek's rule? Restore House Starling, or seat Malek. The choice is yours."

"I think it is safe to say that no one wants Sir Malek to be king," a priest says. "Timberness would surely fall into darkness."

Echoes of agreeance and gasps ring out amongst the crowd.

Sir Victor adds, "Please, good people of Timberness, I have left my father's journal on a table here. Feel free to come and read his words for yourself. We also have Queen Millicent's letter to the princess, penned in her own hand and sealed with her signet. You can see the proof of Princess Milla's lineage yourself. You do not have to trust our words alone."

"I do not trust your words," Treena blurts out. Her parents try to force her to sit back down, but she yanks her arm away from her father and walks forward. "You expect us to believe that a girl who sells matches on the streets and has worn rags her entire life is a princess? She is a peasant and nothing more!" She points to Sir Victor. "This man was supposed to hang for treason. He is a criminal, no better than a peasant pretending to be a princess. He is trying to lead us all astray to gain his freedom from his treasonous tongue."

“Milla is no peasant,” Master Burgess calls out. He stands and points to Treena. “She is good and kind. But not you. You harass people on the street who you feel are beneath you, but not Milla, not our little match girl. She helps others, and even offers her friendship and listening ear to an old widower like me.”

Jordy claps loudly and yells, “Aye, ‘tis true.”

What is he doing? He locks eyes with me, but I look away.

“I will do whatever I can to see that Milla is on that throne,” Master Burgess continues, “for as long as I have breath in these old bones.”

“Then you are a fool,” Treena says.

I will not sit by and listen to her speak to Master Burgess that way.

“Enough.” I stand. The knights, clergy, and patrol guards bow, followed by most of the crowd, Jordy and his parents included. I set my eyes on Treena. “You are cruel, Treena. You take great pleasure in the discomfort of others. I have been on the receiving end of your taunts on many occasions. I have watched you mock and kick dirt in the face of a man in the stocks, berate and demean folks on the street who are not of your station, and I have crossed on opposite sides of the streets of Timberness to avoid your certain wrath. I am the blood-born heir of House Starling, and I will see my family name restored. And when I take the throne, if you question my lineage again, it will be an act of treason against the queen of Timberness. The punishment for treason is death and make no mistake. You will be dealt with accordingly.”

Treena's eyes are wide. She bows quickly and joins her parents again. I take my seat.

"I will follow you into battle, princess," a male voice projects from the back of the room. As he makes his way forward, I recognize him. It's Kevan, the young man who brought his injured friend to the apothecary for Gram to treat. His friend had been stabbed by Malek.

"I will follow you," he continues, "and you shall have your rightful place on the throne. You have a good soul and a pure heart. I will never bow to Malek." He bows and shouts, "Long live Princess Milla."

"Long live Princess Milla!" Voices join in throughout the town hall.

Sir Victor speaks again when the crowd settles. "You will each line up and swear your loyalty to Princess Milla. Starting this instant, no one is allowed access to the palace roads. Travel to the palace is strictly prohibited. We do not want the palace guards or members of court who dwell within the castle walls to know about the resistance. All able-bodied men will join us. We storm the castle after three morrows, and by that nightfall, Milla will be your new queen."

The townspeople line up in front of me, kissing the top of my hand and swearing their allegiance one-by-one. When it is Treena's turn, I remove my hand when her lips near my skin.

Treena looks confused and says the words she is supposed to say anyway. "I swear my loyalty to Princess Milla, the blood-born princess of Timberness and seal my devotion with a kiss."

“Move along,” I say in response, shooing her away.

I don't want her lips anywhere near me. I think of her kissing Jordy, holding his face in her hands, and I want to put her in the pillory like the mage she made fun of. Maybe I will before my reign is over. I smile at my devious thoughts. *Why did she have to kiss my Jordy?*

Jordy is the last person in line. He steps forward to pledge his loyalty and I look him in the eyes, even though it is splintering my heart into pieces.

He says the words, “I swear my loyalty to Princess Milla, the blood-born princess of Timberness and seal my devotion with a kiss.”

He takes my hand, his lips delicately grazing across the top of it. I close my eyes, savoring the feel of him even though I know I should be yanking my hand away this very moment.

“Are we finished with the formalities?” he asks when the kiss is through.

“Yes,” I reply. “You are free to leave.”

“Leave?” He looks confused. “I don't want to leave, my lady. I want to talk to you. I've missed you. I've been worried sick. You haven't been to the bakery in days. I understand why now, though. I had a lot of scenarios running through my head. But I will admit, this wasn't one of them.”

I ignore his attempt at conversation. “Why didn't you defend me?” I ask.

“What?” Jordy's expression is shaky. He's more than a little confused and it's showing. “Defend you? What are you

talking about, my lady? I don't understand.”

“Tonight, when Treena was rejecting my lineage to the crowd, why didn't you defend me?” My throat tightens. His answer shouldn't mean this much. It shouldn't hurt to look at him, but it does. My whole body hurts, and I hate him for it.

“Everyone knows how I feel about you, Milla. When Master Burgess spoke up first, I felt it wiser to allow him to speak on your behalf, a more impartial party. Had no one said anything, I would have definitely championed for you. I would think you would know that. I would think—”

“I saw you kiss her,” I blurt, tears hot on my face before I can stop them. “I saw you kissing Treena outside of the bakery. How could you do that to me, Jordy?”

His shoulders fall, like he's suddenly having trouble holding his muscles to his bones. His eyes are glistening when he looks in my face again. “So that's why you've been so scarce of late. You don't understand, Milla. I didn't kiss Treena. She kissed me. That's not the same thing.”

“Princess,” Sir Victor says, joining Jordy and me. “The crowd is dispersing. Are you ready to go?” He looks Jordy up and down. “Well, you're quite the strapping fellow. You'll defend your princess, aye?”

Jordy's pained face never leaves mine. He's fighting back tears that I still wish I could kiss away, no matter his indiscretion. But it's a bit too little too late.

“Aye,” he says to Sir Victor. “I will defend my princess 'til my dying breath.”

CHAPTER 20

SIR VICTOR HELPS ME DOWN FROM THE HORSE WHEN WE MAKE IT to the cottage. I allow him to be a gentleman. I can dismount a horse on my own, but I suppose there are things I will need to get used to now that I am a princess.

“Won’t you come inside for a bit, Sir Victor? It can’t be comfortable living in a hayloft.”

“It will be better now that I don’t have to worry about patrol picking me up,” he admits.

“Well, what about the king’s guards?” I ask. “Won’t they still be looking for a traitor who escaped the hangman’s noose?”

He cuts me a look and I giggle. “No offense meant, sir.”

“None taken, I suppose.” But he is smiling. “We have men posted at every road leading to the castle. They are informing the guards and palace dwellers that there is an outbreak of the pox in the village, so no entry will be permitted. I can sleep well this night.”

“That’s bloody brilliant,” I admit. “We should take the palace quite easily then, aye? They will not be expecting a ruse.”

“That’s the idea,” Sir Victor says, “but we must still be prepared for anything. Never underestimate your enemy, no matter how securely your trap is set. All that aside, your grace,

I will accept your invitation to come inside. Maybe some ale and a bite to eat? I will admit, my gut is quite empty.”

We secure the horses and Sir Victor opens the door for me.

“After you, your grace.”

“Well, your grace or not, I will still prepare the meal in my own kitchen.”

I pour us two cups of ale and steep some chamomile tea. I slice the carrots and add some butter and salt on top and set them to baking. I bake some apples as well, adding a dash of sugar and cinnamon. When the baking is through, I slice some olive loaf and place some jerky on our plates. I set out a small dish of sweet bread.

“This is a feast,” Sir Victor says, “fit for—”

“A queen?” I say and wink.

“Indeed.”

We eat like we haven’t in days. It feels good to have someone at my table. I miss having meals with Gram. Sir Victor pushes back from the table when he’s through.

“More ale or tea, Sir Victor?”

“Oh, no. I am quite satisfied. Thank you for the proper meal, my lady. It was divine.”

I stand to clear the table and touch Sir Victor’s arm when he stands to assist me. He winces.

“Sir Victor, is there something wrong with your arm?”

“Oh, it’s nothing. I was injured during my rescue from the gallows. It is basically a scratch, highness. It will heal.”

“Roll up your sleeve and let me see it. That is the second time you’ve reacted from my touch. I fear it may be infected.”

He starts rolling up his sleeve. “Aye, my lady. Would it do me any good to refuse you anyway?”

“No, my lord. Now follow me to the apothecary and let’s take a look at that arm.”

I turn on the lantern in the apothecary and it comes alive with the same wonderment I felt as a child when Gram would set me on the table and show me different herbs and roots. The feeling was always a magical one, knowing that her potions contained healing and calm, ways to take away afflictions and pain. I swear I can see Gram’s shadow on the wall, guiding me to the correct jar and the proper mixtures. She is the knowledge and heart of this room, and when I’m here, she is with me.

It is as I feared. Sir Victor’s arm is sliced a little deeper than he has realized, and the cut is soundly infected.

“I will need to suture this. And it will hurt. I can put a poultice on the cut to numb the skin, but it will not numb the pain of the infection. You have allowed this wound to fester too long I’m afraid. But it must be done. I fear you will get sickness in your blood if I don’t take care of this now.”

“Whatever you feel is best, my lady. I trust you.”

I nod. “Take off your shirt then and lie on the table. I need to gather my supplies.”

I shake off the nerves now hitting me, wringing my hands to loosen the slight tremors. Why did I not check Sir Victor's arm the first time I noticed the wincing? But none of that matters at the moment. I need to take care of his arm now.

"Be with me Gram," I mumble. "I need you."

I turn around when the supplies are gathered. Sir Victor is sitting on the table, his shirt off and resting around his waist. His blond hair is like shining flames in the lantern light, and his muscled arms and chest are as deep brown as the earth. I try not to stare as I set the supplies on the table.

"I need to heat the blade," I say. "I'll be back shorty."

"Blade?" he asks.

"To cut away what I can of the infection."

"Oh."

We are awkward and anxious but determined. I return and instruct Sir Victor to lie back. I move the lantern to the table to give me the much-needed light for the sutures. I give Victor a small piece of leather.

"Put this between your teeth and bite down. It helps."

He scoffs at the sight of the leather. "No need for that. I will be fine. Do your work, my princess."

I start with the infection and I know he feels it. He is trying not to cry out but is squirming and breathing sharply. He takes a deep breath when the wound is finally clean, and I stop the prodding.

“It looks much better, praise the gods,” I say. “Now, let me rub this numbing paste on the cut. It will burn at first but will feel much better after a minute or two. Then I can do the sutures.”

He nods and places the piece of leather between his teeth. I smile at his good decision and set to work again.



“How does it feel?” I ask when Sir Victor is seated at the table in the kitchen.

“Much better. You are a good healer, Princess Milla. Thank you.”

I laugh. “No, I am a good student. Gram was the healer. I’m simply glad I was able to acquire some of her knowledge.”

I stoke the fire, ensuring the room is warm. Sir Victor is still shirtless, and I don’t want him to catch a chill. I set a cup of thyme tea in front of him.

“Now drink. It will help with the pain.”

I raise an eyebrow and he sips the tea. I touch his arm and notice his jaw clench. It’s not from any pain he’s in and I move my hand away quicky. He’s not reacting to pain. He’s responding to my touch.

“I think it will be all right to put your shirt on now,” I say. “I’ll get it for you. I don’t want you to get cold.”

I return with the shirt.

“Look in the pocket,” Sir Victor says.

I reach in the pocket and pull out my mother's rolled up letter. I turn my back to Sir Victor and push the small linen parchment into the tiny pocket of my chemise beside Gram's match.

"Thank you, my lord. I am grateful to have it returned." I hand him his shirt.

"Might I be so bold?" he asks.

"Certainly."

"Do you have a beau, princess?"

My eyes open wider. *That was bold indeed.* "Yes. Well, no. It is complicated, kind sir."

He is matter of fact. "Love often is. Is Jordy your beau?"

"I thought he was, but I saw him kissing someone else." I know my cheeks are flush. It's hard to admit that my lips weren't enough for Jordy.

"I'm so sorry that happened to you, princess. But if Jordy doesn't value your worth, then he doesn't deserve you."

I wonder what Sir Victor would think if I told him that the girl Jordy was kissing was Treena? There is no way I'm revealing that indignity, so I change the subject instead.

"So, what happens next?" I ask. "With the resistance and storming the palace? What is the plan exactly?"

I help him slip his shirt over his head and he leaves it untied in the front.

"Well," he replies, "the blacksmiths will forge weapons over the next three days. Then the resistance will ride to the

palace in the wee hours on the fourth day to surprise the king and take back your rightful place on the throne. There are no more than three hundred citizens of the palace lands, and the king's army is good, but not when surprised. There is lots of work to do over the next several days, but we will accomplish it."

"I'm riding with you," I say. "This is my kingdom, and I will defend it."

Victor smiles. "Of course you will ride with us, highness. You are our queen, and we cannot protect you if you aren't with us. It is my charge to keep you safe."

"Do not underestimate me, general. I am brave and strong. The spirit of my gram and my mother will ride into battle with me. And I will fight."

"I admire your bravery," he says, "even though you are but a wee thing. You have the heart of a stallion."

"And the roar of a lion if not obeyed. Now, it is very late and you are in no condition to ride or tend those horses at the moment. You will sleep in the bedroom, and I will make myself a pallet bed in the apothecary."

"You will do no such thing," he says. "I will not put the princess out of her bed."

"And I will not have my patient sleeping on a floor or in a hayloft. I won't risk infection in that arm again. I need my general strong and ready to defend me in the coming days. Now, off to bed with you. I'll lead the horses around back."

“As you wish, your highness.” Sir Victor has a serious look. “There is another matter, your grace.”

“And what might that be?”

He clears his throat. “Have you given any thought to the fact that both of your parents were mages?”

“In what regard?” I know full well what he’s implying.

“In the regard that there is a strong possibility that you have the power to wield magic.”

I would be lying if I said that the thought hasn’t occurred to me a hundred times since learning my lineage, but the thought of possessing magic frightens me. What if there is no magic in me? If that be the case, would that somehow dishonor my parents? And I’ve been raised believing that magic is a bad thing. I haven’t a clue how to wield it, even if I wanted to.

“And if I do,” I say instead, “how would I know? Magic has never been a thought in my head, Sir Victor. It is strange and foreign—”

“And would be a powerful weapon against Malek if you could indeed wield it,” Victor notes. “It’s just a thought.”

He makes his way to the bedroom, closing the door behind him. I make my way to the apothecary, Victor’s words still fresh in my head. I retrieve the jar labeled Willow’s Wisp and shove it in my apron pocket. I pull on my coat and go outside. I lead the horses to the back and fence them in my neighbor’s feed pasture. I lean against my own backdoor and take in a few breaths of the crisp, icy air. I pull a match from my dress sleeve and my flintstone from my chemise. I think of Treena’s

sharp tongue tonight in the town hall and her hatred for me simply because of the station I have always had in this world. I think about her lips on Jordy's, then I think about his lips on my hand this evening. He can't truly want Treena. How can that ever be?

I strike the match and watch it burn. "Why, Jordy?"

The flame nearly licks my fingers, but I blow it out and let it fall. The jar in my pocket illuminates ever so slightly, the light resembling a firefly, and I tug it from my pocket with shaky hands. I hold the jar up to my eyes and stare at the faint light until it resembles flames. A swirl of soft smoke fills the jar, and yet it remains cold to the touch. I tear off the lid to release the contents and that is when I hear it, nearly losing my breath. The jar slips from my trembling hands, but the words are still as clear.

"He'll never take your magic away, Milla."

The flames fade and the smoke disappears, but her words are clear in my exhausted brain. "Mother," I mumble. "I hear you."

I replace the lid and hold tightly to the jar. I know what I must do. And by the gods, I will.

CHAPTER 21

I AM NO SWORDSMAN, BUT I WILL RIDE WITH MY MEN INTO battle. A sword will do me no good if I am cornered, but a dagger will serve me well. Sir Victor has already left for the day, meeting with members of the resistance. I have been instructed not to go into town, but I have one request that needs to be honored. I put on my heavy cloak after I am dressed and collect my coin pouch. I head out the door and make my way to the market square.

The blacksmith's shop is my first order of business. More than a dozen men are hard at work, building the swords and armor our soldiers will carry into battle. I see Philip, the blacksmith's son. He is the one I need.

"Master Philip," I say when I am in front of him.

"Oh, be cautious, mistress," he says. "This is a dangerous place to tread at this hour. You may soil your dress with the pitch."

I lower the hood of my cloak.

"Princess!" he exclaims, and I put a finger to my lips. He lowers his tone, "Princess, how may I be of assistance?"

"I am in need of a dagger," I say. "One that I can slide into my dress sleeve and retrieve with little effort."

"That shouldn't be a problem, highness," he states, sizing up the length and width of my sleeve to see what he has to work with.

“There is one more thing regarding the dagger,” I say. “I need one side of the blade to be iron, and the other to be flintstone. Can this be accomplished?”

Philip rubs his scraggly chin, his attempts at growing a beard dismal at best. “It can be accomplished,” he replies, “but ‘tis a strange request.”

“Good. I will also need a breast plate. Nothing that covers my arms, just something to go around my torso and chest. And I’ll need it straightaway.” I retrieve eight bits from my coin pouch and drop them in his awaiting palm.

“I’ll get right to it, your grace. But I’ll need your measurements.”

“Certainly.”

Philip pulls a measuring strip from his pocket. “Hold your arms out to the side, please, your grace.”

I remove my cloak and hold out my arms. He places the measuring strip around my waist and then pauses when he looks at my bosom.

“It’s fine, sir. Get on with it.”

He does as he’s told. “Very well, princess. I’ll make haste.”

“Have them delivered to my cottage when they are ready.”

“Aye, my lady. I will.”

I pull my hood back onto my head and make my way to the street again. I realize our time is narrowing for the fight with King Urich. This will be the last time I walk in the market square so freely—the last time I am simply Milla.

I round the corner and see the vegetable vendor, his simmering stewpot filled with what smells like potato soup. I inhale the fragrance, remembering how my stomach would growl from within three feet of his decadent concoctions. I glance at each shop as I pass, feeling as though it is the first time I have ever really looked at them. Before, my time spent in the market square was studying the people—which ones looked like they needed warmth. Which ones looked as though they had a hefty coin purse. But being here this way is different. And then it hits me.

I am no longer the match girl.

My eyes set on the bakery when I spy it. I can smell the bread. I close my eyes, remembering how the scent always reminded me of Jordy. Every nerve in my body wants to run through those doors and call out for him, but I back away instead. I can still picture Treena on those steps, Jordy's face in her hands and his lips on hers.

And then I see him.

Jordy steps through the bakery doors and into the street, broom in hand. He's sweeping, his muscles visible through his shirt as he works. He pushes a hand through his thick, chestnut hair and then abruptly stops what he's doing. He leans against the wall of the bakery and rests his arms on top of the broom handle. His forehead is reclining on top of his hands. He's obviously distressed. I'm urged to move in closer, implore what is wrong, but I back away instead. I turn and head for the last place on my mental list, trying not to think of Jordy. One foot in front of the other, no turning back. Two streets to go.

Master Burgess is busy with a customer when I arrive at the trading post. I take the time while I'm waiting to appreciate his craft, the leather bags and coin pouches, straps and reins. I think about the time it took for him to tan the leather and create his wares, and I admire him all over again. He is a talented man, a good man, and I will miss him when I'm in the palace.

"May I help you, mistress?" Master Burgess says when he finishes with his customer.

I lower my hood. "Well, you have helped me more times than I can recall, good sir."

"Milla, my sweet girl!" His arms are around me and I sink into his warm hug, craving the comfort of someone who truly cares for me.

"So, a princess?" he says when the hug is through.

"Looks like," I reply.

"I always knew you were destined for greatness," he says, as resolute as if he were stating that the sun is bright or that water is wet.

"You know, if anyone else said that to me, I would call them a liar. But I believe it coming from you, good sir."

"That's because 'tis true. Every word. Your gram saw it in you too. She'd be so proud of you right now, Milla. I know I am."

"I wish she were here now," I admit. "Why does she have to be gone?"

“Now you listen to me, Milla. You remember your gram’s words, her expressions, you carry them in your heart, and they make you the person you are in this hour. Your gram is as much a part of this adventure as you, mistress. She will only be gone if forgotten.”

“And I will never forget my gram.”

He winks. “Indeed.”

Another thought hits me. Master Burgess is wise, and he may hold some of the answers I seek.

“Master Burgess, if I ask you a question, will you be forthcoming? Not hold any knowledge back?”

“Well now, that is something I have never been accused of, holding back any knowledge.” He winks.

“I fear I’m dreadfully serious, good sir.”

He wipes his hands on the tops of his thighs and gives me his full attention. “Out with it, then. I’m listening.”

I take a fortifying breath. “My mother and father were powerful mages. I found a jar on a top shelf in Gram’s apothecary that was labeled Willow’s Wisp. It belonged to my mother, you see. It appeared to be empty, but last eve it started glowing and smoke and fire filled it. When I opened the jar, I heard a voice say *He will never take your magic, Milla*. The voice was female and unfamiliar, but I dare believe it was my mother. Do you know what it means, Master Burgess? Do you know how the magic works? I would wager that you knew a mage or two before King Ulrich outlawed magic.”

“And you would win that wager.” He places a hand on my shoulder, a tender smile stretching his face. “Fire is their quickening, the birth of the magic itself. Every mage is a fire wielder, but it is not a fire that burns. It is a fire that releases the very power it is creating.”

His words are a riddle. “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“You said you saw a fire in the jar before you heard your mother’s words, correct?”

“Yes.”

“That fire was the magic that held those words all these years until the intended ears heard them. And those words were for you, Milla. That magic was solely for you. Understand? And if your mother’s words were right, you hold that magic within you as well. And you must learn to wield it yourself.”

Gooseflesh prickles my arms at the thought of my mother voicing a message to me, having aspirations of what her daughter would become. I don’t wish to disappoint her, but I know nothing of magic. I am as green as just pressed olive. The resistance will face Urich soon, and time is not my ally.

“Thank you for your insight, Master Burgess. And your friendship.” I pull him into a hug.

“Thank you, princess. I only wish I were a younger man. I would be part of the resistance, right on the front lines. There are not a lot of things I would fight for in this world, Milla, but I would fight for you.”

“And I you, Master Burgess.” I choke back tears. “I must admit, I will not miss being hungry or poor, but I will miss collecting matches from you.”

“As will I,” he replies. “That is why I’ve been keeping these.” He pulls out a bundle of matches and puts them in my hands. “One last clutch for you, my dear...for luck.” He wipes a tear of his own. “You may be everyone’s queen soon, but you will always be my little match girl.”

I place a kiss on his cheek. “Take care of things while I’m away, Master Burgess.”

“I will, my princess. I promise.”

I put the matches in my cloak pocket and head back to the cottage.



The last of the alterations are through. I look at my mother’s dress, pleased with the adjustments I’ve made. I removed the flowy overlay and added another slip underneath, one with heavier fabric to help brave the cold. I hemmed the skirts six inches from the ground. I won’t be tripping over my dress and it will be easier to mount my horse. I found an old pair of trousers Gram was saving for the scarecrow, but I altered them to fit me instead so I can wear them under my dress for added warmth. I will ride into my new kingdom in a queen’s dress and become in it a queen myself.

I make my way into the apothecary. I may not be much of a fighter, but I am a decent healer. I can follow in Gram’s footsteps and take care of the men who go into battle for me. I

busy myself preparing poultices and medications to take on my trip to the palace.

“Princess Milla,” Sir Victor says, letting himself into the cottage. “I have some good news. One hundred riders from the north are joining our cause. They will be here at sunrise.”

I carefully pour the remaining elixir in the small glass bottle and press the cork inside it. “That’s fantastic news, Sir Victor. You are a very capable general and Timberness is the better for it.”

“You flatter me, your grace,” he replies. “And I am grateful for it. Give me a moment. I have something for you.”

Sir Victor steps outside and returns with a stunning red cloak draped across his arms. “Fortunately, the tailor knows you well, Milla. The fit should be more than acceptable. Will you try it on for me?”

I wipe my hands on my apron before reaching for the cloak, trying desperately to hide the tears now threatening to fall. “I...I don’t know what to say. It’s beautiful. Why did you do this, Sir Victor?”

“Because your mother was known for wearing a red cloak when she went riding. I find it only fitting that you wear it on our journey to the palace to reclaim your birthright.”

I lift the cloak from his arms, running my fingers along the heavy, crimson fabric. It is so fetching, the nicest cloak I have ever seen. Selling something like this would have fed Gram and me for a month. I am beyond words.

“My mother wore a red cloak?” It’s hard to lasso my feelings, but I swallow hard and clear my throat.

“Aye, she did.” He hides a toothy smile with the back of his hand, obviously giddy at my glee from his efforts.

“This is the nicest, most thoughtful gift anyone has ever given me. Thank you, Sir Victor. Truly. I will treasure it, always.”

“You are most welcome, my lady. Here, try it on.”

Sir Victor helps me wrap it around my shoulders and steps back to admire it as I tie the cloak at my neck. I lift the hood over my hair.

“How do I look?”

“Like your mother,” he replies. “Beautiful.”

I step into the doorway of my bedroom and peer into the looking glass. I stare for several seconds, forgetting that Sir Victor is watching my every move. I know I’m blushing when I meet his eyes again.

“See,” he says. “Beautiful.”

“Thank you, Victor. I will cherish it, and proudly wear it on our quest. But I must take it off for now. It is rather warm.” I remove the cloak and hang it on a hook on the wall, then step back into the apothecary, busying myself with the potions again. “Are you hungry, Sir Victor?”

“What are you doing?” he asks, removing his own coat and joining me.

“I’m making ointments and potions for our trip. Our men may need healing during battle, and that’s something I *can* do.”

He folds his arms across his chest and leans into the doorframe. “You are an extraordinary woman, you know that? Here you are, the princess, and you’re talking about healing the men on the battlefield.”

“I’m not talking about it,” I correct. “I’m going to do it.”

“I admire you in spades,” he replies.

Victor joins me at the apothecary table and picks up a random bottle. “What’s this?”

“Beetroot.”

“What’s it for?”

“It returns blood flow to the body and can reduce swelling combined with the proper herbs.”

“What does it taste like?” he asks.

“Dirt.”

“What does it smell like?”

“Dirt.”

He laughs and lifts another bottle. I await the bad reaction.

“Ugh,” he says when he takes a sniff. “This smells like my father’s boots, and my mother’s cooking.”

“Sir Victor, you are terrible. You shouldn’t talk about your poor mother’s cooking like that.”

He lifts more bottles, taking quick sniffs and grinning. “Listen, my beloved mother is a beautiful woman, but she can’t cook a smidge. She freely admits it.”

I put my hands on my hips, brimming with revelation. “So, that’s why you thought my food was so grand the other night, because you grew up with a mother who can’t cook.”

He belly laughs. “I suppose you could be right.”

After all the objectionable scents, I offer him whiffs of citrus and lavender, musk and primrose. He tucks a primrose bud behind my ear, and I allow it. We both reach for the dandelion root and our hands touch. He doesn’t move, doesn’t blink. I look into his eyes and recognize the longing. He moves towards my mouth before I can react.

His lips are quivering and his breath hot when he captures my mouth. The kiss is soft and warm, but I am frozen, not wanting to hurt him but never wishing to lead him on. He ends the kiss when I pull away a little, responding to my reluctance as the perfect gentleman he is.

“I overstepped my boundaries, princess.” I can hear his heartbeat in his voice. “I am sorry, your grace.”

“Please don’t apologize, Victor. There is no need.”

He is sincere in his longing, his heart nearly visible in his pounding chest when he takes my hand. “Do you care for me in that way even in the smallest measurement, my princess?”

His face is seeking, searching, reaching for any amount of affection I will afford him. I do care for Victor, but not the way

he craves. It breaks my heart to hurt him, but I will never lead him on.

“Sir Victor, you will never know how grateful I am that your efforts gave me a lineage. You gave me my mother and showed me a side of my gram I never knew existed. Your devotion to your father in seeking out his truths has given me every answer I have ever longed for and more. And for that, I can never repay you. I definitely have affection for you as a trusted comrade, general, and friend. But I would be lying if I said that it goes any further. There has only ever been one man for me. I realize that now more than ever.”

“Your Jordy,” he mutters.

“Yes, my Jordy.”

He backs away a little, running a hand through his spiked, blond locks. “This Jordy is a lucky man. I hope he appreciates that.”

“Me too,” I whisper. “More than you will ever know.”

“Well, why are you still standing here, then?” he says, busying himself with the jars and making a face when he smells another foul odor. “We are all going to war soon. Go to this Jordy and make amends. Lucky bastard.”

“Thank you, Sir Victor, for everything.” I give him a tight hug and head for the door, collecting my new cloak and riding gloves on the way out. “May I borrow one of the horses?”

“You’re the princess,” he replies. “You can steal my horse if you’d like, and I’m helping myself to some jerky and ale, just so you know.”

“Thank you, Sir Victor. For everything.”

He winks. “Don’t mention it.”

CHAPTER 22

I GRIP THE REINS TIGHTER WHEN I NUDGE THE HORSE INTO A gallop, wondering what I will say when I see Jordy. What if he rejects me, refuses to answer the only question running through my aching brain? A new fear creeps into my existence when I think about the ensuing battle. I can't do it without my Jordy by my side. It is a cruel reality. I pray that he still wants me, that what I saw wasn't real.

I stop the horse before I reach his family cottage. I keep my distance for a moment, watching Jordy as he waves a sword in the middle of the courtyard. I didn't expect to see him practicing his swordplay, but I haven't expected a lot of things of late. I never expected to lose my gram, or have a knight show up with a relic of a book telling me that I'm the princess, and I never expected to see my Jordy kissing another maiden.

His leg muscles contract as he lunges, and I lose my breath. As angry as I want to remain with him, I can't seem to make my heart comprehend that he betrayed me. He has always been my Jordy, even when we were children with hardly a notion of what love was, I knew that what I felt for Jordy was different. He would save a scrap of sweet bread for me or pick a flower and stick it in my bonnet. Even if I was the one who'd ate the last scrap of Stilton cheese his mother was saving for his father, he'd get his knuckles whacked instead of mine. He's been my knight in shining armor, my every fantasy, my moon and stars since the beginning.

Funny how a single kiss can tear a castle down.

I shake my head free of the thoughts. I shouldn't think about the way things used to be when everything about our relationship is crumbling at our feet. I deserve answers, need comfort. Jordy needs to tell me why he was kissing Treena. I dismount and nudge the horse to move.

“Is that swordplay for me?” I call to him. “Are you going to fight for me, Jordy?”

He lowers the sword and wipes his forehead with the back of his hand. “Always, my lady. I would die for you.”

Sweat lines his brow and his cheeks are flush and rosy. He pushes his sword down into its sheath and meets me in the street. We secure the horse and Jordy takes my hand.

“Come with me, Milla. I want to show you something.”

I follow him to the back courtyard but tug my hand free from his grasp before we reach our destination.

“Tell me why, then, Jordy. Tell me before we take another step. I need to know why you were kissing Treena. That is not at all appropriate behavior, no matter the circumstance.”

“I've already told you, Milla. I wasn't kissing her. Please, hear my words. That day at the bakery, I was sweeping and Treena approached me. She was asking if mother had baked any sweet bread and I told her that sweet bread was a mainstay. She laughed when father yelled a profanity at mother, and the next thing I know, she grasped my face and kissed me. I was so stunned I nearly fell backwards. I pushed her away, told her to go. Did you not see that?”

My heart is a fragile thing, too ashamed at first to admit it. But I open my mouth and let the words fall out, “My God, I let her best me again. She must have seen me, knew I was standing there, and kissed you for my benefit. I didn’t see you push her away, Jordy, because I was too busy running away. But if you say it is so, then I believe you.”

Jordy takes me by the shoulders. “Milla, I have no feelings for Treena. Aye, I can barely stomach the girl. I have seen her mistreatment of you, more times than I care to recall. But I speak to customers. It is a requirement, part of my job. That’s why I was pleasant to her that day. There has only ever been one maiden for me, and it has always been you. Don’t you know that by now, after all this time? As God as my witness, I did not kiss her. And being an honest man, I will admit... You are the only maiden I have ever kissed.”

I reach up and hook my arms around his neck, pulling his lips down to meet mine. The kiss is hard and hungry at first, like I’m reclaiming something I never really lost. Jordy’s large hands spread across my back, nearly covering my entire frame. I capture his bottom lip and tug it a little before finding his full mouth again. His day’s growth of beard is chapping my face, but it is of no consequence. I kiss him until I feel forgiven, until I know he is mine again.

Jordy backs away a little when the kiss is through, a hurt in his eyes that I haven’t seen before.

I’m confused. “Did I do something wrong?”

“You accused me of wrongdoing with Treena, but what about you, Milla? I know the knight has been staying in your

cottage. Do you believe that at all appropriate behavior? And what of this new red cloak, aye? Did he give it to you?"

A hammer hits my chest, and a noose cinches my neck. My God! What does he think of me? Does he think me a whore? Or worse?

"Jordy, Sir Victor had been hiding in a hayloft after his escape from the gallows, and he had an injury to his arm that was infected. I sutured his arm in the dead of night and did not deem it safe for him to walk back to town and sleep in dirty hay. He is the general of my army. I need him healthy and strong, so yes, I allowed him to sleep in my cottage. For two nights, just until his arm was better. That's all. I would never take a strange man to my bed. Do you think me a harlot? Who do you think I am, exactly?"

His look is faraway. "I used to know who you were. I would wait for you to come into the bakery with your pouch and your wares, buying bread and anticipating my little surprises. I was enough for you then, but perhaps I can never be enough for you now."

My eyes are struggling to focus, and yet I see him as clearly as the first day I laid eyes on him. I'm cold and numb, trying to comprehend his sobering words *perhaps I can never be enough for you now*.

How can your everything not be enough?

"Jordy," I say through tears, "how can you say that?"

"Because soon I will take this sword and secure a castle that has always been yours. And it will be right and true, but

then you will be someone else. You will be a queen, and I will still be Jordy.”

I take his hands and press them to my lips. I kiss his hands and his mouth and his cheeks. I kiss him until his eyes glisten, and he melts in my touch.

“I am right glad you will still be Jordy because he is the man I love, and no other.”

“You love me, a commoner?”

“There is nothing common about you, Jordy.”

He takes me in his arms and kisses me until I am dizzy. I savor the musk and spice that is his skin and the dusting of beard on his square jaw, his broad shoulders. He is my stronghold, my safe haven, all I have in the world.

“I love you, my princess,” he says into my hair. “And I have loved you forever. The hours have dragged without you in my arms, so I fear I may never put you down again.”

“Then so be it.”

But my feet do touch the ground eventually and Jordy recalls why we are back here in the first place.

“Come,” he urges. “You need to see this.”

He leads me to a stone wall in the back of the courtyard.

“There,” he says. “It’s right there.”

It is a drawn signet with the letters J and M. It has obviously been here for a long while.

“J and M,” I say. “Jordy and Milla?”

“Indeed. Compliments of a boy of about ten seasons,” Jordy replies. “I told you I have loved you forever.”

I trace the letters with my fingers. “I can’t believe it. I’ve never seen anything so perfect.”

He touches my face, trailing a finger along my cheek. “Neither have I.”

We embrace, softness against muscle, birdsong at our backs and anxiety in our hearts.

My eyes nestle into Jordy’s as he speaks, “I fear for your safety in battle, my princess.”

“And I yours,” I admit. “But I am instructed to remain close to Sir Victor, and I would advise you to do the same. I want you near me, Jordy. I can’t do this without you.”

He flashes a crooked smile that hides his teeth. “Aye, but you can. Your strength is unquenchable, Milla. But I will remain close, my princess. I may need your protection.” He winks.

“Then you shall have it, my love.”

He finds my lips again, his kisses trailing from my mouth to my neck, but he stops when his lips are against the tops of my breasts. “Milla, you know I love you.” His voice is warm against my skin. “I have never wanted anything as much as I want you. And over these long days, I thought I’d lost you.” He’s kissing me again, and I can barely breathe.

“Jordy, I... Don’t stop,” I say when his kisses cease again. “Never stop. I want you. We are about to go into battle. We don’t know what the future holds—”

“But, your virtues,” he says. “You are to be queen—”

“I am,” I agree. “The only trueborn queen. And when I am crowned I will announce that you are my beloved. My choice. I choose you, Jordy. It has always been you, will always be you. There is nothing to fear if we survive this resistance, but I fear never laying with you if one or both of us does not survive the ensuing battle. I know it is selfish, but I want to know you as a woman knows a man. Is that wrong?”

He takes me in his arms before another word is spoken. His large hands carry me with little effort towards the tree line behind his property.

“Where are we going, my love?”

“It’s a surprise,” he says close to my ear. “Not much further.”

Before long, we are on a short trail, so narrow it is barely visible through the dense brush. A cave is nestled at the end of the trail and Jordy sets me on my feet as we approach it.

“What is this place?”

“My solace,” Jordy replies. “I stumbled upon it when I was a boy. My father says it was an old smuggler’s den, but it had been uninhabited for years when he acquired the property. It has been my own secret fortress ever since. I shall hate to lose it when I establish my own homestead one day. Come, let me show you.”

He takes my hand and leads me inside the cave. I have to duck at first, but then it opens into a larger space. Three lit torches are mounted on the walls, and two of Jordy’s swords

are hanging near one torch. There are fur skins and wheat sack pillows on one side of the cave, and a water barrel and dipper on the other. There is a small stool and a bread knife, a loaf of sweet bread wrapped in parchment. There's a jug of ale and a basket of books, and a fire pit for warmth. Jordy's solace indeed.

I nudge Jordy's arm. "Are you sure you don't live here, sir?"

"Aye, you caught me, my lady." He winks and flashes that crooked grin I adore so much. "I don't live out here, but I will admit that my parents are quite *robust* when they debate. I have been known to seek refuge from their bickering a time or two." He steps over to the sweet bread and slices us a piece.

"It's absolutely wonderful," I say between bites. "Like a wee bit of paradise."

"And secluded," Jordy adds, finishing his bread. "No one will bother us here."

"Indeed." I turn my back to him for a moment, rubbing my neck, trying to settle my nerves. I wonder if Jordy can see me shaking. I can feel the trembling in my cheeks and lips.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Jordy takes my shoulders and urges me to face him. He grasps my face, his thumbs sliding gently back and forth across my cheeks to ease me. "We can wait until—"

"Until what?" I ask.

"Well, I mean...what I meant was...," Jordy stammers.

“Say it.” I reach up, tugging Jordy’s hands from my face and holding them in mine. “Please, I need to hear you say it.”

“What I meant was, we can wait until we are husband and wife. I love you, Milla. It has always been you. And I want you to be mine forever, if you’ll have me. Queen, princess, match girl, I care not your station in life. All I know is that there is no life for me without you. I know I am no prince, but everything I have is yours.” He places my hand on his face. “This body.” He moves my hand to his chest. “This heart.” He cradles my hands inside of his. “My very soul. All that I am is yours. Will you marry me, Milla?”

I draw in a breath, the first one I’ve truly taken since entering the cave. If this is a dream, I curse the waking. If this is heaven, I welcome the endless sleep. “Yes,” I say, hot tears wetting my cheeks. “Yes, Jordy. I will marry you.”

His lips capture mine, his sheer joy evident as he clutches me tighter, refusing to allow me to move even a breath away from his mouth. The kiss is rough at first, but eases as he relaxes. He is as unyielding in his passion as in his swordplay. He is raw, sure, smooth as whipped butter, his lips devouring mine, but I am unmoving. This man is power, strength, but then gentle like the wind on the wisps of a dandelion. And he is mine.

His lips part between mine, the words spoken into my mouth in the most delicious way, “This is a dream. A wonderful, fantastic dream.”

“And it is perfect,” I say, tasting a hint of sweet bread still lingering on his lips. I step back when the kiss is through, his

ever-familiar face pulling me back into the reality of the moment. Soon we will leave this cave, war in our future, danger our bedfellow. I know Jordy has proposed to me and I will soon be his wife, but I'm not leaving this cave a maiden. Neither one of us are guaranteed tomorrow, so today will be our forever. I run a finger along his jawline, and it clenches at my touch.

“I want you, Milla, but we need not spoil your virtue. We can wait until we are wed.”

“No, I will not hear any reason to hold back my love for you, and I certainly will not hear of my virtues. My virtues are your concern and yours alone. I need to love you this day, Jordy. I need you to love me. I know the danger my station in life will place us in soon. We are not guaranteed tomorrow. I need you to bed me now. I will not leave this world never knowing you fully.”

“No words, then,” he says, the longing lighting his eyes despite the darkness of the cave. “I will love you like no man has ever loved a woman.”

He lifts me as if I am but a slip of a thing and I lose my breath, realization hitting me that I will be completely at his mercy. Gram and I never spoke in depth about the coupling of a man and a woman. I know what consummation is, obviously. I know what it takes for a man to plant his seed in a woman. But these stirrings in my belly, the throbbing now tingling the most secret space between my legs, is foreign.

And it frightens me of what's to come.

Jordy carries me to the blanket of furs. He's over me, and I appreciate the fact that I'm lying down. My knees could never hold me given their weakened state. He supports his weight with one hand and smooths the other along my neckline.

"You're so beautiful, Milla." He feathers a kiss on my neck. "So very beautiful."

I know Jordy hasn't the slightest doubt that I am a virgin, but young men are not held to the same standards as maidens, and I see how all the lasses look at Jordy.

"I—I don't know what to do," I readily admit when Jordy shrugs off his shirt. "Might I ask you something, my love?"

He grins. "We are to be wed. You may ask me anything you wish, my lady."

"Have you ever done this before? Coupled with a maiden?"

"Milla, what a question." He's actually blushing, and I love that his awkwardness now matches mine. "No, Milla, I have never coupled with a maiden. I was propositioned by the miller's daughter when I was sixteen seasons, but my bravery left me when she showed me her chemise behind the tavern."

I lightly sock him in the arm and he smiles. But his seriousness rattles my very bones when he settles me to look in my eyes.

"Milla," Jordy says, "you are the only woman I have ever wanted. This will be the first for both of us."

I nod my understanding, the heat in my stomach like a million flames when his lips find mine again. His kisses leave my lips and find my neck and chest. His lips graze the top of

my breast and I can't breathe. I lie back on the wheat sack pillow and close my eyes, wanting to block out everything in the world except for his lips on my quivering body.

When Jordy finds the buttons on my bodice, his large fingers fumble at first to unlatch them. I run a hand along his chest and stomach, his skin tightening beneath my touch. When the buttons get the best of him, in one swift motion he lifts me to a seated position.

"Finish the buttons and allow your dress to fall," he instructs.

"As you wish, my lord." I do as he requests, the bodice of my dress falling around me, exposing my chemise. He rubs a thumb over the nub of my breast and I cry out. I can't contain the moan when his fingers slip underneath the fabric.

"Hold your arms up," Jordy manages through ragged breaths.

He tugs my chemise over my arms and drops it to the dirt floor. My dress is still around my hips, but I am naked from the waist up.

"You are the most exquisite creature I have ever seen." Jordy's hands are everywhere; my breasts, my stomach, a finger encircling my belly button. "I don't know what to taste first," he admits.

"Then you shall taste every inch of me," I state matter-of-factly. I am not sure where the boldness comes from, but I stand and shrug my dress from my body. I slide my thumbs into the waistband of my bloomers and free them from my

body. I take my time with the stockings and boots as Jordy reclines back on his elbows to watch. First one leg, then the other. I can see his manhood through his trousers and my thighs heat to a dangerous level. I display my nakedness in its full glory, and Jordy seems to approve.

He sits up, wrapping his arms around my waist, his face now level with my stomach. He places gentle kisses on my hipbone and tummy, then trails his tongue from my stomach to my breasts.

“Lie down,” he says. “It’s my turn.”

I lie back again and Jordy stands. He removes his boots and stockings, his eyes never leaving my body. He focuses on every inch of me, as if committing my being to memory. He tugs off his trousers and I lose my breath. His manhood is magnificent, and I worry that my virginal flower will rip from his grandeur. But my fear is as fleeting as morning dew in summer. My longing is greater than any fear my eager mind can conceive. In truth, I may very well die if Jordy doesn’t touch me soon.

He joins me on the furs again, his lips now running down my thighs and legs.

“Just close your eyes and let me have my way with you,” he says. “I want to show you how much I love you.”

I nod and close my eyes, losing myself in the blackness and his words and his touch. I trust Jordy with my life. His mouth is on my thigh again, his breath hot and quickened. I feel his hands on both thighs and he parts them. I’m dizzy, dare not

moving an inch. Every sensation in my body heightens when his hands spread across my hipbone.

“You said I could taste, remember?”

All I manage is a moan. He moves up to my breast, his warm mouth capturing the nub and my restraint all at once. He flicks his tongue until I cry out, only exciting him more.

“You’re perfect,” he says. He teases the next breast with his tongue, then cups both in his large hands. “Look at me, Milla.”

I find his eyes through the fog of ecstasy now clouding mine.

“I would never hurt you,” Jordy says. “I want you to feel nothing but pleasure. Do you trust me, Milla?”

“Yes,” I reply, “with my very soul.” Quick glances at Jordy on the street in front of the bakery has always been enough to make me ache with need, but when he places his narrow man hips over my stomach, my feminine middle tingles and heats with an intensity I never thought possible. I feel his fingers between my legs, gently coaxing and caressing my womanhood to the point of madness.

“Let us be slow at first,” he coos into my ear when I feel his manhood replace his fingers. “I would never hurt you, Milla. You are everything I’ve ever wanted in this life.”

Jordy and my gram have been my entire life for what seems like ages. And now that I have lost her, my very soul is his alone. When I thought Jordy had been untrue with Treena, even the air in my lungs was heavy. Nothing was right—not

the sunlight, the stars, or the space around me. I cry out when he's fully inside me.

Jordy breathes the words into my ear. "Am I hurting you, my love?"

"No, don't stop."

Our bodies are now one, the motions slow, like waves in a dark ocean that have always been lost but are now awakened. Jordy tries his best to keep control, but his need becomes too great and he moves faster now, but I like it. I slide my arms around his back and hold him tightly, my fingers sinking into his flesh.

"Yes, Jordy. Yes."

My words excite him more and he lets out a sharp moan, allowing all of his weight to sink into me. We lie silent for a few moments, then Jordy kisses the end of my nose, both too giddy to speak at first.

Jordy breaks the silence. "You are my very soul, Milla. If I die this night, I will die a very rich man. Your worth is immeasurable. All that I am is in you."

I roll over and recline atop him, his eyes the only depths I wish to sink into for the rest of my life.

"You will not die this night, my love. And you must promise me that when we go to reclaim my kingdom, you will stay alive, no matter what occurs."

"Milla, that is a hefty—"

“Promise me,” I say more firmly. “I do not wish to live this life without you.”

He cups my face and his jaw clenches. “I promise.”

I love this man with all I am. He feels like comfort, the only real peace I own in this wretched world. For so long, Jordy was my *what could be*, the very thing I wished to be mine, even if I were never afforded anything else. Jordy was always enough. Now I am being told that the entire kingdom is mine, but Jordy is still everything. He is my sun, moon, stars, he is everything in this universe and more. And I will not lose him in this war to come. I will die first. That is my vow.

He kisses my forehead and stands. I watch him in his full glory as he makes his way to the entrance of the cave. “Dusk is approaching. I think it’s time to fetch your horse.”

I reluctantly agree. “I know. And when I see you again, we will be riding into battle. Do not forget your promise, Jordy. I couldn’t bear losing you. I don’t want a kingdom without you in it.”

My face is in his large hands again as he whispers, “I will not die, my love. I swear it.”

He has pledged it.

And so shall it be.

CHAPTER 23

THE KNOCK ON MY COTTAGE DOOR STARTLES ME AND I SET MY ale on the table before opening it.

“Aye, your grace,” Master Philip says. “Your armor and dagger.” He bows and presents them to me.

I turn the dagger over in my hands then slip it into my long sleeve, the steel and flintstone blade fitting comfortably and the hilt snug enough to hold it in place. I am happily surprised when I can move my arms freely and the dagger remains well-hidden and secure. Philip is a true craftsman.

“It’s perfect,” I say. “Thank you, Master Philip.”

“Anything for my princess.” He looks at me for a moment and rubs his almost-there beard. “Begging your pardon, princess, but you look troubled. Are you nervous about the battle? I know I am.”

I’m admittedly shocked. “So, you are riding then, good sir?”

“Aye, your highness. I am pledged to fight for you and fight I shall.”

I remember his fear when face-to-face with Sir Malek, being challenged for a duel he was ill-prepared to possibly win, and yet he stands here willing to ride into battle for me. Truth be known, I am as clumsy a princess as he is a swordsman. I have no knowledge at all for grandeur and

finery, no clue how to rule a kingdom. Maybe I am a fool to challenge King Ulrich.

“I hope I am worthy of your loyalty,” I admit to Philip. “My heart still feels like that of a peasant girl. What do I know of the crown?”

Philip closes the gap between us, his eyes searching mine. “What does any fool ever know of a crown, my lady? If unchallenged, King Ulrich will leave Timberness to that clod Malek. Does that seem at all wise to any soul who has ever encountered the brute? Do not lessen your worth as royalty, your grace. The future queen in your soul can feel your doubt and it weakens her. Timberness rallies for a strong queen, a queen with the heart of a peasant girl. A peasant girl who holds magic, no doubt. Our former queen was a mage from what I remember in school books. A peasant’s heart holding untapped magic. A powerful combination, if you ask me.”

My eyes dart up, unable to navigate words past the lump in my throat. “I am afraid that I possess no magic, dear Philip. I fear my parents’ magic died with them.”

“You are right in one regard. You don’t possess magic, princess. You are magic. Believe in yourself, as we all believe in you. That peasant girl is who I fight beside on the morrow,” Philip says. “She is who we are all fighting for.”

I clasp the top of his arm. “Thank you, Master Philip.”

He nods. “You’re welcome, my lady. I shall go now. Until the morrow, my princess.”

“Until the morrow.”

I take a seat in front of the fireplace when Philip departs. I watch the flames leap and dance, my thoughts as scattered as the ash and soot escaping in tiny clusters on the floor of the hearth. I think about what these wee morning hours will hold for me and the irony of it all. When I was but a small girl and beyond, I had big dreams—dreams that were much larger than this cottage and the market square. I made wishes of grandeur to simply see inside the castle walls, to see what life held for the privileged ones fortunate enough to actually live there. And now that those dreams are a reality, I'm afraid.

But I know what must be done, know who I really am. I would love nothing more than to see Gram's smiling face, busy in the apothecary, asking me how many coins I'd collected for the day and if I'd managed to put food on the table for the evening. Funny how that struggle was the only thing I thought of daily when my life was selling wares in the market square and taking care of Gram. But those struggles seem small compared to what I'm facing now. When I think of what it must've been like for Gram to be cast out of the palace with me as an infant, to leave behind the only life she'd ever known, all in the name of keeping me safe...

She was the strongest woman in Timberness. She is my family, the only one I need. Her blood runs through my veins, and on the morrow, I will make her proud. But she was not the only powerful woman in my life. Philip's words keep running through my head. *You don't possess magic, you are magic.* Willow's Wisp. My mother's magic. A message in fire...

If I don't find my magic now, learn to wield it to some degree, it will be of no use during battle. I open the door

leading to the back of the cottage and step into the blackness. Nothing but starlight and moonbeams guide my line of vision. I stare into the emptiness, the earth beneath my feet as I step off the porch. I stretch out my right hand, extending it toward the ground. What was it that Master Burgess said? *Fire is their quickening, the birth of the magic itself. Every mage is a fire wielder, but it is not a fire that burns. It is a fire that releases the very power it is creating.*

I close my eyes, willing every ounce of strength in my body to reach my outstretched hand. I still have no comprehension of what is expected from me, what releases any true power I may carry. I say the first thing that comes to mind, the only words in my overthinking brain. I look at the soil itself. “Move.”

Nothing. The ground is simply the ground, unchanged. Stagnant. Still. I extend my hand again, and I see the orange flame dancing in my opened palm. I scream, unable to resist the knowledge that fire burns, shouldn't be in my hand. But the fire is cool, floating, merely an image. It does no damage to my flesh, causes no discomfort at all. I fling the flame to the ground in front of me.

“Move!” I yell again.

In seconds, the ground swirls to life, creating a spinning funnel running along the ground. It dissipates almost as quickly as it starts, leaving a small piece of flame behind. I bend down and retrieve the flame, gazing into its brightness until it goes completely out.

“I did it,” I mutter, my heart a racing stag nearly bursting through my chest. “I’m a mage.”



The sky is black as pitch except for a few scattered stars. I barely slept at all, but it is of no consequence. Sir Victor will be here to collect me very shortly. Soon the resistance will journey to the castle in the cover of darkness and take King Ulrich and Sir Malek by surprise. And when they are defeated, I will become the queen I was born to be.

But I see only Milla in the looking glass as I gaze upon it. No matter the finery I wear, I still see a peasant when I stare at my reflection. My mother’s dress has been hemmed and altered for battle, and it fits like a glove. A queen’s dress for a queen. But I am no queen. Not yet. And I am no longer a peasant either.

I am something in-between.

I shove the bundle of matches Master Burgess gave me into my pouch with the medicines I’ve prepared for the battlefield. I have poultices and anesthetics, and needles and thread for sutures. I retrieve the last match Gram gave me from the top of my dressing table and place a kiss on top of it.

“Give me strength, Gram,” I whisper, and tuck the match into my chemise. I roll my mother’s note through my fingers and tuck it in my chemise as well. “Give me a queen’s heart, Mother, just a speck of the bravery you embodied. Strengthen my magic.”

The raven feather is in my chemise as well. I will fulfill the vow I made, will see the black feather on Malek's lifeless body for what he did to Gram. I swear to the gods I will make it so. I retrieve my newly fashioned dagger and make my way to the kitchen table. I plunge the dagger into a melon that is resting on the table, the blade hard at first against the melon's rind, but then sinks into its tender flesh with little effort. I shiver at the thought of using the dagger on some poor soul, and pray it remains tucked away the entire battle. I shrug away the thought and continue with my preparations.

The armored plate is a little heavy when I lift it. I fit it on my chest and back, tugging the leather straps on the sides until the plates are snug around my torso. I fasten the straps and let out a slow, ragged breath. I'm grateful that Philip had the foresight not to make the armor too heavy for me to wear. It is curved to fit my womanly features and easy to maneuver now that it's in place. I slide my dagger into my tight-fitting left sleeve and cinch the medicine pouch on my right hip. I fill my canteen with water from the barrel. I hear the horses and panic grips me momentarily. I glance around the room, desperate to remember every detail of it, right down to the last herb in the apothecary. I run a finger along the edge of the table, remembering the meals shared upon it with Gram, and the talks we enjoyed in the glow of candlelight. After several seconds, there is a knock on the door. My breath catches in my throat.

I will never be the same once I leave this cottage.

I remove the heavy wood block from across the door and lift the latch. Sir Victor and Jordy are both standing outside. I

straighten my back, placing my red cloak about my shoulders.

“Gentleman,” I say, then I speak directly to Victor. “General.”

“Your highness,” Sir Victor replies, his golden armor a reminder of his former position in King Urich’s palace. “Your troops are readied, and your horse awaits. Shall we ride?”

There are mounted riders as far as my eyes can see through the thick darkness. Armor and shields, blades and arrows... All of this is for me, to secure my rightful reign.

It is surreal.

My words are strong, unlike my feeble nerves. “I am ready.”

Sir Victor nods, then turns and joins his troops. Jordy’s jaw clenches as he looks me over from head to toe.

“You are truly a queen.” He places a soft kiss on my cheek. “Now let us claim your castle.”

Jordy helps me onto my horse as I admire his signature black leather vest and garments. He refuses to wear armor, saying it slows down his swordplay. As much as I worry about the thought of Jordy having no real protection, I will admit that his black leather makes my knees weak and my heart flutter. He is the finest soldier in the company.

I clear my throat. “Will you not reconsider wearing armor into battle, my love?”

“Armor makes a soldier slow, sweet lass,” Jordy replies.

“Armor keeps a soldier alive,” I shoot back.

“Not this soldier.”

I nod my understanding and steady my horse when it flinches. We ride on either side of Sir Victor, a clutch of golden knights behind us aiding their new general in my protection. The riders are quiet as we slowly pace our horses along the narrow road leading to the castle. A few riders join us along the way, exiting their cottages as they kiss their wives farewell. My army consists of farmers and shop owners, ranch hands and peasants. Some have steel armor, and some do not. But they are all humble, as am I. But we will not let our fear stop us.

“Have you seen Philip?” I whisper to Jordy.

“Philip?” Jordy’s lips sink into a frown. “Philip is fighting?”

I hate the confession before I say it. “Aye, he avowed me so.”

“This is no place for Philip.”

“It is no place for any of us,” I reply. “Most of these men know nothing of swordplay, Jordy. But they will fight to ensure that Malek never becomes king of Timberness.”

“Aye, there is a bit of truth in that, Milla. But if I am an honest man, I must admit that most of them fight for you. And if Philip made that vow, I can’t say that I blame him. I would follow you into the pits of Hell if it was necessary.”

I nod and look again to the road ahead. Soon we will be close enough to see the castle’s towers in the dim light of approaching dawn—the tower that my mother sat inside,

misery her only friend. I pray that King Urich, Sir Malek, and the remaining king's guards are bested quickly, and that our troops suffer no bloodshed for my benefit. And I pray that Philip will be safe.

“Jordy, I have a confession.”

“I'm listening, my lady.”

“I tested my birthright, sought to see if I possess any magic like my mother and father before me. And, it would seem that I do.”

Jordy gives me a quizzical look. “What do you mean?”

“I cast a fire from my hands and commanded the soil at my feet to move, and it obeyed. It was only for several seconds, but it happened. I watched my hand light aflame, but it did not burn me. The fire was power that I created. It held my magic.”

Jordy's eyes widen. “That is truly amazing, Milla. Surely it can help us in our quest, then. Maybe you can wield it against Malek somehow.”

I am ashamed to admit how truly clumsy I am in my newly found talent. “I will try, Jordy, but I am very much the novice, I'm afraid. I am giving no false hope in the area of magic to aid our effort but wanted to share my intrigues. If I'm honest, maybe you should talk me out of trying to use magic altogether.” I grin and he smiles.

“I'd never take away your magic, Milla.”

And with every piece of my heart, I believe him.

When we are about ten furlongs from the palace, Sir Victor halts the troops. No voices lift in the cold night air, only the sounds from the horses' nostrils and hooves remains.

“Good men of Timberness,” Sir Victor shouts. “This is the night that you gain your freedom. This is the night that will end the tyranny of Malek. I have it on good authority that as King Ulrich lies in his deathbed, Malek is already planning a celebration for his own coronation. Dark is the kingdom that bows to Sir Malek. But we have our light, the one true heir of House Starling. And we must protect the princess at all costs.”

“Aye,” several voices ring out at once. “Protect the princess! Protect Milla!”

“We will travel as if we are balancing on feathers for these last furlongs,” Sir Victor shouts again when the men are quiet. “When we are near the castle entrance, two knights will ride ahead. The guards will open the gates, and when they do, we will ride with the force of thunder and storm the gates. Find and surround Sir Malek first and any members of the king's guard that you see. Harm no unarmed men, women, or children. Malek and his knights are our focus. We will make short order of them, and victory will be ours!”

“Victory will be ours!” the soldiers repeat.

Sir Victor looks to me and nods. I ride up next to him and lift my voice into the biting air, “I am Princess Milla of House Starling, daughter of Queen Millicent and Sir Waylen, and granddaughter of King Girard and Queen Isabel. I am the rightful heir and future queen of Timberness. I will fight beside you, my brothers, and together we will restore my

rightful place on the throne, and Timberness to her greatness.
Long live House Starling!”

Sir Victor and Jordy lift their swords high into the air, and all the soldiers follow suit.

“Long live House Starling!” Jordy cries out, and the others raise their swords higher in response.

I take in the vision of the blades, their loyalty a brightness in the dark moments that lie ahead. I thank the heavens for their devotion and my gram for lighting the way. We start towards the castle again, moonlight and stars at our backs.

CHAPTER 24

THE HORSES ARE WALKING THE LAST FURLONG. WE ARE VERY near the castle now, the troops as quiet as leaves blowing in the breeze. When we're almost to the castle gates, Sir Victor motions for two knights to ride up ahead, then raises a fist in the air to halt the troops. We stop and wait, shielded in the cover of darkness.

When the lone riders reach the palace, the guard's voice is faint, but I hear it. "Open the gates."

"This is it," Jordy mumbles, looking at me and gripping his horse's reins tighter, obviously anxious. "They have no inkling there are games afoot."

Sir Victor's eyes are set on the darkness in front of us. I'm holding my breath. We hear the sound of the gates' large door as it strikes the ground and look around at one another. The moments pass like hours.

"The riders are cutting down the guards at the gate as we speak," Victor announces to myself and Jordy. He hesitates another moment then yells, "Charge!"

We storm the castle with great force and speed. Riders pass me, my legs crushed against my own horse as others graze me in their passing. My heart is thundering in my ears as loudly as the horses' hooves pounding the earth. Once we're inside the castle gates, our troops scout out the guards, most of whom are emerging from their barracks, no doubt still rubbing the sleep dust from their eyes. Only a dozen or so were actually on duty.

Most of the townfolks are abed, and the few folks still patronizing the tavern swiftly lock themselves inside it.

“We have you grossly outnumbered,” Sir Victor shouts to the emerging guards. “Go back to the barracks and await our victory, or face us and die. Your honor will remain intact. I have proof that King Urich is a traitor—”

“You’re the traitor, Victor!” a knight shouts in Sir Victor’s direction. “You were supposed to hang for treason. We will not stand down until we see you swinging. Long live the king!”

Sir Victor is resolute. “Then you will die.”

Victor and Jordy dismount from their horses and charge the guards. My eyes dart from man to man, mounted riders and soldiers on the ground in hand-to-hand combat are all around me. All I hear is the pounding of metal and my thudding heart. I notice a young man standing in front of the tavern, frozen in fear. I focus on his trembling body and wide eyes. The clanging of steel on steel and men moaning and falling to the hard ground assaults my ears and my sensibilities. It is beyond any nightmare and I’m thankful that Jordy and Victor are still standing.

“Milla!” Jordy’s voice pulls me from my thoughts. With one swing of his sword, he cuts down another guard and then calls to me again, “Milla, have you seen Malek?”

I glance in every direction. “No. Maybe he sought refuge in the bunker.”

“He is not one to cower like a dog,” Sir Victor calls out when he’s beside Jordy. “We have to find him. Milla, seek

shelter.”

“No, I’m riding out to find Sir Malek.”

“Are you daft?” Victor says. “He’ll snap you like a twig. As your general, I forbid it.”

I turn my horse around again as a large arm comes across my chest and pulls me from my saddle.

“Milla!” Jordy’s screams fill my ears as my body thuds against the hard earth.

I scramble to find my footing when the palace guard responsible for my fall reaches to lift me from the ground. I hear the swing of a sword and the guard is cut down in front of me. Philip is behind him, holding a bloodied sword. He offers me a hand up.

“Allow me, my queen.” He takes my hand and tugs me from the ground.

“Philip, behind you!” Jordy yells as he runs toward us.

Philip turns and throws up his shield as a guard attempts to stab him. Jordy shields me with his body, pushing me away from danger. Philip is a clumsy fighter, but rushes the guard, attempting to match him blow-for-blow.

“I need to help him,” Jordy says, handing me his shield. “Cover yourself and don’t move, no matter what happens.”

Within seconds, Jordy is at Philip’s side, but it’s too late. He reaches him as the guard’s sword pierces Philip’s armor and sinks deep into his chest. Philip falls as Jordy’s screams fill the air.

“No, you bastard!” Jordy is still screaming as he plows into the guard, cutting him down within seconds.

We both rush to Philip’s side. Blood is dripping from his nose and mouth. His fading eyes nestle in mine.

“Did we win, my queen? Is Malek defeated?”

I cup a hand on his cheek and run a thumb over his scraggly attempt at a beard. “Yes, my good sir. We won because of you. You saved my life and our kingdom.”

He offers a weak smile and forces out the words. “I’m glad, Milla. If my death sees you queen, then it is a good death. Live long...my queen.” He pushes the last breath from his exhausted lungs, and I lean over his lifeless body, unable to stop my own tears.

Sir Victor calls out to Jordy, “A guard is making his way to the bell tower. Stop him before he reaches it. The guard barracks are empty, and the ones left fighting are nearly bested. We don’t need him to summon aid.”

Jordy cups a hand on my shoulder, then bolts toward the bell tower as fast as his legs will carry him. Sir Victor tugs me away from Philip.

“I’m sorry about your friend,” he says, “but we still have an objective. I need to find Malek. Once we take him, it’s over —”

“He’s there,” I say, just above a whisper. I point towards the castle and the giant of a man I recognize immediately. He wears no armor, holds nothing but his sword and a look of

confusion on his ruddy face. “Sir Malek is standing just in front of the castle doors.”

“Sir Malek!” Victor calls when he sees him. “The reign of King Urich is over. The last of your men are dying before your eyes, but it doesn’t have to be this way. Timberness will never be yours when the king dies.” Sir Victor points his sword in my direction. “The young woman you behold is Princess Milla, daughter of Queen Millicent and Sir Waylen. She is the last surviving heir of House Starling, and we have come to reclaim her birthright. King Urich is evil, and his reign is over from this day forth. We are here to arrest him for treason, and anyone else who stands in our way. Swear your allegiance to Princess Milla and we will spare your life and the life of your men—what’s left of them. Refuse, and die.”

One of the enemy guards drops his weapon and raises his arms in surrender. He walks closer to me, his eyes never leaving my face. “By the gods,” he cries out. “She is the spitting image of the queen.” He turns to the other guards. “Look at her. It is as though the queen has been reborn.”

The fighting pauses as the men look at me, weighing Victor’s words and their loyalty.

“Your king is dying,” Sir Victor directs at the remaining guards. “And when he is no more...” He points his sword in Malek’s direction. “He will be your king. At one time, you were all my brothers. I know how most of you truly feel about Sir Malek and his cruelty. Is he the ruler you will swear your allegiance to? The king you will die for if necessary? Or do you feel your life would be better served under Queen Milla’s

reign, the last surviving member of House Starling? The choice is yours.”

An enraged Sir Malek is red-faced and nearly panting, a sheen of sweat on his bald head despite the chill in the air. “Traitors, each of you who believes the rantings of one of our own who was convicted of treason.” Malek practically spits the words through his black moustache and goatee. “Anyone can find a girl who resembles our deceased queen and play her the part of a princess. This is all an elaborate ruse. Pick up your swords and fight, you fools, or you will swing when the castle is once again secured.”

The soldiers look around at one another and begin laying down their swords one by one, merely raindrops in an ocean of troops all pledging loyalty to House Starling.

My house. Gooseflesh tingles my arms.

Sir Victor looks to me and then back at Malek. “He’s mine,” he mutters through clenched teeth. “Time to surrender, Malek,” he calls out. “You’re outnumbered. You can’t win.”

Victor draws his sword and starts toward the castle and Malek. Sir Malek’s lips curve up into a twisted smile as he lifts a fist in the air. A trumpet sounds from atop the castle on his command. A small line of soldiers on each side of the castle run toward our men.

“Damn it all,” Victor yells as Sir Malek sprints back toward the castle. Victor tugs me behind him. “These men are the last of his regiment. Our soldiers can handle them. Stay close, no matter what happens. We have to stop Malek. When we best him, it’s over.”

A slew of our soldiers fend off the guards in our path, allowing us to pursue Malek. The castle is nearly empty as we rush inside behind him. I steady my pace to keep up with Victor, finding it hard to breathe from a throat that has swallowed a stone. I am consumed with emotion that threatens to stall me. Of all the times I have wished to see the inside of the castle, to be a part of a world so unreachable for a simple match girl, all I feel in this moment is an overwhelming sense of dread.

“He is fleeing to the king’s quarters,” Victor says, pulling me from my thoughts. He draws his sword and quickens his pace. “We must hurry, Princess Milla. There are no limits to his treachery.”

We reach King Urich’s sleeping quarters in mere seconds. Sir Victor kicks the door open as Malek attempts to barricade it, but to no avail. Malek draws his sword and points it at Victor, then sprints to the other side of the room, very near a window facing the courtyard. Malek glances out the window and pounds his chest, releasing guttural shouts.

“Your men are nearly bested,” Sir Victor observes, “as I said they would be. It’s over, Malek. Lay down your sword and your life will be spared. No more bloodshed need occur.”

Malek grips his sword tighter, pointing it in Victor’s direction. “I will never surrender to a traitor. You will die by my blade today, you fool.”

Sir Victor readies his own sword, the two men in a standoff at the foot of the ailing king’s bed.

“What...? What is the meaning of this?” King Urich pushes out the words with what seems like his last breath. He is as feeble as a newborn colt, his once brown hair shot through with streaks of prominent gray. He sets the bluest eyes I have ever seen directly on me—eyes that mimic the soft froth of the ocean, but still somehow manage to be foreboding. Then, they widen like saucers.

“By the gods,” King Urich cries out. “Willow? Is that you? It can’t be. Am I seeing a ghost, come to carry my soul to eternal damnation?”

Malek and Sir Victor are still facing each other, swords drawn and readied to strike. I step closer to the old king’s bed and Victor angles his body, ready to protect me if need be.

As I close the gap between the bed and the center of the room, I barely recognize the sweet smell of the pinon wood still glowing in the hearth, and the musty fragrance of the decades-old tapestries lining the walls behind me. I grasp a fistful of the fabric of my mother’s dress hanging on my trembling body, attempting to calm my raging nerves. The soft silk slides through my shaky fingers as I pull in a long, slow breath for courage. I stare back into his icy orbs, searching them for a single shred of decency, but there is none to be found.

This man was the death of my mother.

The ruination of my family.

He sentenced me and Gram to a life of hardship.

He silenced House Starling for twenty-one winters.

But now, he will hear me.

“I am no ghost, nor am I Willow. My name is Milla. The queen was my mother, and you destroyed her. You stole my lineage and my throne, and I am here to reclaim them both.”

The back of his hand does little to stifle the chuckles I wasn't expecting. He manages to push himself up on his elbows.

“Ha!” King Ulrich coughs before finishing his words. “The child. I should've known.” He glares at Malek. “You were bested by a girl and her army? I was a fool to ever believe my kingdom could endure with you in my stead.”

Malek's face morphs into something resembling a gargoyle. “So, it's true?” he hisses in frustration. “All those words spoken in the barracks of the queen's lover being the father of a phantom child...the queen's sudden death and the disappearance of the queen mother. We thought them old wives' tales, but it is all true. What other reason would you have to send away a child you sired? This lass is indeed a Starling...and she has a legitimate claim to the throne?”

King Ulrich's twisted smile could shame a jester. “Only if you allow her to live.”

Sir Malek backs away slightly, his eyes still darting from the king to the window behind him. “The real question is, why did *you* allow her to live after convincing the kingdom she was a stillborn?”

“I allowed the queen to sway me. The pleadings of a woman is a man's damnation.” The frail king attempts to fully

sit up but fails. “It doesn’t matter now, though, does it? I will return to dust soon, but I truly hate that I chose such a scoundrel as my predecessor.” The king clears his throat, his voice weakening with each word. “Had you spent more time securing our allies rather than visiting brothels and taunting villagers in the streets, maybe you’d wear the crown. Looks as though you will be visiting the dungeon instead, aye?”

“And you’ll be visiting Hell!” Malek lunges, plunging his sword deep into King Urich’s chest.

My hands fly to my mouth and I hear the slight rasp of my silk skirt ripping as Sir Victor tugs me behind him and swings his sword at Malek.

“Go ahead, King-slayer,” Sir Victor shouts. “Let’s see how you fare against a real man and not a dying king or a frightened boy in the streets!”

Malek’s grin is sick and vile. “I may lose a crown this day, Sir Victor, but you will lose your life.”

The crash of steel on steel fills the room as Malek and Victor match each other blow-for-blow. A surge of panic overtakes me, and I stumble back when Malek swings his massive sword dangerously close to Victor’s face. But Victor ducks and comes up sword first, blocking Malek’s advance. Victor pushes Malek hard against the window, and they both fall through it as it breaks, an explosion of wood and glass.

My own screams fill the room, “Victor, no!”

I rush to the window. Malek and Sir Victor have continued their battle on the street below, along with a few other men

still tangled in swordplay around them. Most of our soldiers are now lining the sidewalks and homes of the palace dwellers, securing their safety and staving off any attempts at rebellion. I look for Jordy, but he is nowhere to be seen from this vantage point. I need to get down there.

I glance at the king as I pass his bed, his body now bathed in a sea of red. A sound stalls me, and I force myself to look into this paled face. It is faint, but I hear it. The king is barely breathing, clinging to whatever life is left in his evil bones. He is mumbling a single word, but I can't make it out. I step closer, but he does not see me. He is entranced with whatever it is his dying eyes are focused on across the room. His stony, blue eyes widen more and I turn to see what he is looking at. Nothing is there.

“Wil-low,” his raspy voice whispers out. “Willow... No!”

His eyes are licked with terror as his breaths finally stop. King Urich is dead, and my mother was the last soul he encountered on his way to meet his maker. *Good.* I place my fingers on his lids and close his widened eyes, affording him more kindness than he ever bestowed on me or my kin. But evil will not change my heart or my decency.

“May God have mercy on your wretched soul, Urich of Enverness.”

I make my way out of the palace, a slew of my own soldiers already milling about the corridors and halls.

“Is Sir Malek bested?” I ask the first soldier I encounter.

“No, my princess. General Victor is blade-to-blade with him now. We will afford the general the honor of taking Malek himself, but we will not allow Malek to survive if Sir Victor is bested. Malek is fighting a war he cannot win. His men have all surrendered or have fallen, your highness. It is only a matter of time.”

I swallow the lump in my throat and ask, “Do you know Jordy, the baker’s son?”

“Aye, my lady. I know him.”

“Have you seen him? Is he—”

“Take comfort, Princess Milla. He has not fallen. He is safe, and in the front courtyard as we speak.”

“Thank you, kind sir. Good fortune to you always.” I clasp the top of his arm and he winces. Then I notice the tear in his shirt.

“You’re hurt.” I push aside the fabric, revealing a deep gash in his arm. I pull a vial of poultice and a strip of cloth from my pouch. “Rinse the wound and pack it with the poultice, then tie the cloth around it. Leave it wrapped for three morrows and then repeat the process again until it heals completely, understand?”

“Aye, your highness. Thank you.”

I nod and make my way outside the castle, relief filling me with the news that Jordy is safe. I fear for Sir Victor’s endurance against Malek. Victor’s sutured arm is still healing, no matter his bravery and strong will. I need to do something.

And I need to do it now.

CHAPTER 25

I STAY NEAR THE OUTSIDE CASTLE WALL ONCE I'M IN THE courtyard, trying my best to remain out of sight. My boots crush the broken glass of the window that Sir Victor and Malek fell through, and there they remain, dueling in the middle of the courtyard like gladiators on display for our amusement. The other enemy soldiers are bested, and my stomach churns when I see the lifeless bodies of the fallen. Why didn't they surrender? Why would they allow honor to keep them true to the likes of Malek? A clutch of my soldiers are standing on the ready, watching the final act of swordplay, seeming ready to strike if their general is struck down. I will never understand a man's sense of honor. Honor is of no value to Sir Victor if he is dead, and Malek could be bested in one surprise blow from a soldier if I so command it. *Perhaps I will.*

"Milla!"

Jordy.

Jordy rushes to my side and clasps my face in his large hands. He kisses my forehead, then backs away to look at me.

"Are you all right, my lady?"

"I'm fine, my love," I reply. "King Urich is dead. We followed Malek to the king's bed chambers. They had words when my lineage was revealed and Malek stabbed him. Then he and Victor tangled swords and fell from the window." I nod

my head toward them. “And they fight still. We need to end this, Jordy. Who is our best archer?”

“No, Milla. Sir Victor must fight for as long as he can endure. Having an archer’s arrow find Malek’s heart would shred Victor’s honor. You know that.”

“And I do not agree with that.” I lower my head. “You stepped in with Philip in the market square that day, remember?”

Jordy takes my hands. “That was entirely different. Philip is not a knight.”

I huff out the words, “Knight or no, Sir Victor has an injured arm.” I face the swordplay again. “He is tiring and favoring that arm. I can tell.”

Jordy kisses my hand before releasing it. “I will not allow Sir Victor to be defeated. I swear it. Just promise me you will remain safe, my lady...no matter what occurs.”

His oath grips my heart like an angry fist, but I nod my agreement when the words don’t come. We move closer to the swordplay, Jordy’s hand on his blade as he watches Victor’s every move.

“Your time away from the king’s guard has made you weak, my old friend,” Malek shouts to Sir Victor.

“I was never your friend,” Victor spits back.

Malek’s sword finds Victor’s middle, barely grazing it, but it is enough to knock him back. Malek advances as Sir Victor attempts to block the strike aimed at his legs. The sword finds its mark and Victor falls to the ground.

“No!” I’m running toward the fray, but Jordy is faster.

“Malek!” Jordy screams as the demon is about to stab Sir Victor, who is dragging his body along the ground, attempting to retrieve his own sword.

Malek turns and faces Jordy, peals of wild laughter escaping his vile throat. “You? I thought I told you to never oppose me again, boy. Remember? Now this *is* getting interesting. No second chances. I’ll gut you like a fish this time.”

Jordy grins. “Are you catching your breath, or do you simply like to hear yourself talk? On with it. Do your best, then, Sir Malek.” Jordy wields his sword like he was born with it in his hand and backs away a little, trying to draw Malek away from Sir Victor, who is still dragging himself along the ground. Jordy glances in my direction.

And Sir Malek notices.

“Ha!” Malek laughs. “This new *princess* is your lady, the one I saw with you at market that day, the one with the room full of potions and witchery.” His laughter is a demented thing. “So, I am to lose my kingdom to a peasant princess, huh? I suppose we’ll see about that.”

Malek swings his sword at Jordy and the crude duel begins. When they are a safe distance from him, I rush to Sir Victor, my head a swirl of fear and determination. I bend down to lift him, my chest plate a nuisance that I doubt I can keep supporting. My shaky hands tug off my cloak and the leather straps of the armor until the last one is free. I allow my armor to fall to the ground. I drape one of Victor’s arms over my

shoulder and help him stand. The slices on his legs are deep and painful, and he cries out when he puts weight on them.

“I’m sorry, Princess,” Victor says, his voice meek and pained. “I have failed you.”

“You’ve done nothing of the sort. We made short order of the palace army thanks to you. Your strategy was brilliant, and your courage is unmatched.”

I fear Victor will fall before I get him to safety. He is losing a lot of blood, and his face is paled and lined with sweat. I motion for two soldiers in our path and they help carry Victor and ease him down on a soft patch of ground.

“We need to stop the bleeding,” I say close to Victor’s face. “This will hurt, but it can’t be helped. I’ll work quickly.”

Truth be told, the bleeding does need to stop, but I keep looking from Victor to Jordy. He seems to be holding his own with Malek, but I fear for his safety with all my soul. I retrieve thin strips of cloth from my pouch and some congealing ointment. I open my canteen and look in Victor’s anguished eyes.

“This will hurt a bit. I’m sorry.”

I pour the water on the gashes in his thighs and follow with some smears of the ointment. Victor’s body goes rigid and he cries out but relaxes a little when the ointment starts numbing the wounds as it sets to work. I give the strips of cloth to the men standing nearby.

“Hold the wounds shut. Use these as a tourniquet. Tie them as tightly as he can bear.” I touch Victor’s shoulder and

whisper in his ear. “I need to help Jordy, all right? I will mend you when the battle is over. I promise.”

His smile is weak. “Make no fuss over me, your highness. Go to Jordy. You are his stronghold. I underestimated your skills, and I admire your bravery, my queen.”

“Thank you, Sir Victor.” I give his shoulder a slight squeeze and turn my attention to Jordy.

“Milla,” Sir Victor adds, “Jordy is no knight. There is no dishonor in ordering assistance. We need to end Malek now. The longer he breathes, the more dangerous he becomes.”

I nod and move closer to the swordplay still in my line of vision. Jordy’s face displays full concentration, his eyes following Malek’s every movement. My heart aches with pride and terror, too afraid that Malek will strike Jordy down at any moment, but more than impressed that Jordy is holding his own. From the way he’s handling his sword, perhaps Malek is the one who should be afraid. Guilt pangs my middle when my mind is set, hoping Jordy knows I trust his skill completely. But Sir Victor is right—Malek needs to be stopped. I make eye contact with two of my men and motion for them to attack Malek.

As the men draw their swords, Malek hears them and turns slightly. Jordy moves in closer and Malek lands a surprise kick to his middle, sending him flying.

“Jordy!” I lose my breath.

Malek faces the two soldiers. He pulls a dagger from his boot and throws it into the neck of the taller soldier. The man

falls dead in a heap and Malek chuckles, then looks to the other soldier.

“What are you waiting for?” Malek taunts. “Bring your best, soldier.”

It hits me as swiftly as the knife in my poor soldier’s neck. That dagger has been in Malek’s boot all along.

He was toying with Sir Victor and Jordy.

If Jordy continues to fight, Malek will kill him.

Jordy stands and inhales a few deep breaths. Malek squares off with the other soldier. They spar for a few moments and the soldier stumbles back. Malek swings his sword in one swift motion, taking the soldier’s head clean off his shoulders. I throw a hand to my mouth, bile backing up in my throat. Jordy makes eye contact with me and takes a fortifying breath. His slight nod reaffirms the promise he made before this battle ever began. He is determined to take Malek and come out of this alive. He tightens his grip on his sword and steps up to face Malek again. I can’t breathe, can’t move. I won’t allow Malek to take my Jordy. I look about at the soldiers standing around, intently engaged in the duel before them, hoping they are not called next to fight the demon who has tortured them for years. Malek has held his position for quite some time through fear and intimidation. Not one man here truly wishes to face him.

But I am no man.

And this is my kingdom.

I will die before I allow him to take it from me. I outstretch my right arm and aim it at Jordy. “Mother, aid me in my magic,” I whisper and take a fortifying breath. “Quicken his hands!” I scream, releasing the power now cradled in my palm. I launch my magic toward Jordy and his hands alight with flame.

Malek stumbles back, surprised by the fire. Jordy panics, but soon realizes what I have accomplished when he glances in my direction. He swings his sword with impossible speed as Malek scurries back several paces.

Jordy advances and Malek’s stunned expression gives me hope. Malek stills himself and readies his own sword, matching Jordy’s speed at first. After several seconds, Malek’s stamina fades and Jordy clearly has the upper hand. I take my first real breath since the swordplay began. I am mesmerized by Jordy’s glowing hands and swinging sword. Fire hands indeed. He lunges to land a blow to Malek’s chest, but Malek somehow dodges it. Jordy swings his sword again as the fire leaves his hands. He is momentarily distracted by my fading magic and Malek uses it to his advantage. Malek swings his sword close to Jordy’s chest and Jordy twists backward to avoid the blow. He loses his footing and falls as Malek’s sword plunges into his shoulder. Malek pulls the sword from Jordy’s trembling flesh as Jordy cries out.

My screams fill the space around us and Malek turns to face me. Jordy falls to the hard ground, taking my heart with him as his sword falls from his hand.

Flashes of Malek in our cottage on the night I lost Gram assaults my memory, the way he took her poultice and thought it folly. I will not allow him to be the death of Jordy too. Magic be damned. I am the match girl, the peasant.

I know who I am.

“Be with me, Gram,” I whisper. “You promised you would always be with me.”

Malek taunts Jordy. “I told you never to oppose me, boy. I told you what would happen. You thought your woman’s witchery could best me? You are a fool, lad. And you will die this day.”

I step forward and pick up a sword near my feet. I lift the sword in the air and remind myself to breathe. “Sir Malek, I challenge you.”

Raucous laughter pours from Malek’s throat. “You, girl? You challenge me?” He looks about and motions to the soldiers standing around us as far as the eye can see. “You have an army, and *you* challenge me?”

“Yes.”

His smile is criminal. “Then when you are defeated, this army is mine.”

My voice no longer trembles. “We have an accord.”

“Milla, no!” Jordy shouts.

“I have heard enough from you,” Malek growls to Jordy and lifts his sword.

“No harm will come to Jordy,” I say. “No matter the outcome, no harm will come to him.”

Malek faces me again. “Now aren’t you the sweet one? Sacrificing yourself for your lover.” He lifts his sword. “And I thought you a witch. Well, then, bring your best, girl.”

I hold the sword up, unable to stop my arms from shaking from its weight. In one motion, Malek swings his sword into mine, causing it to fall to the ground.

“Pity,” Malek says. “It seems you can’t manage a sword, *princess*.” He tosses his own sword to the ground and smirks. “No matter, I’ll kill you with my bare hands. Or maybe I will take you captive. Maybe I’ll take you as my bride. Wouldn’t that be rich? Another Starling queen bested by her king.” He looks to Jordy again. “What do you think I should do with her, huh? She has fire in her belly. I like them feisty.”

I pull Gram’s match from my chemise and the dagger from my sleeve. I move closer to Malek, who’s still leaning over Jordy with his teasing. He bends down and spits in Jordy’s face as I strike the match on the dagger’s flintstone blade, setting it aflame. *I wish to free my kingdom of tyranny...*

“Remember what I said, boy?” Malek says. “I told you to bring help if you ever faced me again.”

I step up behind Malek. “He did.”

Malek turns into me, my dagger’s glow lighting his shocked eyes. I drive my flaming dagger into his heart before he can react, and he falls to his knees and then flat on his face,

a pool of blood collecting at his sides. The soldiers' cheers fill the cold morning air.

“Long live the queen! Long live the queen!”

I pull Malek's raven feather from my chemise and allow it to fall on his exposed cheek. My oath fulfilled, I run to Jordy's side. He tries to sit up, but I insist he stay on the ground. “I need to tend your shoulder, my love. Please don't try to move.”

“You had a special dagger, a trick up your sleeve?”

“Literally, my love.”

He tugs me down to meet his mouth, the kiss soft on two sets of lips still clumsy and trembling.

“You are indeed a queen.”

I set to work on Jordy's shoulder as a few soldiers approach me.

“What will you have us do, your highness?” a soldier asks.

“Here, take these.” I pull some matches from my pouch and hand them to the soldier. “Make a celebration fire in the courtyard and summon my people. Fly the banners of House Starling. Our days of tyranny are over.”

CHAPTER 26

THREE DAYS INTO MY REIGN, PHILIP WAS GIVEN A HERO'S BURIAL for his unselfish bravery and courage when faced with insurmountable odds. He is the true reason I have my kingdom and I will never forget his sacrifice. I was a little worried that the palace dwellers would view me as an insurrectionist, but their love for my mother and grandparents has replaced all doubt. A Starling as a ruler was what they truly desired, and the idea of Malek becoming their king left knots in their bellies according to the palace squire on my first day in the palace. Those little secrets spoken in dark places have come to light. I am glad to have a part in healing their hearts, and their bodies.

My new apothecary is already under construction. I can no sooner live in a castle without healing than a fish can live in a riverbed with no water. It is highly unorthodox, a healer queen. But I can think of worse titles, and I will always be here for my people, no matter their need. The people are pleased to call me healer and mage. My first order of business was to declare that magic is no longer forbidden in Timberness. I am still learning to wield my magic, and I hope others with the gift can find theirs as well.

And my cottage will not remain empty either. I had my guards locate young Collette and Tomas. My cottage now belongs to them. No more living on the streets, and no more empty bellies. I will have rations delivered to them weekly. They should be focused on schooling and child's play, not

starvation and cold. They will be free to wish and dream. Life is truly beautiful, and now they can experience its worth. The light knocking on my door pulls me from my thoughts.

“Come in.”

Jordy joins me in my bed chambers. “I’ve come to escort you to your coronation, my love. By the way, you look beautiful.”

I gaze in the looking glass. I am wearing my mother’s coronation dress and pearls, thanks to the old family paintings and the trunk with my mother’s personal effects the palace scribe hid away for years. I hope I make her proud. I smile and take Jordy’s extended elbow. His other arm is in a sling from his shoulder injury, but he is healing nicely.

“You look quite fetching yourself, my love,” I say, brushing a small piece of lint away from his sleeve. “Are your parents here?”

“Everyone is here. It’s like a dream for us all, one of our own being the queen. You are a legend, my love. I’m so proud of you.”

I know my cheeks are pink, but I do nothing to hide their heat. I will probably never get used to being a queen, and that is quite fine with me. I have my Jordy and my friends and a mended kingdom after years of long struggle. We came out on the other side renewed.

It is all any soul could wish for.

“Shall we?” Jordy says again.

“We shall.”

He leads me to the throne room. My coronation awaits.

Jordy joins Sir Victor in the massive room after I am seated on the throne. I look about the room, familiar faces all around. I spot Master Burgess and he gives me a wink. Sir Victor smiles when I look into his face. His legs are healing nicely, but he is still using a wheeled chair that he complains about daily. He'll be himself in no time, the bravest general the kingdom has ever known. I spot Treena in the crowd. She lowers her head when she catches my gaze, and sheepishly looks up again when I continue to watch her. She bows her head and I reciprocate and give her a genuine smile, to her grand surprise. The past is the past. And I am leaving it there. But if I hear of her torturing another poor soul, I will place her in the stocks for good measure.

“And now, the unveiling of the royal portraits,” the scribe’s words ring throughout the grand hall.

A curtain drops behind me, revealing portraits of my mother and my grandparents. My gram was indeed a beauty. I owe my life to her. Another curtain drops, revealing a new portrait of myself. I’m surprised the paint is dry, my legs still aching from standing long hours for the artist to capture my image. Jordy mouths the word *Beautiful* and winks. He is the beautiful one. My fortune is in him.

Master Burgess steps forward. “Might I, your majesty?”

I motion for him to come to me. He smiles as he hands me a sixpence.

“What is this for, good sir?”

“To put in your shoe, for your approaching nuptials. It’s for luck and good fortune, always.”

I feel my eyes glass, but I do nothing to hide it. “Thank you, Master Burgess. You are too good to me. I do have another favor to ask.”

“Anything, my queen.” Master Burgess grins. “What might you inquire of me?”

“To walk me down the aisle and give me away to my beloved Jordy.”

Now my old friend’s eyes are wet with tears. “It would be my honor, sweet Milla. But I will confess this to you from my soul. Our dear Jordy may borrow you, but I will never give you away.” He places a kiss on my cheek and pulls a bundle of matches from his pocket. He holds a single match in my line of vision. “Make a wish, your majesty.”

“No need. It already came true. I know who I really am. But I will wish for your longevity, my friend. I need you here for a hundred years.”

“Like matches for wishes,” he says when I take the match from his grasp.

I tuck the match in my chemise, and he smiles. He places a kiss on my forehead and stands next to Sir Victor again. Jordy steps forward when the cardinal retrieves my crown. I stand to meet him. Jordy stands to my left and the cardinal holds the crown in the air.

“I crown thee Queen Milla of House Starling, the daughter of Queen Millicent— our Willow—and Sir Waylen,

granddaughter of King Girard and Queen Isabel. You are the rightful ruler of Timberness, our queen and supreme highness. Long may she reign.”

A thousand voices repeat, “Long may she reign.”

Jordy whispers, “Are you happy, my queen?”

I take his hand and look out into the crowd. My eyes fill with tears again, but I don’t bother to blink them away. I squeeze Jordy’s fingers and look into his perfect face. “Aye, my love. I am very happy. Now and in my ever after.”

THE END.

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Here's to all the Happily Ever Afters. May they endure forever.

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