

THE KINGDOM CHRONICLES

A woman with long, dark, wavy hair stands in a lush, autumnal forest. She is wearing a long, flowing, sleeveless orange dress. Her arms are crossed over her chest, and she has a contemplative expression. In the background, a stone castle tower with a conical roof rises through the trees. The scene is bathed in a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunrise or sunset. The overall atmosphere is magical and romantic.

TURRET

CAMILLE PETERS

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By: Rosewood Publications

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*To everyone who struggles with ailments of any kind. May you  
also find beauty and joy.*

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## About the Author





## CHAPTER 1

No matter how long I'd been trapped, I couldn't get used to being so high, so far above the world I'd never quite been a part of. I watched from my perch on the highest floor of the turret as the world beyond its enchanted walls shifted to autumn, the green leaves becoming dipped in hues of gold and orange, a measurement of the time that had passed since I'd been away from home.

My room was near the top of the seven-story tower. The height used to be dizzying, but in the three years I'd been trapped here, I'd long grown used to it. I was so close to the sky I felt as if I could reach out and touch it. I never tired of the sensation that with one breath I could almost tumble inside its vastness, nor did I ever fail to appreciate the beauty of the ever-changing landscape, stretching as far as my eyes could see, just aching to be explored.

But doing so was impossible, for I was a prisoner.

I shifted my perch on the windowsill and leaned back against the frame to alleviate some of my lightheadedness. The stones warmed to seep through the thin fabric of my dress, the tower's way of extending assurance, a magical communication only I could feel. Being enchanted, my turret home possessed a mind of its own, and though it didn't speak in words, I often felt these small reminders that it was aware of me, ones that provided great comfort that I wasn't as alone as I often felt.

Out of habit, I searched the ground below. I wasn't sure why I kept looking for Mother when I'd long since stopped believing she'd visit me, but no matter how many times I tried

to suppress it, my hope that *today* would be different compelled me to continue clinging to my hope. Yet there was still no sign of her.

“I don’t think she’s coming today,” I murmured, quietly enough that only the tower would be able to hear me. The last thing I wanted was to alert my attending guard, Quinn, or my handmaiden Melina, to my distress. Both remained nearby, Quinn whittling from his usual rigid position against the wall, Melina darning stockings near the hearth.

The tower stones warmed again in a feeble attempt at comfort, but it did little to quell the heavy discouragement pressing against me, a heavy burden I’d become far too accustomed to carrying and one I’d long since grown tired of.

In the beginning of my imprisonment, Mother used to visit every few weeks to check on me, finding me easily despite the spell that made the tower invisible, though her visits were so impersonal I half-wondered if she was actually checking on me or on the tower and the enchantment she’d placed on it. It wasn’t as if I enjoyed her visits—not when they were filled with tension, false sweetness, and her thinly veiled disappointments and subtle criticism—but I enjoyed them far more than being forgotten, just as I often was.

But it had been months since she’d last come, confirming my pressing, reoccurring fears that she’d grown tired of her motherly duty towards the sickly daughter whom she’d always considered a burden. I was surprised I still believed I’d ever be anything else. I often wondered why Mother even visited at all since she was the one who’d trapped me, creating a spell to make the turret my caretaker in order to free herself of the obligation.

*She said it was for my protection.* But the assurance was becoming more and more difficult to believe with each passing hour trapped within these walls.

The dark memories from that day returned unbidden, haunting my thoughts. I closed my eyes to block out the scene and stave off my burning tears, but reminiscences slithered into my mind anyway, causing me to recollect things I yearned

to forget—Mother’s coldness, my sister Reve’s betrayal, the sense of despair that had overcome me when after several futile efforts I realized the tower’s enchantment couldn’t be penetrated, leaving me trapped...likely forever.

Even as the tower’s invisibility had gradually faded over the years, I still had no hope of being found, for no one had ever come, confirming my worst fears that no one ever would. It didn’t matter, for I was sure no one was looking for me, the forgotten, sickly princess, a useless appendage to the Malvagarian Royal Family.

From his post along the wall, I sensed Quinn’s concerned gaze. I hastily masked my expression to hide my dark, poisonous thoughts, but by his frown I knew he’d already seen past my usual barriers.

Melina tore her attention away from her mending with a worried pucker. “You’ve been near the window a long time, Your Highness; come away before you catch a chill.”

I bit my lip to suppress a sigh, trying to breathe evenly to ward off my growing headache and keep from coughing. Everyone seemed to address my well-being more than myself, as if there was absolutely nothing else about me worthy of their attention. Perhaps there wasn’t. After all, a princess who’d spent most of her life bedridden had very little else to recommend her. Suitors had certainly never come calling.

“I’m fine.” I stubbornly remained silent about the fact that I could still feel the lingering effects from my recent illness—a crushing weight pressed against my chest, making my breathing shallow; bouts of dizziness mingled with heavy exhaustion; my persistent cough aggravated by the slightest exertion; and a headache pulsing against my temples, each symptom familiar due to the frequency of their unwanted visits. But I didn’t want to admit I felt unwell and risk losing my time near the window, a far more interesting way to wile away the hours than in bed.

Whenever I caught Quinn’s knowing gaze, I sensed he knew I feigned feeling healthier than I actually felt, so I avoided looking at him at all. But I couldn’t escape the sense

of his gaze devotedly watching me, despite there also being great comfort in knowing how much he cared.

I leaned my head back, enjoying the caress of the fresh air against my face, even if such a pleasure had to be enjoyed with layers of blankets piled on my lap in order to protect me from the autumn chill. “I’m well,” I insisted again, more weakly this time.

Melina frowned and cast a pointed glance towards Quinn, a silent plea for him to intervene. He shifted and I almost sensed his internal battle—his desire for me to receive fresh air, something he encouraged at every opportunity, and his ever-present worry for my weak health.

He searched my face, his look deeper than my handmaiden’s, as if he saw beyond my physical ailments to the ones riddling my heart. “Are you enjoying the view?”

By his knowing look I knew what he was really asking. After years of service he’d become attuned to my emotions, allowing him to sense even without words that while the view was lovely, I was really looking for Mother.

I was too discouraged to answer, so I merely shook my head and returned my attention outside, even though I’d already memorized this particular location the tower had transported us to. A clearing surrounded the turret, and just beyond was a forest that stretched endlessly into the distance. I had no idea which forest it was; the tower had shifted locations so often—sometimes several times a day—that I’d long since lost track of the surrounding geography.

I used to love waking up and immediately peering out the window to see where the tower had transported us during the night. I wasn’t entirely sure the reason behind its magic—whether it was the tower’s attempts to entertain me with a different view each day or if it was part of Mother’s spell to keep the tower from ever being discovered.

Probably the latter, which meant I’d likely never be found and I’d live out my days isolated and alone.

No matter how unique the location, I often imagined that if I looked far enough into the distance I could see my childhood home, the palace filled with haunting memories of my life within its walls. These thoughts often caused me to withdraw back into the tower, which over the years had become a place of refuge.

But the days of the shifting tower were long gone, for it'd been weeks since the turret had last moved. It had never gone so long before, and I was growing worried...as much as I could for a bunch of enchanted stones.

I shifted my attention back outside and tried to appreciate the view despite its familiarity, but it was difficult to concentrate with the heat of Quinn's attention still riveted on me. I heard him push off the wall and approach, felt his presence as he hovered behind me, and after a moment's hesitation he joined me on the other side of the sill.

My gaze darted briefly towards him long enough to see his concerned gaze before I was back to staring outside the window. "The tower still hasn't moved; I'm growing more worried."

In my peripheral vision, I saw Quinn's attention shift reluctantly from me to stare out the window with a furrowed brow. "I grow more concerned the longer it becomes. I'm wondering if perhaps there's a reason for it...that the tower *can't* shift anymore."

I frowned. Transporting itself to a new location was one of its many powers. How could it simply *stop*? "Do you think its enchantment is weakening?"

He said nothing for a moment, his expression thoughtful. "It's a possible explanation."

My mind whirled with the implications of such a thing. It was hard to imagine the tower losing its magic, especially when all of its other powers remained in full effect—its ability to provide us with food, firewood, and other necessities; its tendency to shift its rooms or create new ones entirely; and especially the protective enchantment that prevented me from leaving.

I reached a cautious hand out towards the open window to test the tower's protective spell. As always, I didn't get far before my hand hit an invisible barrier that prevented me from reaching any further. If we ever managed to escape, it wouldn't be through the window...though that had never been a viable possibility considering I hadn't overcome my fear of heights *that* much.

Quinn swiveled around to fully face me. "I doubt the tower is what's really on your mind. What's bothering you, Gemma?"

I stilled at his use of my name, something he didn't use often despite my insistence on dispelling formality—after all, what use was the title of *princess* when we were all trapped within these walls? But Quinn and Melina often insisted on the title. It not only created an unwelcome barrier between me and my only companions, but the reminder of my royal status left me feeling uneasy considering it was a title I continuously failed to live up to.

When I remained silent, Quinn spoke again, more hesitantly. "Princess?"

I couldn't quite hold back my sigh. So he was back to formality. I wasn't sure why it bothered me, especially when as my guard it was to be expected—I only knew that it did.

I was trying to find the words to answer him when I noticed something out of the corner of my eye, causing my foolish heart to lift. I tried to lean out as far as I could, but the tower's barrier kept me from getting too far. From my perch I scanned the clearing surrounding us. Had Mother decided to visit after all? But she wasn't there. My heart sank and I felt foolish for having gotten my hopes up; the disappointment only escalated my loneliness and restlessness, which would make them more difficult to endure than before.

Quinn leaned closer, eyes shrouded with concern. "Gemma?" So much filled that single word.

I forced a smile. "You're unfailing in your duties. While you're charged with my physical protection, you go beyond your duties in order to inquire after my well-being."

“This isn’t about duty, Gemma. You’ve been melancholy for weeks. I’m genuinely worried. How can I help you?”

Dear Quinn. He’d been my guard for years, far longer than any of the others I’d had before him. I used to get a new guard every year as my previous guards had quickly grown bored of their unchanging position standing outside my bedroom door with little variation.

But from the beginning, Quinn had been different. He’d been guarding me for seven years now and had yet to weary of the position of protecting a sickly princess who did almost nothing but stay in bed all day, and had thus remained year after year without fail. The day we’d become trapped, he’d even had a chance to leave yet had instead chosen to remain with me in this prison.

The painful memories from that day returned, bringing with them the pain that always accompanied them. Once again I forced them from my mind, but my distress lingered in my expression, causing Quinn to bridge the usual proper distance between us; he slid along the windowsill closer to me until he was right beside me.

“Gemma?” Both his tone and expression were far more earnest than before, while worry filled his gaze as he studied me.

“It’s nothing. I’m just...remembering.”

By his knowing expression, he didn’t need me to clarify. His manner hardened, the way it always did whenever he thought about the day my imprisonment had begun. I used to fear it was because he resented his fate becoming entangled with mine, but over the years I’d come to realize his anger was only on my behalf and for the injustice that had been dealt to me.

“You won’t be trapped here forever,” he said, a promise he’d given me far too many times to count. “I’m still searching for a way out. Now that the tower is no longer shifting locations, I have reason to hope the circumstances of its enchantment are changing. If they are, I intend to take full advantage of it.”

I bit my lip as I returned my gaze to the window, where I strained to look beyond the trees. Somewhere out there was the Malvagarian palace, my cold childhood home. If the tower's magic really was fading, allowing me to breach its walls for the first time in the three years we'd been imprisoned...I gave my head a rigid shake. Such a thought felt like not only an impossibility but a rather *frightening* one. Anxiety swelled, making it difficult to breathe.

Though deep down I knew this was a prison, the thought of leaving was still terrifying. The longer I remained, the more I was beginning to believe I no longer *wanted* to escape, and that thought was almost more frightening than being trapped forever.



## CHAPTER 2

I struggled in vain to wriggle from Melina's surprisingly firm hold around my shoulders, causing my growing headache to pound as she led me away from the window and back to my bed. "I'm *fine*," I said for the dozenth time, but as usual she ignored my protests; when it came to my health, she was far more stubborn than my old physician back at the palace, which spoke volumes for her relentless determination.

She gave me a look that told me quite plainly that arguing was utterly futile, and indeed we'd played this very scene out far too many times for me to have any hopes of actually winning.

A fit of coughing forced me to reluctantly relinquish the fight. What princess was so weak she couldn't even get her most loyal servants to obey her wishes? Now thanks to my hours spent near the open window with its cool autumn breeze, I'd likely be trapped in bed for the remainder of the afternoon, a sentence that would undoubtedly stretch into the evening and tomorrow morning.

Melina helped me climb into bed. Despite it being large and comfortable, it was my least favorite place; even the most elegant shackles were still shackles.

She eased me down with the expertise of having done this very thing hundreds of times during our time together before she rested her hand on my brow. Worry puckered her own. "You're quite warm."

“I feel fine,” I lied, trying to ignore the heat behind my eyes that usually came with the onset of a fever. But it was utterly pointless; Melina was now an expert in not only fevers but my other usual ailments, with the ability to detect even the slightest change in my health no matter how much I tried to hide it. All the experience she’d gained from tending me throughout our imprisonment would rival even the most competent physician within the five kingdoms.

By the familiar gleam in her eyes, I knew she wouldn’t relent until I’d been thoroughly smothered by her overt attention. I cast a long-suffering look towards Quinn, hoping he’d take the hint and rescue me, as was his job, but he merely remained at his post along the wall, arms folded and his expression rather serious.

I bit my lip to suppress another sigh; Quinn alternated between defending me against my handmaiden’s enthusiastic ministrations, standing by and allowing her to tend me, or on worse days being an even more frantic nurse. Despite my repeated pleading looks for him to intervene, he remained rigidly at his post; it appeared I wouldn’t be getting any help from him. It didn’t help my cause that I couldn’t suppress a few more coughs as Melina fretted over me.

I reluctantly submitted to Melina’s fussing as she fluffed my pillows and made sure I was comfortable before finally stepping back, granting me some much-needed air from her suffocating attention. “I’ll prepare your fever remedy and will return shortly.” She paused halfway to the door to cast me a pointed look of warning. “I expect you to still be there when I return; no sneaking out of bed.” She gave Quinn an equally stern request to babysit me and relaxed at his confirming nod.

I sighed. “You’d think you were my mother rather than my handmaiden.”

Her nose wrinkled at the mention of Mother, whom she had a rather unfavorable opinion of ever since her magic had trapped us here. “A mother perhaps, but certainly not like *your* mother.”

She dipped into a curtsy and departed. I gave her a few moments to be well away from the closed door before casting Quinn a desperate glance. “Is there any chance I can convince you to ignore her wishes and let me out of bed before she returns?”

I scowled as he firmly shook his head, dispelling my hopes. Admittedly I wasn’t at all surprised; when it came to his duties as my guard, nothing could sway him. Yet annoyance prickled me all the same. I struggled to sit up before a wave of dizziness forced me back against my pillows.

“So much for protecting my well-being as faithfully as you protect me physically,” I grumbled.

His brows drew together. “What do you mean?”

“You know how much I hate being bedridden, and yet you made no move to stop my warden.” I knew it was unfair to call Melina that when she only had my best interests in mind, but it was difficult to think of her as anything else when I had hours of being trapped in bed left to endure.

He frowned, clearly offended I doubted him, but I was too grumpy to offer an apology. He was silent a long moment before he bridged the distance between us and settled in the chair constantly at my bedside. Normally it was reserved for Melina, whose primary duty when bouts of illness arrived was to keep me company, but Quinn occupying the seat was a welcome change; there was something comforting about having him closer than his post usually allowed.

He leaned his elbows on his knees and gave me a rather serious expression. “As much as I want you to be happy, I care too much to risk your health any further. You can’t deny you’re not feeling well.”

I pursed my lips, hating to admit he was right; I could only ignore my dizziness and pulsing headache for so long. “I’m feeling *well enough*,” I finally ventured, for it was the best I could offer with any semblance of honesty. “Enough not to be trapped in bed for the remainder of the day, as if I haven’t already spent most of morning here or all of last evening; I haven’t left this room in days.”

“Three,” he supplied promptly. “That’s not so very long.”

I glared at him and he had the sense to look contrite. He scooted his chair closer and leaned forward.

“I know this is wearying for you, Gemma, but we only have your best interests in mind. Despite your wanting otherwise, the truth of the matter is you’re *sick*.”

How I longed to have any other word applied to me. “Perhaps I want to be something more than an ill princess.”

He blinked at me in clear surprise. “But you already are.”

His words were meaningless, for they did nothing to discount the reality of my life up until this point. Memories of my childhood were measured not in years and milestones, but in different bouts of illness, constant visits from physicians, endless treatments, and long periods trapped in my room while my siblings enjoyed life beyond the confines of four unchanging walls. Being in this tower was no different.

It was wearying only being known as the sickly princess: worrying over me was my family’s primary pastime, our subjects continuously smothered me with prayers and well wishes rather than knowing me for anything else, and even other royalty and visiting foreign dignitaries always ensured they asked after my health; I hated the fact that news of my constantly being unwell had traveled even beyond our borders to penetrate the other royal courts.

It didn’t help that in truth I myself didn’t even know who I was beyond my illnesses, and that thought was the most frightening of all. Perhaps that was why I was no longer bothered by the fact I would likely never escape this tower; it didn’t matter whether or not I ever did, for my life would be the same regardless of whether it was within these walls or beyond them: monotonous and measured solely by my fluctuating health.

Quinn’s expression hardened, as usual attuned to the direction of my thoughts. Thanks to his years serving me, I could never hide anything from him; the man was far too perceptive, knowing me on a deeper level than my absent

family ever had. “Don’t give up hope. You deserve more than to be trapped in this tower, Gemma.”

I was in no mood for a repeat of this conversation. “How can I not when there is very little hope to be found? Even if we *could* escape, how would I ever make it home if I can’t even be out of bed for more than a few hours?”

“I’ll carry you the entire way.” By the way his eyes blazed, he didn’t speak in jest.

“Such a noble effort would be a waste if I have nothing at home to look forward to; I’ll only continue to spend most of my time trapped in bed.” My composure was faltering, causing my words to come out bitter.

“I know you’re frustrated,” he said gently. “No feeling is worse than the helplessness of being trapped by a condition you can’t escape. But please believe me, Gemma, we’re not trying to cause you distress.”

I knew he meant well and that it was unfair for me to take my frustration over my circumstances out on him when I knew he’d change them if he could. I lowered my eyes in remorse. “I’m just so *tired* of this.”

“I know.” Gentleness filled his expression with every word. “I understand you’re frustrated about being in bed again, but we only encourage it not to torture you but to ensure you’re well. I know it’s difficult to maintain hope when you’ve already endured it for so long, but losing hope will only make things more difficult.”

“It feels like I’ll never be anything *but* unwell.” The thought of having my life consist of nothing else was too unbearable to even consider. I nestled under the covers as a fevered shiver ran through my body.

“Trust me, I understand that fear more than you know.” His expression had taken on a faraway look and I suddenly wondered whether we was still speaking about me or something else entirely. The look didn’t linger before he blinked rapidly and returned his attention to me with an encouraging smile, but something about it appeared forced.

“Is something bothering you?” I asked.

“It’s nothing.” He cleared his throat, and when he next looked at me all signs of his sudden melancholy had disappeared, making me wonder whether I’d imagined the emotion. “I understand your concerns, so please allow me to reassure you: despite your fears, I truly believe your illness won’t mar your life forever; one day you’ll overcome this and live the life you desire.”

I frowned. The life I desired...in truth, I wasn’t entirely sure *what* that would look like. My gaze flickered towards the window across the room and the sunlight tumbling through, the closest thing I currently had to the outside world. “I’m... not entirely sure *what* I want.” I was shy to make such admission, but as usual Quinn was nothing but empathetic.

“We should imagine the possibilities together; perhaps envisioning something more for yourself will help you get well sooner knowing there’s something awaiting you.” He scooted his chair closer with rather endearing eagerness. “If you could go outside right now, the first place I’d take you is...the woods.”

My eyebrows rose. “Why there?”

“Because it’s one of my absolute favorite places. I used to go there often as a boy to escape my tutors, where I’d spend hours exploring, climbing trees, and gathering all manner of treasures.”

Curiosity tickled my senses, an emotion I’d had little reason to feel for a while. “What sorts of treasures?”

He pulled out a piece of wood and a carving knife. “Not the usual ones you’d expect or the rare collectibles my father used to embark on expeditions across the five kingdoms searching for.”

My brother used to have a similar hobby. I swallowed the sudden lump in my throat; thinking of Briar was painful.

Quinn’s knife moved expertly across a piece of wood as he spoke. “Little did he realize that *real* treasures could be found much closer to home, ones that cannot be made by man, but

instead come from nature itself: acorns, pinecones, the thrill of discovering a bird's nest hidden in the branches, watching the patterns created by the light fluttering through the treetops..."

He trailed off with a rather wistful look, as if he'd momentarily been transported to his childhood memories, ones far different than mine. I tried to imagine the image his words had painted, but with my limited exposure to the outside world I couldn't quite manage it.

"I've never seen any of those things," I murmured. I'd spent plenty of time seeing the woods at a distance from my bedroom window, and even tried to learn about nature through books, but it wasn't the same as experiencing them.

The light faded from Quinn's eyes, even as his determination increased. "Not to worry, you *will*, I'll make certain of it." His tone held a promise, one he often made whenever we discussed the possibilities of me one day experiencing the world outside the tower. I wasn't sure how he could be so certain when the curse trapping us showed no sign of fading.

I forced those thoughts away and leaned closer. "Tell me more about the woods."

He grinned at my enthusiasm. "Nature has a unique symphony of sounds, so different from the tower's frequent silence—the songs of the birds in the forest's branches, the wind blowing through the leaves, the crunch of the undergrowth as you explore...and you haven't even heard the best part." His expression became almost boyish, softening his handsome yet usually stoic features. "Within the woods near my family's manor is a stream which I spent hours wading in; there's nothing quite so satisfying as the feel of the smooth rocks against your bare feet."

I tried to imagine it as I lay my head back against my pillow, giving in briefly to my exhaustion, but my attempts quickly darkened. "Can you imagine what Mother would say if she caught me doing *that*?" I didn't even want to think about the sharp reprimand she'd give, disapproval I'd already

received far too often and yet could never numb myself to, no matter how hard I'd tried.

His entire manner hardened at my reference to Mother. "But Her Majesty isn't here, is she? Leaving nothing stopping you."

No, she wasn't...yet I could almost sense her presence from within every stone of the tower, sense her expectation for me to live up to a role that my lifelong attempts had never achieved but had only given her cause for disappointment.

Quinn finished whittling and blew off the loose pieces of wood. "A glimpse of the outside world until you can experience it for yourself." He handed me a wooden acorn, carved so expertly it almost looked real, just like all the previous carvings he'd given me, all of which rested in a place of honor on my vanity. I stared at it, slowly tracing my finger along its cap, before looking up with a grateful smile.

Pink stained Quinn's cheeks. He cleared his throat and glanced towards the door. "Melina is taking an unusually long time to return."

I gratefully seized this change in topic. "I'm surprised, considering how often she's prepared my remedies."

We both fell into an uneasy silence, our attention riveted to the door as we waited for it to open. The time stretched on, and still Melina didn't return.

"Should you perhaps check on her?" I eventually asked after several long, anxious moments. "The rooms do tend to shuffle...perhaps she got lost."

Though he looked like he wanted to scour the tower for her, he didn't move from my side. "I don't want to leave you alone."

Despite my own growing worry, I managed a teasing smile. "What dangers can possibly penetrate the tower's protection?"

His unyielding gaze met mine. "I wasn't referring to your physical protection."



My heart warmed, dispelling the last of my annoyance from his insistence I keep to my bed. His loyalty knew no bounds and provided such comfort.

Quinn shifted restlessly and cast repeated glances towards the door, and soon he began pacing the room in long, agitated strides. I was beginning to wonder if he'd grow so concerned he'd leave me after all in order to search for Melina when a knock sounded and the door opened to reveal my handmaiden, not bearing her usual tray laden with my medicines but returning empty-handed.

"There you are." In his worry Quinn's words came out rather gruff. "The princess has been waiting for a long time." With the way he spoke, he made it sound like there was nothing I looked forward to more than taking my medicine, when in reality I wasn't the least put out in being spared that undesirable duty.

"My apologies." Melina wrung her hands, and at her clear anxiety Quinn's gruffness softened.

"Did something happen?"

She hesitated. "Yes, though in truth I'm not sure what to make of it."

"Explain." His sternness had returned, demanding answers, and still Melina hesitated.

"It's just that...I couldn't find the princess's herbs."

A tense silence followed her admission, broken first by my gasp, then Quinn's growl. "What do you mean? The tower has always ensured there are enough herbs to tend to the princess."

"That's just it...those herbs have disappeared."

He gaped at her for a moment. "Impossible. There *has* to be some. I won't rest until the princess has been tended to." And without another word he wrenched the door open and stomped through, slamming it behind him.

At his departure Melina wearily sank into the abandoned seat beside me. "Are there really no herbs to be found?" I asked quietly.

She rubbed her temples with a sigh. “I looked everywhere—in the herbal garden and apothecary, the supply stored within pantry, and I even searched the entire tower to see if the garden had simply moved to another location...yet there aren’t any to be found. It’s as if they’ve disappeared entirely.”

Worry prickled my heart. The tower always provided us with everything we needed. Was Quinn right that the magic was beginning to fade? What could have caused such a thing, and what were the implications if it continued?

I sat with my silent handmaiden and my escalating anxiety, occasionally receiving subtle but reassuring pulses from the tower when I rested my hand on the wall, but they felt fainter than normal, which only tightened the worry cinching my heart. I closed my eyes when the fever’s heat caused them to water, laying my head against the pillow, but I was too anxious to get any rest.

Quinn returned nearly an hour later; I could tell by his stern expression that the news would be discouraging. “It’s as Melina said: there are no herbs to be found, nor could I locate the apothecary anywhere I looked.” He strode over and rested the back of his hand against my brow, his fingers cool to the touch. His frown deepened. “Perhaps a cold cloth for the princess will help alleviate her fever until we figure out what to do.”

Melina immediately stood. “A cold cloth, of course.” She bustled to the washbasin while Quinn turned back to me, his fingers lingering on my brow and his eyes swirling with worry.

“Are you going to be alright?”

Even at my assuring nod he didn’t pull his touch away; instead his hand moved from my brow to stroke first my cheek, then my hair in a way that wasn’t at all nursing, nor was his soft look at all the one I was used to from my guard.

My breath caught, but before I could fully wonder what Quinn was doing, his eyes widened and he hastily yanked his hand away as if he’d been burned, leaving me strangely longing for his touch, one that hadn’t just been comforting but

something...*more*, causing a feeling to stir within me which I'd never felt before.

This stirring was small, almost indiscernible, but I had little time to explore it with my worry waiting in the wings to take its place. "What's happening to the tower?" I asked, my voice tired. "Do you believe the magic is truly fading?"

Quinn was silent a long moment before he bit his lip, a falter in his usual stoic expression that revealed just how dire he viewed the situation. "It will require further investigation, but there's no mistake: for the first time in three years, something is shifting."

Hope filled his eyes, as if this change had been what he'd been waiting for ever since our imprisonment. My stomach clenched even as my ever-present fear encased my heart, almost more acute than what I'd felt when I'd first become trapped. I tightened my hold around the wooden acorn Quinn had carved for me, finding solace in holding it.

Despite the beauty of his stories of the woods he'd shared and the curiosity they'd caused me to feel, in the end they were just that: stories, ones that did nothing to change the fact that the world outside my tower was a dark, frightening place, filled with heartache and loneliness and nothing to offer me.

My gaze flickered to the mirror hanging on the opposite wall before I hastily yanked it away; I didn't want the reminder that I had more than one reason to be afraid. If the tower's magic was truly fading, what would be left to protect me?

## CHAPTER 3

From my position near the fire, I warily eyed Quinn and Melina's whispered discussion on the other side of my bedroom; from the tension in their posture they appeared to be arguing. I was quite certain they'd have taken such a discussion elsewhere if Quinn wasn't determined to keep me in his sight, but considering they were well-versed in keeping their voices lowered, I was left without any clue as to what they were discussing.

Well...not entirely. This morning Melina had informed me that the herb garden had mysteriously reappeared, and she'd wasted no time in procuring me a remedy that a good night's rest now left entirely unnecessary. Despite this fortunate albeit puzzling turn of events, her movements had been agitated, leaving me to wonder whether there was more to the story; by Quinn's tense posture midst their hushed conversation, I had no doubt it likely had something to do with the tower.

I waited for a pause before interjecting. "It's fortunate that curiosity isn't fatal, else I'd fear my hours are numbered. The only remedy to such a condition is to learn what you're discussing. I hope you're as faithful about administering it to me as you are my other remedies." I sent each a pointed look.

Melina looked exasperated, but Quinn's lips twitched in a rare show of amusement. "She's right," he said. "We should inform the princess. Her being trapped in a changing, unpredictable tower means she deserves to know."

Melina frowned in clear disapproval, but Quinn wasn't asking her permission. He approached to stand near my chair

and cleared his throat at my expectant look.

“As you know, the tower has thankfully recreated the herbal garden.”

Through the stones against my feet, I sensed the tower’s emotions concerning the matter, one that took me a moment to decipher as some sort of...apology? As if it hadn’t meant to lose such an important room in the first place.

“However,” Quinn continued, “it appears that others have been taken in its stead.”

Even with the warmth of the nearby hearth and the layers of blankets around my shoulders and over my lap, apprehension caused me to shiver. “*Rooms?* Which are missing?”

He hesitated, but before he could speak, Melina interjected. “It’s mostly just various pieces of furniture taken from a room here and there, nothing to be concerned over.”

I waited for her to continue and frowned when she didn’t. “With the tension from your discussion, there must be something more to it. What is it?”

Quinn cleared his throat. “It appears the conservatory where most of our produce was grown...has vanished.”

My stomach lurched. One of the gardens that grew our food was just...*gone?* “Maybe it’ll come back, like the herbal garden...”

“Maybe.” But with the way he bit his lip, I could tell he didn’t hold out much hope.

I stared at each of them in turn, taking in the worry marring their expressions and the tension stiffening their posture. Neither had asked to be trapped with me and certainly not under these precarious circumstances, and I was anxious to repay them for their unfailing loyalty that had brought me great comfort throughout our imprisonment.

I refused to sit in my room allowing my fears to continue to paralyze me; I wanted to *do* something. I pushed off the

blanket covering my legs and made to stand, but Quinn lurched forward.

“What are you doing?”

“I want to see for myself how the tower is faring.” My concern ran deeper, for while the missing garden was worrisome, we had enough food stored in the pantry not to immediately starve. My urgency was guided by my friendship with the tower.

Quinn’s expression was unrelenting, and I knew I was just as close to being allowed to explore as I was to leaving this prison at all. “Gemma, it’s autumn and the corridors are chilled, not to mention you’ve just recovered from another bout of illness. Walking for so long—”

My frustration mounted. “You’re refusing to let me leave?” How could one man so quickly flip from my biggest advocate to my most meddling companion?

He seemed torn by my distress, but as usual when it came to my well-being—or rather what he *thought* was best for me—he remained unrelenting. “There’s no reason to overexert yourself; we have it all well in hand.”

In other words, I had no hope of actually breaking away from my usual state of doing nothing in order to actually be useful. But it was too early to give up; the toll from having been restless for so many long hours and finally having some sort of purpose only increased my determination. If Quinn wouldn’t let me venture beyond the room, then I would await my opportunity.

It eventually came during the only time Quinn didn’t guard me: in one of three short breaks he took throughout the day. After ensuring I was comfortable and Melina was nearby, he slipped from the room, granting me the perfect opportunity to leave. Melina’s back was to me and her concentration riveted on yet another letter she was writing to her fiancé that she’d never be able to send, allowing me to take advantage of her distraction when she thought I was napping in my chair in order to slip quietly into the dark hallway.

I paused a moment just outside the door to rest my hand on the wall to steady myself. I hadn't walked in hours and my legs were sore and stiff, but after a few tentative steps I felt them strengthen, allowing me to slowly poke around the tower.

My freedom from my bedroom's confining walls would have been more thrilling if the situation hadn't been so dire. The corridors were gloomier and chillier than I remembered, whether because of the approaching winter or because of whatever condition the tower was suffering from, I wasn't sure.

The beginning of my explorations was uneventful. I felt my time trickling away like sand through an hourglass. If I didn't find anything worth investigating soon, Quinn would return to find me gone and commence a frantic search until he discovered me, thus ending my forbidden adventure prematurely. I hastened my pace as quickly as my weakened constitution allowed.

Soon my explorations shifted, not because I found anything unusual, but because I sensed a change in the tower, a strange *uneasiness* the moment I stepped into an unfamiliar corridor I was certain hadn't been there before—a long, stone passage devoid of decorations that led to a single door at the far end, likely a newly created room. My brow puckered. What sort of room would the tower create despite its fading powers?

Curiosity urged me forward, but when I tried the knob it was locked tight. My frown deepened. I'd never encountered a locked room in the tower; it was my home and allowed me to wander freely. This first locked room presented a mystery I was eager to uncover: what could possibly lie on the other side that the tower didn't want me to see?

I tried the lock again, and although it still held, the handle jiggled, as if the door was just stuck rather than locked. I wriggled the handle, urging the door to open. I sensed the tower struggle against my determination, but its weak magic made it impossible to hold me back for long, eventually allowing me to open the door a crack.

But before I could step inside, the tower became a swirl of urgency; a restless breeze suddenly blew through the chilly corridor, trying to push the door shut, but I managed to wrench it back open. “Stop, I want to see what’s on the other side,” I said.

Although it obediently stopped fighting, its uneasiness lingered as I inched the door further open and peered inside.

I expected something special to be hidden inside to warrant such security from the tower, but all that greeted me was a room of mirrors. A variety of kinds lined the circular walls to surround me on every side...yet none showed my reflection.

I hesitated in the doorway, having had terrible experiences with mirrors throughout my sojourn in the tower, yet something about the room drew me inside. I crossed to the closest mirror, a large, ornate one with a gilded frame. I reached out to graze the glass, and at my touch a swirl of thick smoke filled the mirror. I yanked my hand back but didn’t look away as the image began to form.

Terror knotted my stomach as too late I realized what this room contained. I swiveled towards the door but it had already shut behind me, trapping me inside. My panic rose, especially when the strange power of the room drew my gaze back to the looking glass. I ached to look away, but the mirror’s strange spell connected me to it, making it impossible to avoid the vision as it played out in the glass in sinister detail.

It was a narrative I’d only been shown once before, and once had been more than enough. I’d hoped never to encounter this particular vision again, yet here it was, playing out across the mirror like a performance on a stage.

Father lying pale and sickly on his bed, taking one rattly breath after another, before he suddenly took his last and death shrouded him, robbing me of any opportunity of seeing him again should I ever escape. The all-encompassing heartache and sense of loss felt just as acute now as it had the first time, despite the time that had passed since the tower first revealed Father’s death to me months before.



Only when the image faded from the glass did the sadistic power of the mirror allow me to tear my gaze away...only for it to settle on the mirror beside it, already swirling with thick, grey fog. I tried to turn away but my limbs were stiff and frozen, forcing me to remain while the magic unfolded its story in every last detail.

Too late, I realized why the tower had tried to keep me locked out—it'd futilely tried to keep me from reliving each of these unpleasant memories, which had already played across the turret's other mirrors throughout my imprisonment. How I wished I'd listened to the tower. I should have been on my guard the moment I saw the mirrors, for they only ever showed me darkness.

I was about to pay a high price for the curiosity that had led me to be trapped in a room that would once again force me to relive my dark memories and visions of life outside the tower, ones I never wanted to experience again.

The vision in the next mirror fully formed, a familiar memory, one of many from my past: lying sick and weak in bed, face flushed with a fever as a raspy cough wracked my thin body. Despite my exhaustion, I struggled to weakly sit up, desperate to escape the confines of my bed...only for my maid to push me firmly back down with a commanding, "No, Princess, you must rest. Her Majesty's orders."

The Gemma in the mirror slumped against the pillows with a weary sigh even as her gaze darted towards the window, open just enough to hear the sound of my siblings' laughter as they played outside...without me. "But I want to go outside."

"You're too ill," the maid insisted. "But they promised to visit you later and tell you of their adventures."

Hearing of adventures secondhand just wasn't the same as living them myself, but it was better than nothing. So I waited anxiously, measuring the endless, monotonous hours with each tick of the clock...only they never came, too busy with their lives to remember their sickly, neglected sister.

Reliving the memory brought back all the emotions it'd caused all over again—the restlessness and boredom, the sense

of helplessness, and most of all the aching loneliness, as crushing now as it'd been then.

I tried to recapture this preferred numb state and hold it like a shield around my heart. This was why it was better to stop longing for the world outside, for it protected me from being continuously disappointed. And for the most part, my shield was strong enough that I often forgot that those emotions were still there.

This vision thankfully faded, but the room hadn't yet finished with me. It held me within its clutches as other scenes played out before me in different mirrors, as if this room were a museum displaying all the pain the outside world had to offer—more memories from my sickly past, the constant longings to experience things that were continuously denied me, the broken promises of my siblings—especially from Reve—to visit, only to later forget. Then there were others with Mother—her constant disapproval, her dismissals, and most of all her disgust at having such a sickly daughter.

One in particular stood out amongst the rest: a rare evening when I'd been well enough to venture from my room to join a state dinner held in honor of the visiting King of Lyceria, presumably on the premise of searching for a bride for his son, Crown Prince Nolan, amongst the two Malvagarian princesses.

I knew my presence had been granted solely to increase Mother's chance of forging such a coveted alliance. For a fleeting moment I'd hoped that perhaps I would be chosen, a marriage that would allow me to finally escape my confining life. Despite my pale, rather sickly complexion, I knew I was pretty in my own right, as well as trained in all manner of education and etiquette befitting a future queen. Could there possibly be a chance the king would pick *me*?

But despite having done my best to present the royal image expected of me, I hadn't been able to mask my exhaustion, nor prevent myself from frequently coughing at the table, resulting in Mother's sharp, disapproving glare, as if she thought I was trying to thwart the king's interest on purpose.

Following the meal, the Lycerian king joined Mother in her sitting room for a private discussion. I passed the closed door on the way back to my bedroom and couldn't help but pause to press my ear to the keyhole, too eager to see whether there was any chance of an alliance between the prince and myself. While I'd never wanted an arranged marriage, I longed to at least be considered and had no doubt I'd accept should the opportunity arise. I wanted to belong to someone, to be something more than the sickly princess who had no other purpose.

But such a wish felt impossibly out of reach, especially with the whispered snippet I overheard from the other side of the door. My heart lurched at the sound of my name.

“And you're certain it's not Gemma you want?” Desperation filled Mother's voice, and not for the first time I feared she cared more about ridding herself of me than the benefits a prestigious alliance would bring our kingdom.

“Out of the question,” the Lycerian king said. “Lyceria could never accept such a sickly princess as their future queen. However, your second daughter, Princess Reve...”

I withdrew from the door, unable to bear hearing being compared to my healthier younger sister. Yet the king's sharp words left me frozen in the corridor, the truth behind his rejection pressing heavily against my shoulders like a relentless burden. In that moment I realized my worth as a princess meant nothing, not when my title was continuously overshadowed by the illness I could never escape, no matter how desperately I wanted to.

The conversation ended and the door opened. The King of Lyceria strode past me without a glance. Mother followed close behind, looking rather pleased with herself for having successfully arranged such an advantageous marriage for one of her daughters, but her triumph faltered the moment she spotted me standing uncertainly outside the door.

Her expression darkened. “You're useless, Gemma. You had but one task: to secure a match that would benefit our kingdom. What point is there in having a daughter if she can't

even manage *that?*” She dismissed me with a wave of her hand, sending me back to my room in tears, where I was forced to wile away the hours while life continued to pass me by.

After that I was never invited to another state dinner, not even when the King of Bytamia—a man who had four unmarried sons—visited. Such a pointed dismissal from Mother only proved I’d lost my purpose as a princess.

Eventually this dark memory faded from the tower room, but it was quickly followed by scenes of all the frightening things that had occurred after I’d been locked within these walls—Drake finding himself trapped in a mirror, Briar growing weaker and weaker from his cursed connection to the enchanted palace gardens, Reve becoming cursed and losing her memory...and eventually her wandering lost in the woods, confused with no idea of who she was.

The mirrors’ visions continued but skipped forward in time to events it’d shown me more recently. Drake had eventually escaped the confines of his own prison, but he didn’t seem any happier. I saw several visions from his married life, ones I knew weren’t my business viewing—tears from his wife as she repeatedly lost each of her pregnancies, the stress and heartache of each of their failures to start a family, his own worry and distress over the situation, the tension such a trial created in their relationship...everything to mar what was supposed to be a happily ever after, one I was beginning to fear didn’t exist.

The tower’s message was clear: I wouldn’t find any more joy beyond these walls than I already enjoyed here.

Another nearby mirror stirred to life, revealing a flashback I hated above all others: the day I’d become trapped in this tower. Mother had invited me on a rare and unexpected carriage ride with my sister and my two faithful companions. I couldn’t even remember the last time I’d left the palace, and though I’d been wary, I was quickly distracted by all the passing sights outside the carriage window.

It eventually rattled to a stop and we exited the carriage. The woods were thick, filled with the scent of pine and earth, and a thick mist hovered over the trees. I shivered and pulled my shawl more tightly around my shoulders, pausing when Reve quite suddenly handed me her cloak, a rather surprising gesture coming from her; its warmth dispelled much of the chill, one that was almost welcome considering it meant I was outside for the first time in months.

My gaze took in every detail as we picked our way through the thick forest, Quinn faithfully by my side. Soon a spacious clearing loomed ahead, where a tower stood erect before us, its grey stones glistening with an almost enchanted quality.

Mother paused in front of the tower's base, which had no door. "Here we are," she said with forced brightness.

My brow furrowed as I took in the towering structure. "What is it?"

Mother's smirk was less loving and more triumphant. "It's a surprise I've created especially for you."

My confusion deepened. "What need have I for a tower?" The wariness I'd struggled to mask escaped, causing my voice to shake.

"It's an enchanted tower," Mother said. "You've spent far too long languishing at the palace. I'm hoping a much needed change of scenery will do you good and help you heal."

Hurt settled over me as I understood her meaning. "You're sending me away?" It was the manifestation of my worst fears. As if sensing my distress and aching to provide me with some small form of comfort, Quinn took a protective step closer.

Mother's responding smile was entirely emotionless. "It's for the best, my dear. I know palace life has been tiring. The enchanted tower has many healing qualities that will be good for you." She urged me closer to the turret, as if she meant to force me to enter. I stumbled backwards and nearly fell, only steadied by Quinn's firm yet gentle hold.

"I...don't understand. I don't want to leave home." While I was tired of the restraints from that life, I'd rather remain there

near my family than be sent away so coldly.

“It’s for the best,” Mother repeated before turning to Quinn. “Gemma’s handmaiden will remain with her, but as for you...the tower’s charms will be more than adequate enough protection. There will be no further need for you.”

Shock filled Quinn’s expression before he set his jaw. “I’m Her Highness’s guard. I refuse to abandon my post.”

Mother narrowed her eyes. “If you insist...but I must warn you that this will be your only chance to leave. Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Quinn’s decision didn’t waver, though hatred for Mother filled his eyes. “What are you going to do to the princess?”

“If you share her fate, then you’ll know soon enough.” Mother’s crimson lips curled into a smirk. “Perhaps this is for the best. If you’re contained, then you can’t get in my way.”

Quinn lifted his chin. “Regardless of any consequences to myself, I won’t leave. I can’t.” It was clear by the determination filling his expression that he wouldn’t be swayed, while Melina wrapped her arms around my shaking shoulders in silent support. Only knowing that their loyalty meant I wouldn’t be entirely alone throughout my imprisonment allowed me to maintain a fragile hold on my faltering emotions, but only just.

Mother searched Quinn’s expression a moment, gauging his sincerity, before shrugging. “Very well.”

At her words, the full implications of my guard’s decision settled over me. As much as I didn’t want him to leave, how could I allow him to share in my fate in becoming a prisoner? I made a choking sound of protest. “Quinn!”

“It’s alright, Princess.” His tone was calm and reassuring, yet he couldn’t mask the worry marring his expression. I felt both relief and fierce guilt at his insistence on remaining.

But I had little time to try and talk him out of it. Mother rested her hand on the wall. “Trust me, this will be for your own good.”

At her touch and a few muttered words, the stones quivered to form a doorway with dark weeds woven around the frame. She jerked her head, motioning for Quinn and Melina to enter, but though they obeyed, I remained still, staring at Mother pleadingly, unable to fully accept the implications of what was happening.

“Don’t do this, Mother. I don’t want to leave home. Please.”

“It’s for your own good, my dear. Trust that Mother knows what’s best.”

I finally lost the battle over my faltering emotions, allowing my tears to escape. “But I don’t want to remain here.”

Mother’s expression was blank as she took in my tear-streaked cheeks before she glanced at my sister. “Reve, it appears your sister needs a bit of persuasion. Don’t you agree it’s for Gemma’s own good to be away from the chaos of the palace? Some time away to heal will do wonders for her.”

I spun on my sister, my eyes wide in silent plea. “Please, Reve. I don’t want to leave home.”

She hesitated before stepping forward to wrap her arm around me, a gesture so foreign I felt myself stiffen in shock. “I agree with Mother. You haven’t been feeling well at the palace. This is the perfect place for you to get better. How about we both go into the tower and I’ll ensure you’re settled and comfortable. If you don’t like it, you don’t have to stay.”

Though her tone was reassuring, I still hesitated. “But Reve, I already know I don’t want—” But she was already guiding me into the tower. I tentatively followed, foolishly placing my trust in her.

The moment I stepped inside she released me, causing me to lose my balance. I was only spared falling by Quinn’s steady hold around my waist. I instantly understood what had happened: Reve, like Mother and likely the rest of my siblings, had no intention of helping me; they only wanted to be rid of me. I had no place amongst them either.

The betrayal was sharp and stinging, squeezing my heart so tightly I feared it'd break. I glanced helplessly towards Reve, catching a glimpse of her stoic expression before the tower sealed shut, trapping me inside.

Stunned, I numbly stared at the wall separating me from the outside world, too hurt to pay attention to Quinn and Melina's frantic search amongst the impenetrable stones for an exit. Even through the thick walls I could hear my family's retreating footsteps. Despair compelled me to hurry up the stairs.

I quickly lost my breath as I ascended the steps to the tower window I'd seen from outside, one that turned out to be the view from my new bedroom. I peered out just in time to see Mother's and Reve's departing forms in the distance.

"Reve!" I cried desperately. She paused and slowly turned to face me. "Reve!" I cried again, but she disappeared into the woods, leaving me behind. But surely she'd never just *leave* me. She'd return, she just *had* to. I spent hours at the window waiting for that moment, hours searching for her, hours hoping the others would eventually come rescue me.

But in the days, weeks, months, and eventually years that followed, neither she nor any of the others ever came looking for me.

This memory faded, leaving me exhausted with the tumult of emotions I'd experienced. I was growing weary of this room and the reminiscences I hadn't asked for, each of which weighed heavily on my heart. I yearned to escape, but there was one more mirror whose vision I hadn't yet seen. Once again I tried to look away as it filled with fog, but no matter how hard I tried to escape, I was forced to watch one final vision...one the tower had never shown me before.

The swirling fog settled to reveal my brothers facing one another in the middle of the Malvagarian palace foyer during what appeared to be an argument. Even though I didn't want to see what would soon unfold within the glass, I found myself stepping closer, the part of me that was secretly curious about



my family living their lives outside these tower walls urging me forward.

Drake held a document in a clenched fist and waved it before our brother. “For the last time, you can’t do this, Briar. I refuse to allow you to pull the last remaining guards from trying to find our sisters.”

Briar’s expression twisted in disgust. “Why should I continue to expend valuable men and resources trying to find them? I’ve spent months searching; the cause is hopeless.”

I wanted nothing more than to close my ears and eyes, but once more I couldn’t, forcing me to watch as Drake crumpled the document. “But they’re our sisters. You can’t just give up on them.”

“Our sisters have become nothing more than a drain on my kingdom.”

Briar’s words and the menacing way he spoke them were the last things I saw before the vision faded, but they echoed throughout the room, confirming what I’d always feared: despite being gone for years, I wasn’t at all missed.

*Our sisters have become nothing more than a drain on my kingdom.*

Overwhelmed by these painful and suffocating emotions, I collapsed onto the cold floor.

## CHAPTER 4

I remained kneeling on the hard floor fighting for breath, my limbs becoming stiff and coldness from the stones seeping through my dress causing me to shiver...and yet I didn't move. I wasn't sure how long I remained as the visions from the mirrors whirled through my mind.

I didn't even stir at the sound of the door opening and Quinn's familiar heavy footsteps, but I did sigh. I knew he'd find me eventually. Part of me never wanted to leave this dark world currently entrapping me while the other part was fiercely relieved for the timely rescue.

My guard paused beside me and rested a heavy hand on my shoulder, a comforting gesture that sent warmth through my frozen limbs. I expected a reprimand for having snuck off by myself, but instead he only said a single word.

"Princess?" Worry filled Quinn's tone. When I didn't answer, he crouched beside me and hooked his fingers beneath my chin to lift my gaze. His eyes widened at my tear-streaked cheeks. "Gemma?" My name came out soft and filled with fierce concern. "Are you well?"

I knew he desired an explanation, but that was the last thing I wanted to give him. How could I relive the horrible visions still haunting my thoughts? But nor was I up for his persistent interrogation until I satisfied his worries.

I motioned to the mirrors surrounding me, the cold and the intense emotions making my movements stiff and jerky. "This

is a new room where the tower's previous visions are stored as if within a library." I took a shaky breath. "It's shown them all to me again...along with a new one."

His eyes widened. He'd witnessed enough of the effects that the tower's visions had on me to know exactly how traumatic they often were. "All at the same time?"

I nodded weakly. Quinn glared at each mirror, clearly angry, but it wasn't fair of him to be upset. The tower was my friend; it had tried to shelter me from the mirrors, and whatever extent of its magic was in control over them had undoubtedly only shown me what they contained for good reason.

I ached to defend the tower, but with the disapproval hardening Quinn's expression I knew it was a losing argument, and I was too weakened from my ordeal to argue with him.

Quinn muttered something dark beneath his breath that I had no doubt were threats towards the tower before he gently helped me to my feet. Pinpricks prickled my legs, which had stiffened from kneeling too long. I lost my footing and stumbled, but he caught me before I could fall.

His arms wound tightly around me to hold me rather close, allowing me to feel every muscle of his firm chest. My heart beat wildly at our proximity and the smoldering look he gave me, one that was rather...new. But I'd no sooner noticed it or contemplated just how cozy it was to be held in his comforting embrace than he released me, so hastily I nearly lost my balance again.

He awkwardly cleared his throat. "Are you well, Princess?"

I managed a nod, not surprised when he didn't immediately believe me. He analyzed my expression before resting the back of his hand along my forehead. I bit my lip to suppress a sigh. As much as I appreciated his concern, a worried Quinn was a rather exhausting man to put up with.

Concern puckered his brow. "You're a bit warm."

How could that be when I felt so cold? The icy air filling the tower seeped through the thick fabric of my dress, causing me to shiver, which naturally wasn't lost on my guard. He immediately offered his arm to escort me from the room. It was a relief to leave, and I hoped the suffocating images that had smothered me while within would remain behind.

Yet they didn't. Instead they followed me, continuing to work on my thoughts despite my attempts to push them away. Several pressed against my mind at once—Father's death, Reve's wanderings, and especially Briar's cruel abandonment of all attempts to find me. That one was the most haunting. If my own family didn't want me, then there was little point in ever seeing them again.

I felt Quinn's concerned gaze, compelling me to look up. "You don't look well. Are you sure you're alright?"

There was no point in lying. "I can't stop thinking about what the tower showed me."

"What *did* it show you?" His tone had hardened once more, and when I stole another peek I found him casting several accusing looks towards the tower walls as we strolled past.

There were far too many to recollect, none of which I wanted to revisit...but I couldn't hold back the one that haunted me the most. "My brother is no longer looking for me," I said hollowly.

Quinn stiffened in shock. "But...that can't be. He's devoted to finding you."

I weakly shook my head. "The tower showed him talking to Drake and he...wasn't the same. He was so hardened. I believe becoming king has changed him."

The horror I'd felt at witnessing this change in him returned to encase my heart. He'd been more than hardened... he'd been outright *bestly*. I'd never seen my brother that way, and nothing terrified me more than returning home and living under such a man's roof.

Quinn frowned. “But I’ve known His Majesty for many years. He’s a good and kind man devoted to his family.”

Those were the memories I also had of him, yet the mirror’s vision had been entirely different. “Perhaps the crown has corrupted him.” Or perhaps his cursed connection to the enchanted gardens had grown worse. Whatever the reason, I wanted no part in it. “Even if we could escape the tower, I could never go home now.”

Unsurprisingly, Quinn immediately reacted to my declaration. “You mustn’t say that, Princess. It’s too soon to give up. We’ll get you home if it’s the last thing I ever do.”

“You don’t understand.” I stopped walking and turned to face him. “I don’t *want* to go home. Ever.”

For a moment he and I had a silent staredown before he released a whooshing breath. “This tower is a rather effective warden.”

My heart flared in defense. “A *warden*? The tower’s purpose is to protect me. Its showing me what’s really going on outside its walls will prevent me from leaving to find out for myself, sparing me that heartache.”

Quinn’s frown grew pensive. “Is that really what it’s doing...or is it using any means necessary to keep you trapped?”

My breath caught. “What do you mean?”

“*Something* is going on with the tower’s magic,” he said. “From my early investigations I’ve already discovered its powers seem to be fading. If they weaken enough as is my hope, then the enchantment keeping you here will no longer be in effect. There will be nothing keeping you from leaving... which means the tower needs another means of trapping you. It appears it’s doing all in its power so that you won’t *want* to escape, even once you have the freedom to.”

I gaped at him in disbelief. “You think it’s showing me bad things *on purpose*?”

He tightened his jaw. “I do.”

For a moment panic swelled, causing the anxiety I usually experienced whenever thinking about going outside to rise... except this time it was coming from the tower itself, making it much more difficult to escape.

No, I couldn't lose the sanctity of these walls. This was my protection, one that allowed me to experience more of a life than I ever had back home at the Malvagarian palace. I couldn't doubt the tower's motives and lose the peace it granted me.

I shook my head. "I don't believe that."

He released a frustrated breath. "You don't believe it, or you *refuse* to believe it? You'd rather believe there's nothing *more* than what you're currently experiencing?"

For a moment doubt prickled my heart, for that very belief was almost as familiar as the illness I'd experienced throughout much of my life. But I forced myself to shove it away. "How can you be so convinced the world is as beautiful as *you* believe it to be?"

"Because I've experienced it; I know the beauty the outside world has to offer. Considering you don't, I'm surprised you're so determined to believe otherwise." At my wounded look, he took several steadying breaths, each one softening his frustration. "Forgive me, I only want to help you. Despite your determination to remain here forever, I firmly believe you deserve a life far greater than what can be found within these tower walls."

He said nothing more, but though the conversation had ended, his words lingered to join the rest of my frantic thoughts. They made me weary, adding to my exhaustion and causing me to slow. I prayed Quinn wouldn't notice, but a falter in his usual observation was clearly too much to hope for.

He stopped just outside my door, his attention riveted to me. "You're looking tired. It was quite a long walk, and you've been out of bed for several hours."

I didn't even have a chance to answer before my body chose this inopportune moment to seize up in a raspy cough. Quinn's eyes widened and his arm tightened more securely around mine. He opened the door to my bedroom, where Melina sat not near the window where I'd left her but frantically pacing the room. Her gaze snapped to the doorway as we entered.

"Thank goodness you found her." Her eyes widened as she took in Quinn's fierce expression and my weary one. "What's wrong with the princess?"

"She's overexerted herself." Quinn led me to a chair, his movements urgent.

"I'm fine—" I began when my coughs subsided enough for me to speak...before another wave began. It took a full minute for it to stop. "I'm fine," I managed again, but he ignored my protest; whenever Quinn was in such a state there was no reasoning with him.

He gently eased me into the chair, his movements careful despite his stocky build. Then he crouched in front of me, his gaze riveted to my face. After a moment he heaved a frustrated sigh and scooted closer, his gaze almost...strained as he looked at me in the faint light.

He took longer than usual to examine me but was eventually satisfied, which allowed his usual command to overcome him. Whenever he worried about my health he behaved like a captain in charge of a warship, barking out fierce orders even though the only one to see to them was Melina.

I glanced towards her for help, for she was the only one Quinn occasionally listened to, but she chose not to interfere; instead she stood along the wall looking rather amused. She caught me watching and gave me a rather mischievous smile. My brow furrowed. What did that mean?

Quinn turned to her. "Fetch Princess Gemma some tea and a cool cloth; I thought I detected a fever."

Melina didn't hesitate to do his bidding, far too used to his frantic nursing to object. All signs of her earlier mischief vanished and she cast me a concerned glance before hurrying towards the kitchen. Quinn eased my chair closer to the fire before bustling around like a mother hen ensuring I was comfortable.

He gathered several pillows and blankets and practically buried me beneath them. "Are you feeling better, princess?" he asked.

I heaved an exasperated sigh. "I'm *fine*. Really, Quinn, I only needed to sit down—"

But he seemed not to hear me. He seemed more agitated than normal, and I wondered how much of this had to do with my physical well-being and how much had to do with what had transpired in the tower's mirror room and the conversation that had followed. As sweet as his concern was, his mothering was rather suffocating.

Just as Quinn was starting to fret about what was taking Melina so long, she returned with the tea. The moment she handed it to him, he crouched in front of me, once more all gentleness. "Would you like me to help you, Princess?"

I shook my head. "I can do it—" I started to reach for the cup but he held it out of reach.

"Let me assist you." And he helped me take a sip. Chamomile, prepared the way I liked it, with just the right amount of cream, honey, and lemon.

I gave up the fight, but I didn't do so happily. Quinn's brow furrowed as he took in my displeased expression and pursed lips. "Are you well?"

There was no use lying; I'd already allowed too much of my moodiness to show for me to pretend I was well. "No. Your fretting is rather annoying."

He looked as if I'd slapped him. He withdrew the cup he'd been trying to get me to drink from and the damp rag he'd reached over to put on my forehead. "I'm...just worried for you."



“I know.” Though I was used to concern over my well-being marring my interactions with others, for some reason it bothered me more when *he* exhibited it. Though as my guard it was his duty to protect me, in moments like this I felt all he saw was someone to watch over, as if there was nothing else to Princess Gemma. And perhaps there wasn’t. The thought was rather sobering.

Quinn was still blinking at me, looking rather hurt. My heart prickled with remorse. I hadn’t meant to cause him any additional distress; the poor man did enough of that on his own.

“I wish you saw me as more than a helpless princess to protect. I want to be something more than someone who’s constantly ill.”

He searched my expression and his own softened. He set aside both the damp rag and my tea and turned his full attention to me. “You *are* much more than your illness, Gemma. I more than anyone know that. But the fact of the matter is you’re not always well.”

I scowled. I hated that he was right, that despite how desperately I wanted to be more than my illness, it was still a part of me, one of the prisons I couldn’t escape. “That may be true, but the way you’re treating me now is as if I’m an invalid on the brink of death.”

He had the sense to look contrite as his gaze took in my position weighed down beneath half a dozen blankets. “Perhaps...I got a bit more excited today than usual,” he admitted. “I suppose I was feeling rather helpless. After not being able to protect you from what the tower showed you, I felt the need to be more protective in other areas. I’m sorry.”

Knowing he meant well made it easy to forgive him. “I wish you’d trust me when I tell you how I’m feeling.”

“I will...if you promise to be more honest. But tell me: *are* you feeling completely well now?” He gave me a look that dared me to claim I was feeling better than I actually was.

I analyzed and found that, despite my fiercest wishes, I was feeling quite tired and experiencing the beginnings of a headache forming at my temples. I sighed in defeat, my answer. His lips twitched and defiance rose in my breast. I lifted my chin.

“Be that as it may, all of this”—I gestured around me—“is a bit much, don’t you think?”

He once more took me in, piled beneath the blankets, and frowned. “Perhaps a bit; I’d hate for you to become overheated.” He promptly removed several and I relaxed in relief as some of their heavy weight was lifted. “I’m sorry, Gemma.” He avoided my eyes, as if he couldn’t give the apology directly to me. “I just want to help you, and since I can do nothing to take away the images the tower showed you...” He sighed as he removed one more blanket and the bowl of water with the cloth, but not the tea. “How can I make it up to you?”

“Next time, ask me what I require rather than assuming you know what’s best for me.”

He hesitated, as if such a promise was rather difficult for him to make, before he nodded with a sigh. “Very well, if that is your wish. Now I shall leave you for some much-needed rest.”

I nearly rolled my eyes that he’d already broken his promise to ask me what I needed...though I couldn’t deny I was feeling rather exhausted and would have asked for a chance to rest anyway, as much as I didn’t want to admit I needed it; I was tired of my frequent naps.

Why did the man know me so well?

With an almost mischievous knowing look, he bowed and took his leave. The moment the door closed behind him, I leaned back against my chair with a weary sigh. “The man is impossible.”

“He certainly is.” Melina sounded far too cheerful considering the circumstances. I cast her a disapproving look.

“You were no help.”

“Oh, you had it well in hand. You know Quinn wouldn’t have listened to me had I tried to interfere; he only listens to you.”

I snorted at that. “He doesn’t listen to me at all.”

“He does, which is why you were able to stand up for yourself; only you could have penetrated his nursing frenzy.”

My lips twitched. I suppose I had managed to put a stop to it before Quinn got too wildly out of control. “He is such a worrier.”

“Only with you.” Melina settled back in her nearby seat and took up her mending, falling silent as she concentrated on her stitches. I watched the flickering fire dancing in the hearth, the hypnotic movements only making me more drowsy so that it was difficult keeping my eyes open.

Perhaps it wouldn’t hurt to take just a short nap...

But Melina’s next words dispelled all thoughts of sleep from my mind. “Don’t you wonder *why* Quinn is so attentive?” Her tone was sounding far too casual, which immediately aroused my suspicions about where this conversation was going.

“He’s my guard. It’s his duty.” Not to mention his favorite pastime.

“Do you really think his behavior is *solely* from duty?” She gave me a challenging look, one that for some reason caused my pulse to palpitate.

“What do you mean?” My voice wavered.

She smirked as she returned to her sewing. “I’ve had a suspicion for quite a while that the man views you as *more* than a princess or even a woman to protect...” She lifted her gaze and met mine straight on. “The man is in love with you.”

I startled, even as my heart performed some rather interesting acrobatics in my chest at her words. A strange feeling settled over me, one that felt almost like...hope. But it vanished almost immediately, forced out by my disbelief.

“You think my guard is in love with me?” I kept my voice low considering the man in question was certainly standing guard outside my door, despite there being absolutely no chance of danger befalling me while confined to my room. The last thing I wanted was to risk him overhearing such a ridiculous suspicion from my handmaiden.

“I don’t think, I *know*. Not only have I spent years observing your guard’s behavior, but I’m in love myself and know how a man behaves when he’s in love in return.”

For a moment her look became wistful at the mention of her fiancé, Corbin, back at the Malvagarian Palace. The two had only been engaged for a few weeks before she’d become trapped with me, causing her to spend the past three years wondering whether or not he would still be there when she finally returned...if she ever did.

“He’s waiting for you.” It was an assurance I gave often, even though it was one I could only hope was true.

Her soberness cleared as she pushed her emotions away and returned her attention to me. “Of course he is.” But with each passing week, she sounded less certain. “But we’re not discussing me and my beau, but you and *yours*.”

She gave me an expectant look, awaiting my response, but I found I had no words. I was both stunned by her assessment and, admittedly, rather embarrassed. “You can’t be correct.”

Her eyebrows rose. “You doubt me?”

“I—it’s just that—this is *Quinn*. He’s my guard. He’s like...my brother.” But the word didn’t feel quite right, though I didn’t currently have a better one to describe our relationship.

She rolled her eyes. “Even if that’s what you feel towards him, he certainly doesn’t feel the same way towards you. You’re rather oblivious to the world around you, but try paying better attention and you’ll see that I’m right.”

Anxiety, never far away, rose, almost crowding out the strange warmth that came from the thought of Quinn caring

for me in such a way, a pleasant feeling I was too afraid to analyze.

I forced myself to push it from my mind and lean my head back to take my long-awaited nap, but sleep wouldn't come. Rather than my mind being filled with sleep or even the horrible images the tower had shown me, instead they were filled with Quinn—the fierce worry that often overshadowed his expression, his sweet longing for something more for me, his anger towards the tower for hurting me, his attentive nursing...*could* they stem from something deeper than devotion?

I gave my head a rigid shake. I was being ridiculous, forcing myself to connect dots that weren't there. Why had Melina put such a foolish idea into my head? She couldn't possibly be right. Quinn was my guard and thus only saw me as a sickly princess to protect and care for, and I was too afraid to even hope for the possibility that perhaps he'd be the first man to finally see something *more*.

## CHAPTER 5

I shifted restlessly as I watched Melina and Quinn bustle about the kitchen preparing dinner, a meal that was certain to be meager considering the tower had yet to replenish the missing food supplies or the garden that had vanished without a trace.

“Are you certain I can’t help?” I asked for the dozenth time, unable to bear sitting about doing *nothing*, which as usual seemed to be my default state, one I’d grown to despise.

Melina gave a firm shake of her head. “We have it well in hand, Your Highness.”

“But—” I protested.

“You overexerted yourself earlier and must rest.” Her voice was firm, unrelenting. “Besides, kitchen tasks fall under the duties of a servant, not a princess.”

Without another word she turned back to her work, ending our argument as the usual victor. I silently cursed the walk I’d taken earlier, the first I’d been allowed since the day I’d discovered the mirror room. It had only been a short stroll through the tower corridors, a much-needed chance to escape the confines of my room, but it had left me slightly breathless.

My companions had wasted no time leading me to a kitchen chair, where I was currently trapped. My only consolation in being forced to sit in the kitchen was that at least this room provided much more interesting scenery than what could be found in my bedroom, including...

Once again my gaze was drawn to Quinn, one of the subjects I was finding increasingly diverting, only because he provided a puzzle I had yet to solve.

Try as I might, I couldn't get Melina's suspicions out of my mind. I'd been watching him rather obsessively the past several days, stealing several subtle glances so he wouldn't notice. It was strange we'd been trapped together for so long but I'd paid him so little attention, treating his presence like any other tower feature.

But I was paying him more than a little attention now. It'd become a quest of sorts, a way to fight the monotony my life had become. I felt like an investigator gathering clues as to the mystery of my guard's true feelings and whether they ran deeper than the loyalty of a faithful protector.

I wasn't entirely sure what my purpose in such a venture was. Discovering he harbored romantic feelings towards me would lead to nothing. After all, *I* certainly didn't care for him in that way...didn't I? The fact I had no ready answer was yet another impossible riddle to solve.

I sensed his gaze and glanced up to find that Quinn had paused in his task of chopping vegetables in order to watch me, his brow furrowed in concern. I offered him what I hoped was a reassuring smile, but by his deepening frown I could tell he wasn't fooled. As usual the man knew me well, a fact that surely only came from his serving me for seven years rather than because he wanted to know me on a deeper level.

He searched my expression for a moment before glancing sideways at Melina. "Perhaps we can find a task for the princess."

Hope swelled and I straightened with a jolt.

My handmaiden nibbled her lip. "Have the princess help in the kitchen? I'm not sure..."

"It need not be a large task," I said desperately. "Just please give me something to do before I go mad."

She considered for a moment more before sighing in acquiescence. "Very well, if it will spare you from recklessly

overexerting yourself again in the future.” She retrieved a bowl of peas and placed them in front of me. “You can shell the peas. First, remove the stem and any stringy fibers with a knife, then open the pod and gently push the peas out with your fingers.” She demonstrated each step slowly so I could see how it was done before she glanced up with a look inviting questions.

But I had none. I eagerly went to work at the task. Trimming the stems off was easy enough, but opening the pod proved trickier. I tried to slice along the rim with my nail and push the peas out with my thumb like my handmaiden had shown me, but the pods didn’t always open easily, or I’d manage that task only to squish several peas while trying to extract them. It resulted in several squashed peas.

I giggled as another crushed between my fingers. “Oops, it’s a good thing I’m a princess rather than a housewife.”

“It just takes practice,” Melina said. “The more you perform the task the easier it becomes. My sister and I used to have contests to see who could shell the most peas the fastest; we often filled an entire bowl in only a few minutes.”

My eyes widened as I took in the bowl bursting with unshelled peas. Acquiring such a skill seemed like a far more useful way to spend the hours I usually spent languishing away in my room without a purpose. Perhaps the next time a bout of illness forced me into bed, I could bring some peas in order to pass the time in a way more productive and interesting than embroidery; one could only create so many samplers.

I contentedly went about my task, likely taking far longer than Melina expected, but I was grateful she allowed me to help all the same. Soon I was humming, only pausing to giggle each time the soft vegetable accidentally squished between my fingers.

I soon felt the familiar gaze of my guard and once more lifted my eyes to meet his. He was watching me with a rather soft look, seeming to take great pleasure in my contentment. My cheeks warmed and I hastily lowered my gaze. Was that the look of a man in love, as Melina suspected?



I gave my head a rigid shake, dispelling the foolish notion. *Your happiness only pleases him because he's your guard, not because he's in love with you.*

Yet I couldn't keep my eyes lowered for long; the sight of peas—a combination of whole ones and squashed ones—just wasn't as interesting as watching Quinn work. My gaze was repeatedly drawn to him—the concentration lining his handsome face, his broad shoulders, the methodical way he chopped the vegetables with movements as careful and precise as everything else he did...it was almost mesmerizing.

My cheeks warmed the longer I watched him. Embarrassed that Melina's suspicions had caused me to behave so foolishly as to *gawk* at my guard, I tried to look away...only to find that I couldn't. I found myself rather fascinated by the way he worked...and soon I began to notice a few things that seemed rather *off*.

Though his movements were slow and deliberate, they seemed distracted. His hand often fumbled with the knife and he seemed to stare long and hard at its placement before slicing. He finished cutting the carrots and searched for a bowl to put them in, not with his eyes...but with his *hands*, and almost knocked the bowl over when he reached for it.

My brow furrowed and my peas were soon entirely forgotten, my attention entirely eclipsed by Quinn. A strange apprehension trickled over me, one I couldn't explain in words, as Quinn felt for the bowl and put the chopped carrots in, his gaze squinting whenever he lowered it to monitor his task. He finished—missing several scattered carrot pieces—and picked up the knife to slice the potatoes, but he didn't quite place it right, so that when he brought the blade down...

My sharp gasp mingled with his cry of pain as the knife sliced his finger. The knife clattered to the counter, where a small pool of blood was quickly forming.

“Quinn!” I sprang from my seat too quickly and a wave of dizziness overcame me, forcing me to take a moment to get my bearings before I could hurry to his side. I stared wide-eyed at the gash in his thumb, both horrified by how deep his

wound was and relieved that at least he hadn't sliced his finger clean off. "Oh, Quinn."

"It's not as bad as it looks," he said gruffly, embarrassment mingling with his pain. "At least not deep enough for stitches. I'll be fine, I was just careless..."

I gingerly grazed the base of his thumb, several inches from his wound. "Why weren't you watching what you were doing?"

"I was." His voice hitched in defense. "It's just...the color of the potato is too similar to the wood of the counter—" His words faltered and he said nothing more.

"What does that have to do with anything?" I asked.

He looked as if he meant to answer, but instead he simply sighed. "Nothing."

I wasn't nearly satisfied with such a vague response, but before I had a chance to inquire further, Melina bustled over with her handkerchief to staunch the flow of blood. It quickly soaked through the cloth, staining it crimson, with no sign of stopping anytime soon. The sight of it curdled my stomach, but despite my horror I still wanted to reach out and see for myself how deep the gash was, hoping it wasn't as bad as it looked...only to find I couldn't move.

My whimper escaped. "Oh, Quinn."

His attention was on me in an instant, no other thought to his bleeding thumb. "I'm well, so please don't worry on my account." He tried to smile, but with the pain twisting his expression it looked more like a grimace.

"You're certainly not *well*," Melina said brusquely. "You're lucky you haven't lost your finger. I can try to stop the blood, but you need some healing herbs."

"I'll retrieve them." I wasn't sure whether my urgency came from my need to help Quinn or my desire to escape the kitchen and the sight and smell of his blood. Undoubtedly both.

I turned to leave but froze as another wave of dizziness overcame me. I rested my hand on the table to steady myself and prayed my lightheadedness wasn't obvious to my handmaiden or guard, else they'd forbid me from helping; with the way I constantly deferred to their wishes, one would think I wasn't a princess at all.

Melina narrowed her eyes. She'd certainly noticed, but at my pleading look thankfully relented with a nod. I immediately left before she could change her mind, hastening from the kitchen but slowing once I reached the corridor. I paused to rest my hand on the wall to steady myself, still feeling weak and tired, before the memory of Quinn's bleeding finger and my need to help him pushed me forward.

Though I'd only been to the herbal room once, I still remembered the route...assuming it was in the same location and the tower hadn't shuffled its rooms around again. The silent, almost indiscernible guidance of the tower led my every step until I reached the herbal room.

A comforting earthy scent greeted me as I stepped into the dank room. I paused to lean against the doorframe, both to catch my breath and to slowly take in the tidy rows of plants, the table against the far wall laden with unfamiliar tools and the dry herbs hanging along the wall and from the eaves, all whose names were a mystery to me. The sight was both fascinating and entirely overwhelming. So many herbs, all with different uses, none of which I knew.

But there was no time to deliberate. I crouched in front of a nearby bookshelf to scan the titles of the basic herbal guides. I ached to explore them carefully in search of the perfect treatment, but time was pressing, forcing me to choose *A Basic Guide to Medicinal Herbs*. In order to preserve my strength for when I prepared the remedy, I settled for sitting on the cold ground with the heavy tome in my lap, a less than dignified position for a princess, but in this moment I didn't care.

I flipped through the book, searching for a section on wounds, only to find it and be greeted by an overwhelming list of plants that promised to treat a wound in a variety of ways,

with no hints as to which was best. I scanned the list of unfamiliar names, only recognizing cinnamon.

I wasn't entirely convinced that plant would be the most effective, but I had little time to do a thorough search, not with Quinn bleeding as he awaited me in the kitchen. I skimmed the ingredients until I found several more whose combination could potentially work well together.

I used the illustrations to help me find the correct plants from the garden before setting to work preparing them. I worked as quickly and efficiently as I could, relying wholly on the written instructions in the book. I minced the cinnamon, chamomile, and aloe vera before pressing the eucalyptus and extracting the oil from the leaf and seeds of a neem plant.

Despite the urgency guiding my movements, several unique emotions stirred within me. I felt a strange thrill getting my hands dirty as I worked with the plants. Each paragraph of information I read stoked my curiosity, inviting me to learn more and causing possibilities to fill my mind of various ways to combine the herbs and the potential effects should I do so.

But there was something more—preparing the herbs caused a spark to ignite in my heart, and each passing moment working with them only stoked that flame. It guided each of my movements and gave me a sense of purpose and accomplishment I'd never quite experienced before, but which I liked immensely.

It didn't take as long as I'd expected to finish the remedy, and although I was relieved to have created one so quickly despite my inexperience, I couldn't help but feel a twinge of regret at having to leave the herb room so soon. I cast a lingering look over my shoulder as I departed, promising myself to return in order to explore whatever flame the room had caused to be lit inside me and discover what it could possibly mean.

I'd been gone nearly half an hour when I finally returned. Melina busied herself over the hearth and Quinn sat tensely at the table pressing the handkerchief to his wound, his face pale and his worried gaze riveted to the doorway. He perched on

the edge of his seat as if fighting to remain in place rather than springing up to conduct a frantic search for me.

He relaxed the moment he saw me. “You were gone so long I was growing worried; I was just about to look for you.”

“You feared a dastardly fate befell me in a tower enchanted to protect me?” I hoped my teasing tone would soften the worry marring his expression; he already had enough concerns to burden himself without additional worry.

He sighed. “Whenever you’re out of my sight I fear the worst. I was imagining all sorts of possibilities...including that blasted room.”

I instantly knew which room he referred to: the one that showed me things I didn’t want to see. My chest cinched at the memory of when he’d found me there, and I hastily forced myself to push it away.

“I only went to the herbalist room, where I conducted my research as quickly and efficiently as I was able in order to prepare a remedy. I’m not entirely sure it will work, but—”

“I trust you,” he said firmly.

I nibbled my lip, still hesitant. If I didn’t even feel confident in the royal role I’d been born to, what business did I have performing a medicinal one? “Are you certain? I’m no herbalist—”

“I trust you.” His tone was more confident than before, and my heart swelled that he put his faith in me so easily. I settled on the chair beside him and reached for his hand...only for him to twist away. “Princess, you shouldn’t have to be the one to assist me.” He reached for the bowl with his other hand, as if he meant to tend to his wound himself.

In an instant the warmth from his confidence in my remedy vanished, replaced with icy annoyance. Not only did I want to explore the flicker I’d experienced in the herbalist room when creating this remedy, but for some inexplicable reason I couldn’t even begin to explain, *I* wanted to be the one to tend Quinn, and I was frustrated that he refused to let me.

I held the bowl out of reach. “Let me serve you.”

He didn't give up so easily. "Princess, I insist." Again he made to reach for the bowl but froze at my pointed glare.

I gathered an assertiveness I hadn't known I possessed and straightened with a firm, unyielding look. "I want to be the one to tend to you."

Quinn studied the determination filling my expression before relinquishing the fight. He lowered his eyes and held out his hand for me to take, remaining silent as I carefully removed the handkerchief to examine the cut. The sight of his wound twisted my stomach and made me lightheaded, but I didn't look away.

It was strange holding his hand, something I'd never done before. I tried to ignore how his skin felt against mine in order to more fully concentrate on the task at hand. I took several steadying breaths before dipping my clean handkerchief in a bowl of water Melina provided and dabbing it gently on the wound to clean it. His breath hitched, but otherwise he made no show of his discomfort.

"Am I hurting you?" I asked.

He shook his head but said nothing more for several moments before it seemed he couldn't bear the tense silence any longer. "But...I hurt you. Believe me, it wasn't my intention to displease you. I'm just used to being the one to protect you." He kept his voice lowered in order to keep our conversation private from Melina, who was still standing at the nearby hearth.

"I'm not incapable," I said. "I'd hoped *you* of everyone would at least know that."

"I always have, but your capabilities don't change who you were born to be. I fear you disregard your role too easily because you don't feel yourself worthy of it."

My heart prickled at this insight. "Perhaps there's some truth to that. But even if I don't fully live up to my role, I don't want it to hold me back; my illness has done that for too much of my life already." I lifted my gaze from his thumb to meet his, watching me intently. "You've always been there for me

during my poor health, so please allow me to express my gratitude by helping you in return.”

These words were the key to softening his resistance. I watched them work on his conscience before his posture slumped, his acquiescence to my wishes. I smirked in triumph and he glared almost accusingly. “You don’t owe me anything; it’s an honor to serve you.”

“I know, but I want to repay you all the same. Would you truly deny me that request?”

His lips twitched. “How can I refuse you anything, Gemma?” A deeper emotion seemed to fill the way he said my name and the accompanying look he gave me, possibilities hidden within his words I ached to explore.

Flustered, I hastily lowered my gaze and resumed washing away the blood from his cut. When it was clean, I dipped my finger into the pasty green remedy and carefully applied it to his thumb. He stiffened at first before relaxing as I carefully rubbed it in.

“Does it hurt?” I finally allowed myself to peer up at him, telling myself it was to monitor his well-being...only to find myself staring at the rather adorable way his bangs fell across his damp brow.

He gritted his teeth and shook his head. I wasn’t fooled by his act of gallantry but didn’t want to increase his discomfort. If he wanted to hide his pain from me, then I’d let him.

I rubbed another layer of remedy across the gash, which stretched halfway down his thumb. Despite each gesture being solely for medical reasons, I felt a strange thrill with every touch. It ignited something inside me, deeper and warmer than even the spark I’d felt from studying the herbs.

I wasn’t entirely sure *what* this feeling was, only that it nourished a need inside me, acting not only as a balm for my constant loneliness but for a deeper need I had no name for.

Not only had I never touched Quinn in such a way before, but I’d never noticed the golden flecks in his hazel eyes, each gentle line of his features, and the rather adorable way his

rather large ears stuck out from his mass of brown hair that fell untidily halfway down his neck.

Each look and every touch stoked an unfamiliar fire I only now realized had been lit inside me. The feeling grew as his fingers gently brushed mine, his look intense yet still soft. It seeped right into my heart, causing my breath to catch.

*No, Gemma, I silently ordered myself. You're misinterpreting things, seeing what you want to after Melina's ridiculous assumptions.*

I refused to convince myself I cared for Quinn simply because she'd caused me to wonder if he cared for me in such a way. I'd known him for years, and it was only after Melina had put such foolish ideas in my head that I'd begun to question our comfortable friendship.

Yet I couldn't deny I *liked* these questions...as well as the way his fingers grazed my hand, his movements almost unconscious but gentle...and all too pleasant.

Before I could get too used to the feelings he was causing to stir within my heart, I hastily yanked my hands away, causing his brows to draw together. "What's wrong, Gemma—*Princess?*"

"Nothing," I stuttered.

But it wasn't nothing. Whatever was happening between us was rather alarming. I tried to convince myself that what had transpired had been entirely innocent, just a few touches, ones natural to make while I'd been tending his wound. I wouldn't allow myself to misconstrue our relationship, and thus I wouldn't explore whatever feelings his touch had caused to stir life into my heart.

"Nothing," I said again. "I'm just feeling...out of sorts. Melina can wrap your wound. I...need to lie down." And before I could convince myself to stay, I hastily left the kitchen, running not just from him but from the truth slowly settling over me: *something* was occurring between us, and I was too terrified to examine what it could possibly mean.



## CHAPTER 6

Despite desperately trying to resist the impulse, I found myself once again noticing my guard. My gaze had been repeatedly straying from the book open on my lap to him for the past hour, just as it'd done every day in the week following my tending his wound. As usual, he stood rigidly near the library door, his attention focused straight ahead, just as he spent much of every day...all because he'd willingly chosen to enter this prison with me.

But despite the companionship our imprisonment had allowed us to enjoy these past three years, we'd rarely spoken of matters beyond the tower, leaving me knowing little about him. The desire to learn more grew with each passing day... along with the new feelings stirring to life within my heart, a need aching to be fulfilled.

I tried to push them away and return my attention to my book, which my diversion had caused me to make very little progress on, but the words and lines blurred together on the page, making reading impossible and leaving me no distraction from the questions now filling my thoughts.

“Is something the matter, Princess?”

I startled at Quinn's sudden inquiry. “Of course not.” I forced my attention back to my book and once more pretended to read. He was silent a moment, leaving me grateful he didn't press the matter further...until he spoke once more.

“Forgive me, Your Highness, but you seem rather inattentive; it appears to be diverted...elsewhere.”

My cheeks warmed as I stole another peek over the rim of my book to find him watching me with his usual concern. I'd been foolish to think he wouldn't notice my nervous behavior—after all, the man was a *guard*, *my* guard—and thus paid nothing but the most devoted attention to me.

“Nothing is wrong. I'm well.” Once more I tried to return to my book, but pretending to read didn't silence my anxious thoughts...nor the newly discovered desires budding within me. After a moment's debate I gave up the fight. I closed my book and turned my full attention to him, no longer bothering to pretend he *hadn't* been the reason for my distraction.

“Do you ever get bored?” I asked.

He blinked at me, clearly startled by the question, one that was admittedly not the first one I'd planned on asking. “Bored guarding you?” By his tone, one might think I'd spoken blasphemy.

“You stand around all day doing little else.” A fate that seemed more torturous considering he'd never asked to be trapped here with me. With how often he spoke of the outside world and encouraged me to be a part of it, he undoubtedly missed it a great deal.

As if sensing my unspoken worries, his expression gentled. “It's my greatest honor to protect you, Your Highness. Please be assured that I'm never bored, especially when there's much to occupy my thoughts.” A blush enveloped his cheeks at his words, a rare change to his usual stoic expression.

I frowned, puzzled by his reaction. Why would he...but I'd no sooner wondered the reasons for his embarrassment than Melina's suspicions of Quinn's true feelings filled my mind. Was *I* the one who occupied Quinn's thoughts?

My heart fluttered at the possibility...before I gave my head a rigid shake. Of course he hadn't meant *me*. I wasn't the slightest bit interesting and thus wouldn't warrant such attention. Any he paid me was solely due to his duty to guard me as one of my father's most trusted knights. It was ridiculous to think otherwise.

I ducked behind my book, signaling an end to this strange conversation before it'd even fully begun. Even without looking at him, I sensed Quinn's flare of distress and silently cursed his observation that made him *not* noticing that something was troubling me utterly impossible.

He hesitated a moment before slowly approaching to stand beside me. I sensed his worry but tried to resist looking at him. As before when I'd bound his hand, I felt a strange thrill at his nearness, a feeling which both warmed me and frightened me.

Quinn finally spoke. "Are you well, Princess? Did I say something to upset you?"

I tried to resist, but his voice drew my gaze to him beyond my control. I shyly peeked up from my book to take in his sweet concern. A strange flutter filled my stomach and I couldn't help but stare at him—his serious but handsome features, his large hazel eyes, the sweet way he looked at me. I sensed something shifting between us, a change which had been occurring for quite some time; it was only just now I was beginning to notice.

My heartbeat escalated in fear, just as it did whenever I considered leaving the safety of the tower. Exploring what was happening between us would force me to tumble into the unknown, a thought that terrified me beyond all others.

I wasn't strong enough to face it.

Desperate to escape the unfamiliar feelings occurring between us, I snapped my book shut and hastily stood, only to be overcome by a wave of dizziness. I swayed, but before I could lose my footing, Quinn's firm arms wrapped around me, holding me steady.

I was unprepared for the emotions that filled me from his touch, far more powerful than the ones I'd experienced when touching his hand to tend his wound. My breath caught and I tentatively peered up at him. He studied me with deep concern. "Are you alright, Gemma?"

The tender way he looked at me, the soft way he spoke my name...it was so different from how it used to be between

us...or perhaps for the first time I was seeing it for what it really was, a thought which only escalated the terror encasing my heart. If only I could turn back time to before this moment, for now that I was experiencing these emotions they'd be impossible to ever forget.

As if suddenly realizing how just how close we stood and how long he'd held me, Quinn hastily released me, but not enough for me to lose my balance. Even after stepping back he didn't pull away completely, as if, like me, he couldn't bear the thought of distance.

"Are you alright?" he asked again, his tone more uncertain.

It took me a moment to find my voice. "I'm fine. Just...a little dizzy." I regretted the admission the moment I gave it, for Quinn's expression immediately shifted to his fierce protectiveness, the look that usually preceded his fretting. "Please, Quinn," I hastily pleaded. "There's no need to worry."

He hesitated before reluctantly nodding. I released a relieved sigh and finally stepped fully away from him, not realizing how warm his enfolding presence had been until we were no longer close. I shivered and wound my arms around myself. Quinn immediately retrieved my shawl, which lay discarded on the settee, and wrapped it tenderly around my shoulders.

I settled back in my seat and watched as Quinn went to the hearth to stoke the fire. The flames grew, bringing additional warmth, but it was nothing to how cozy I'd been while standing so near him. My heart gave another strange twinge.

He finished tending the fire and turned to face me. "Is there anything else I can help you with?" His look was almost desperate with eagerness to be given a task.

My cheeks flared with heat once more. "Actually...I was hoping you'd converse with me. Though you've served me for years, I realize I know little about you." The desire to remedy that was stronger than mere curiosity, an emotion that I still had no name for.

He shifted nervously on his feet. “As it should be, Your Highness; my duty is solely to guard you.” He noticed the hurt filling my expression and had the sense to look contrite. “Please be assured that I want nothing more than to converse with you. I’m just afraid...that deepening our friendship will cause me to falter in my duties. I can’t afford any distractions.”

I sighed. “There’s little need to worry about protecting me; the tower’s enchantments do that job well enough.”

He frowned, even as his gaze darted around the room almost suspiciously. “I’m still unconvinced the tower can be trusted.”

Apprehension squeezed my chest as my own attention went to the walls that surrounded me in their protective cocoon, just as they always had. I sat close enough to reach my hand out to stroke the stone; magic caressed my palm, assuring me of our friendship and its devotion.

“There’s nothing to worry about concerning the tower... unless you suspect the furniture is plotting to go rogue.”

I hoped for a smile, but his serious expression didn’t even falter...though by the amusement in his eyes I sensed he wanted to. “I shall promptly begin a thorough investigation of each piece of furniture to discern whether or not they can be trusted.”

I fully smiled at that, and after a moment’s hesitation, he returned it. “See?” I said teasingly. “It’s not so frightening talking with me rather than vigilantly watching me.”

His smile faltered slightly, but thankfully not completely. “Forgive me, I never meant to give you the impression I don’t enjoy conversing with you. In truth, it’s one of my favorite things.”

My heart swelled at his words, and once more my confusing feelings stirred to life. But rather than trying to push them away as I’d done before, I found that this sweet moment with Quinn was stronger than my earlier fears, making me yearn to explore these new emotions further.

But before I could even begin, Quinn shifted uneasily and his gaze darted between me and the door. I recognized that look, for this was an inner battle he experienced several times a day.

I bit my lips to keep back a smile. “As diverting as watching me for hours on end likely is, you’re allowed to take a break, Quinn.”

He sighed. “I know, but...I hate leaving you without protection even for a few minutes, even when you have Melina’s presence, especially since there’s something I need to look into that could keep me away from you longer than I want.”

My brow puckered with feigned confusion. “You mean there’s something more pressing than continuously watching me for hours on end? You must tell who my competition is for your coveted attention at once.”

As I hoped, his lips twitched at my teasing, though once again he didn’t fully smile. “The only thing strong enough to divert my attention from you is something that’s for your best interests, should I succeed as I hope.”

His cryptic comment only escalated my curiosity, but by his guarded expression I knew he was determined to keep his secret. The puzzle tickled my thoughts long after he reluctantly left to retrieve Melina from the chores she’d been tending to ever since the tower had stopped cleaning itself so that I wouldn’t be left entirely without a companion, and the mystery continued to distract me when I attempted to return to my book to await my handmaiden’s arrival.

Several minutes passed...and still she didn’t come.

That was unusual. Melina usually came quickly, too wise to risk Quinn’s annoyance should she not attend me as soon as possible. What could possibly be the reason for her delay?

I’d no sooner wondered this than the energy of the room shifted, no longer comforting but instead rather uneasy...and it seemed to be emanating from the tower. I looked up from my book towards the nearby wall and rested my hand against the

stones. A surge of agitation tingled from them, spreading up my arm.

“Tower?” I asked uncertainly.

No answer.

I flattened my hand against the wall, hoping for answers in the tower’s usual silent communication, and after a moment of searching through its layers of tension, a single thought filled my mind: *leave*.

My book slid off my lap as I shakily stood, yet I didn’t immediately move. Confused, I frowned at the wall.

“Tower?” I asked again. Its urgency increased, compelling me to act on its order. But before I could, the tower suddenly shook, causing me to lose my precarious balance and fall painfully to the floor.

I struggled to right myself, but the entire structure swayed, thwarting my attempt to stand and sending me stumbling back to the ground. Several books tumbled from the shelves and even the furniture shifted. Fear cinched my chest as I curled in on myself and covered my head with my arms, waiting for it to pass.

The tower stilled as suddenly as the shaking had begun. For a moment I lay on the ground, shock rendering me paralyzed. My thoughts were eclipsed by the need to leave the library and search for Quinn, but my body ached from the force of my fall, so it took me a moment to stand and face the door. My breath caught. For a moment I could only stare, disbelief causing my heart to still.

The door...was gone.

I gaped at where it used to be, a place that was now nothing more than a wall. It took several moments to regain the use of my limbs in order to shakily approach. I rested my hand against the stones, cold to the touch, no sign of the usual life that filled the tower.

Not trusting my vision, I ran my entire hand across the wall, searching for a way out with my touch. For the door just *had* to be here; there was no way it could have simply

*disappeared*. But no matter my frantic searching, it remained absent...leaving me trapped inside this room.

My breaths came short and sharp as my panic rose. My movements were frantic as I ran my hands along not just this wall but the others in the circular room, desperately searching for a way out...but there wasn't one.

The strangled sob I'd been fighting to keep back escaped. "Tower?"

No answer.

My voice hitched. "Please, you must take me to the exit. Tower? *Tower?*"

Still nothing.

My tears escaped, and with my energy spent, I sank to the cold, hard floor. There I knelt, my shoulders shaking with sobs, only broken whenever I found the strength to call for the tower or even for Quinn, but there was never any answer.

I wasn't sure how long I remained in this hunched position. I only stirred when I felt a flare of life penetrate the air, as if the tower was rousing from a deep slumber. I slowly looked up, and though the force behind the tower's enchantment remained invisible, I could sense it. It began in the stones I knelt on, seeping over my body to enfold me in what felt like an embrace of comfort...and apology.

The tower held me until I dried my tears before its force pulled away to move towards the wall where the door had vanished with a silent command for me to follow. And though I had no reason to trust it, I shakily obeyed, my legs sore and stiff from kneeling on the hard ground.

I returned to the wall and rested my hand against the stones. At first they remained cold, as they had when the door had vanished. But then suddenly life filled them. They tingled with warmth, then shuddered against my touch, before all at once they caused the stones to melt away, revealing the door.

I'd no sooner registered its presence than it flung open to reveal a pale and frantic Quinn. For a moment he simply



stared at me in disbelief before he seized me in his tight hold.  
“*Gemma.*”

Pure relief filled my name as well as his arms clinging to me, keeping me close enough for me to feel every firm line of his chest and his heart beating frantically against mine. As before when he'd held me, I couldn't help but notice how cozy his arms were, how safe they made me feel. I nestled deeper into his hold with a contented sigh, and in his arms the panic and fear that had filled me moments before melted away.

He didn't hold me nearly long enough before he suddenly yanked me from the library into the safety of the corridor. Moments later, the door vanished behind us, melting into the wall until it was no longer there. I stared at where it'd disappeared in disbelief before glancing uncertainly at Quinn.

“It appears we no longer have a library.”

Unsurprisingly, he found no humor in the comment. “Oh, *Gemma.*” His voice shook and I suddenly found myself back in his arms...not that I minded, a realization that was just as new as the sweet feelings I was only beginning to discover. “I never should have left you alone. I returned the moment the tower shook, only to find...”

He said nothing more, only squeezed me more tightly, a sensation that likely would have been uncomfortable from anyone else, but from him it somehow wasn't tight enough.

“I'm fine,” I managed, words I quickly realized were a lie. Shudders rippled over me as the suffocating fear from being trapped in the library with no way out overcame me.

He felt my shivers and moaned. “But you're not...all because I left you for a single moment.” He burrowed his face against my hair, something he'd never done before, but I was too shaken to fully enjoy the moment. With each of my shudders he rubbed my back, a futile attempt to comfort me.

It wasn't until my shaking had fully stilled that he finally pulled away, first to study my face in order to discern my well-being, then to glare at the surrounding walls with pure hatred.

“I knew this blasted tower couldn’t be trusted. I need to get you out.” His reference to the tower sounded like an expletive.

My heart flared at his sharp words. “It’s not its fault. It tried to warn me, and it helped me escape the sealed room...” His expression hardened and I knew my defense was lost on him...and if I was being truly honest with myself, it was on me as well.

What had happened with the tower? In all my time trapped within these walls, it had never shaken like it just had, and our continued imprisonment made it so there was nothing protecting us should this unexpected occurrence happen again. The thought caused the safety and security I’d always felt from the turret to falter, leaving nothing to protect me from my fears.

## CHAPTER 7

I watched anxiously as Melina sorted through the contents of the pantry. I took several steadying breaths in an effort to remain calm, but my rapid pulse betrayed my uneasiness. Even without looking at Quinn, I felt his own tension from where he stood rigidly beside me. A stolen glance revealed the worry that had penetrated his usual stoic expression.

It had been a tense week following the tower trapping me in the library, and ever since then the tower had continued to change with each passing day—from locked rooms and absent furniture, to dim lighting despite having an abundance of flickering candles, to a constant draft that not even the largest fire in the hearth could dissipate. Though the tower had never trapped any of us in another room, several were vanishing, a fact which kept Quinn even more devotedly at my side.

As if these trials weren't difficult enough, now our supply of food was dwindling.

My attention returned to Melina, whose tight, emotionless expression was a mask for her growing concern, but I knew her too well to be fooled by her attempt at calm; she couldn't hide the worry filling her eyes as she finished sorting through our supplies and faced us. Quinn stepped closer to me, as if his presence could protect me from her impending pronouncement.

“It's as we feared: the food reserves are low.”

Quinn cursed and left my side to examine the supplies himself. His movements were sharp and agitated as he rummaged through the bags of grain, root vegetables, and other preserves. When he finished he didn't warrant me a glance, but instead remained very still.

"What's the assessment?" It was a struggle to keep my voice calm, for his reaction was far more enlightening than any answer he might possibly give.

His look was regretful when he finally turned to me, as if he feared imparting bad news went against his duties to protect me. "It's...as Melina said. The food reserves are not only low, but the tower has produced no fresh produce or dairy products."

My stomach tightened. "But...it's never failed to provide for us before. What could have caused this?"

He shrugged helplessly. "The same magic that's undoubtedly causing everything else. I don't pretend to begin to understand the enchantment placed on this tower."

I struggled to control my sharp, rising breaths; an anxiety attack wouldn't help matters. But my panic, always so close to the surface, escalated beyond my control, pressing against my chest and making it difficult to breathe. I was only able to steady my palpitating nerves when Quinn rested a gentle hand on my shoulder.

"What are we going to do?" I managed to speak calmly, but my hands twisting in my lap betrayed my uneasiness.

Melina nibbled her lip before lifting her chin. "We will make it work." She bustled around the pantry for the ingredients for tonight's meal. "It shall be simple fare until the tower decides to replenish..." She trailed off, but her unspoken question remained: what if the tower *never* replenished our food? What would we do then?

Arms laden with food, Melina exited to the kitchen, leaving me alone with Quinn hovering beside me. The burden from my worry suddenly became too heavy to bear; my

shoulders slumped and I rested my elbows on my knees to bury my forehead in my hands.

On cue, Quinn immediately tried to comfort me. “All will be well, Princess.” But the uncertainty in his voice contradicted his assurances.

I sighed. “But *will* it? With the trajectory of the tower’s enchantment and the uncertainty surrounding it, in truth we have no way of knowing whether or not it will.”

Quinn seemed helpless for a moment before he set his jaw. “Regardless of what we don’t understand, I won’t rest until I’ve found a way to protect you.”

This promise eased some of my concerns...as well as stirred the feelings continuing to fill my heart towards him.

But though I trusted his assurances, they didn’t fully quiet my anxieties, for the food shortage wasn’t an isolated event. The shifting tower, its fading magic...something was changing, and anything different left me ill at ease. If things continued as they did, it might soon become more dangerous to remain within the tower than to leave, a possibility that filled me with icy terror. I wasn’t yet ready to breach the tower’s walls and face my fears; I wasn’t certain I ever would be.

The walls of the pantry were becoming too confining, pressing against me relentlessly and increasing my urgency to escape. The restlessness quickly became too much, forcing me to escape the confines of the kitchen to pace the corridors. Even after I grew tired, my need for movement was far more urgent than my need for rest, for stilling would leave nothing to distract me from my rising worries.

I paused midway up the twisting staircase to turn to Quinn, who’d been faithfully following close behind. “Please, I need a moment alone.”

He hesitated before shaking his head. “With the tower’s unpredictable whims...I’m afraid I can’t grant that, Princess.”

Even though his answer wasn’t the least bit surprising, I still sighed. He at least maintained enough distance to give me

the illusion I was alone as I climbed the remaining stairs and paused near the top. Coldness seeped through my dress as I pressed myself against the stone wall, struggling to control my breaths, which were coming out quick and sharp from both my strenuous climb and my rising anxiety, which had only grown the higher I'd climbed.

I sensed Quinn's desire to help, but there was little he could do. My anxieties were yet another prison I couldn't escape...just like the tower. But though these thoughts were familiar and safe, something was now shifting inside me, as if the tower's fading magic had caused my familiar thoughts to lose some of their power.

When we'd first become trapped, the tower's enchantment had seemed absolute and unchanging...only for it to now be gradually slipping away. Could that possibility be true for the anxiety acting as a warden over my thoughts? The possibility was enough to pierce the overwhelming darkness shrouding my mind just enough for a sliver of light to penetrate it.

This light calmed me just enough to allow me to escape the prison of my thoughts. An idea illuminated my mind. I left the second-floor landing and took the stairs that twisted up towards where the herbal garden resided, faintly aware of Quinn's soft footsteps ascending the staircase close behind me.

I hesitated at the door, afraid to open it to see whether this part of the tower remained or if it'd also slipped away. With a wavering breath I entered the room...only to see it was just as I'd left it.

Dirt rows filled with plants lined the stone floor in patterns of tidy plots, thriving despite the surrounding tower walls blocking out the sun. Despite still being new to my herbal studies, the earthy scent that greeted me was both familiar and comforting, and immediately began to ease the tightness squeezing my chest.

I wandered the rows before running my fingers along the spines of the books filling the shelf hugging the wall, relishing the caress of leather against my fingertips, as if I was being

greeted by old friends despite having only consulted these books once before.

I tugged one out and flipped through its pages, immersing myself in the words and illustrations that greeted me and finding solace in the descriptions of various herbs, a sense of order even midst my chaotic thoughts. My explorations became more focused as I began searching the books for a calming tonic.

Once I'd found a remedy that looked relatively simple to make, I used the illustrations as a guide to procure the herbs amongst the ones growing in the room and stored in the jars lining the shelves. Once I had them all, I carefully followed the instructions.

As I'd hoped, preparing the herbs proved not only distracting but soothing. The variety of scents mingled together to surround me like a protective embrace, while the rhythmic movements of my hands calmed my taut nerves. The herbal book gave my mind something more uplifting to focus on—each word pushed out the dark anxieties filling my thoughts one by one until my attention was completely eclipsed by the puzzle of which herbs to combine to create my desired effects and the variety of ways to prepare them.

It was an entirely new world, one of the few I didn't mind discovering, for this one not only felt safe but gave me a purpose I'd never experienced before.

I only emerged from this intriguing new experience when movement caught my eye from the doorway. I glanced over to find Quinn hovering in the threshold bearing a tray of food Melina must have just brought up. "Forgive me for disturbing you, but I wondered if you were ready for lunch."

In truth my herbs had occupied all my thoughts, leaving no room for hunger, but admitting that would only cause Quinn to fret over my appetite, and with today's added difficulties, we already had enough to worry about.

I beckoned him to enter and settled myself in one of the few chairs occupying the room, ones I wasn't entirely sure had been there when I'd arrived. Quinn studied them with a

pensive frown as he arranged the tray on the table. “I’m certain those weren’t there before.”

“Apparently the tower values comfort over food,” I said warily.

Quinn continued to eye them. “I recognize these chairs from one of the lesser-used rooms. Perhaps the tower possesses enough magic to transfer them here, whereas food is something it must create on its own...something it is no longer able to do.” He seemed to regret his words upon seeing my alarm. “Forgive me for worrying you, it’s only speculation.”

I nodded and willed myself to recapture the calm my studies had brought me. I forced myself to focus on the food on the tray—fresh bread, steamed potatoes, and tea, a simple meal but likely the best poor Melina could create considering the circumstances.

“At least we still have food.” It was an effort to sound cheerful.

Quinn poured me a cup of tea. “These are all from our reserves. Root vegetables, grains, and tea leaves store easily, but we’ve been unable to find anything fresh. When Melina brought your food, she assured me that upon further investigation, she found that the other pantry containing the dried meat hasn’t disappeared, meaning that for the time being we won’t starve.”

I understood his unspoken implication: if the tower didn’t produce any additional food, eventually there’d come a time when we’d run out. The worry I’d worked so hard to suppress returned in a rush. I bit my lip, causing Quinn to look regretful for bringing up such a somber topic.

He cleared his throat as he handed me a plate of food. “I’m admittedly curious why you sought solace in such a place.”

I gratefully seized this change in topic as I began eating, more to appease my guard than my own hunger. “When I created the herbs for your wound, I found I rather enjoyed the task, so when I began feeling anxious...I felt drawn here,



hoping that perhaps the act of studying herbs could in and of itself be its own remedy.”

I felt foolish making the admission out loud. What could have compelled me to explore such an unroyal subject? I already feared I continuously failed as a princess, yet here I was choosing to venture further from the path expected of me. But rather than feeling regretful, for the first time I *wanted* to do something different. Yet I couldn't...could I?

Quinn's sigh interrupted my inner turmoil. “I hate seeing that look.”

I blinked at him. “What look?”

His expression was grave as he leaned closer. “The one you get when you're being too hard on yourself. You cling to what you believe are the expectations that come with being a princess, while in truth the only one placing limits on yourself is you. You're building walls that don't exist. Princess or not, herbalism is a fine interest.”

As usual, he'd been able to see right through me; it was as if he alone could penetrate my walls and see straight into my heart. It went beyond his duties as my guard...while also feeling like a natural aspect of the relationship deepening between us.

This realization encouraged me to confide in him. “I feel something different when I work with the herbs.” Just as I was beginning to feel something different with *him*, something warm and deep that filled the spaces between us.

Once again my gaze was drawn to him. He sat close, allowing me to more easily study him. Despite his serious countenance, he was rather handsome, with dark brown hair that fell messily across his forehead and bright hazel eyes that always regarded me so tenderly.

The longer I studied him, the more I noticed the worry furrowing his brow, the weariness cloaking his expression, and the dark circles beneath his eyes.

“You look tired. Please don't tell me you stay up all night to guard me.”

“I sleep,” he said, seeming purposefully vague regarding *how long*. “I often sleep just outside your door so I can be near you should you need me. But ever since the tower trapped you in the library, I’ve also used the time to investigate its magic.”

“How have you been doing that?”

He sighed. “Nothing that’s worked. I’ve mostly been trying to find ways of testing its limits in an attempt to breach the magical barrier, as well as investigating areas where the tower has recently changed to see if I can uncover anything useful. If only the tower contained books on magic and curses, but my investigations have turned up nothing.”

“Have you managed to discover anything?” I pushed the plate of sliced bread towards him to encourage him to eat, and after a moment’s hesitation during which he ensured I had enough on my own plate for a full meal, he reluctantly accepted it.

“Nothing useful, I’m afraid, though I have reason to hope I’m making progress on the matter I was studying the day the tower trapped you in the library.” He lifted his bread to his mouth but stopped at my puzzled frown. “Is something wrong?”

“You usually take your bread with butter.”

He blinked down at the tray, searching. “But there isn’t any —” His words faltered when I scooted the butter closer. For a moment he stared at it with a rather struggling look.

“What’s the matter?” I asked.

He hastily blinked and tore his gaze away with a rather frustrated sigh. “Nothing.” He took a bite of bread without bothering to butter it, only pausing mid-chew at my confused pucker. “Butter is now limited, so I shall go without.”

He took another bite, appearing entirely calm...even as he avoided my eyes. Though his explanation made sense considering his usual tendency towards self-sacrifice, his words left me with an uneasy feeling that his excuse hadn’t been the real reason he hadn’t buttered his bread. But what other explanation could there possibly be?

I was distracted from my worries by Quinn nervously clearing his throat and looked up to find his gaze not on me but taking in the circular room. “There’s something I wish to discuss with you.”

Apprehension prickled my heart. By his solemn expression, this would likely be a difficult conversation. “What is it?”

“The magic is slowly fading. I’m not sure which part of Her Majesty’s enchantment still exists, but the tower losing its ability to create our food gives me cause to wonder which of its magic will fade next...and whether it’ll be its protective spells. I fear that soon it’ll no longer be safe to remain in this tower. I think we should find a way to leave.”

He said the last part in a rush, as if to get the words out before he lost his nerve. I pursed my lips in silent disapproval for his choice in topic, but it wasn’t enough to prevent him from hastily continuing.

“My investigation of the tower has led me to believe there may be a way to breach its magic. If we could find it, we could finally leave and return home.”

The anxiety I’d come into this room to escape—an emotion I always felt whenever I considered leaving the tower—flared. How could I ever leave? The outside world was filled with too many unknowns, and I’d already dealt with enough of those to last a lifetime: the uncertainty that accompanied my frequent and unexplained illnesses, my unknown future, my role as a princess...and now the shifting relationship with my guard. How could I possibly face another?

I sighed. “I know you mean well, but in truth, I don’t want to leave, Quinn.”

He seemed unsurprised by this answer, for it was one I gave him often. “Don’t you ever wonder what lies beyond? There’s so much more than this, Gemma. I wish you’d believe it.”

For a moment I tentatively allowed myself to imagine answers to the mysteries of the world beyond these walls, only this time I wasn't alone in my daydreams, but with Quinn. My cheeks warmed, but I didn't shy away from the pleasant image of us together. If he could remain with me, would I ever consider...

I gave my head a rigid shake to dispel the thought of escaping the tower. Quinn sighed, knowing without my saying anything that once more I was choosing to ignore his earnest desires for me to escape. Though the conclusion of this familiar conversation was nothing new, for the first time I wondered if it was the wrong one.

"I'm sorry." I wasn't sure whether I was apologizing to him or to myself.

"I have no doubt that one day you'll find your inner strength. You're more capable than you believe, Gemma."

Once more my gaze was drawn to him and I couldn't make myself look away. Sweet understanding and sincerity filled his eyes as he looked at me, and I knew that no matter how weak I often felt, he accepted me as I was. My heart warmed at the thought, nourishing the new feeling blooming inside of me.

I wasn't sure what compelled me to reach for him, only that the distance between us, as small as it was, had grown unbearable. I rested my hand over his, curling my fingers around his. He remained still, puzzlement marring his brow as he looked first at our connected hands then up at me, a question in his eyes, the same one I wondered.

What was happening between us?

I had no answer. All I knew was that holding his hand was unlike anything I'd ever experienced—it felt as if my heart was opening for him, inviting new possibilities I'd never before allowed myself to consider.

I feared the moment wouldn't last before Quinn realized our touching hands went beyond the relationship expected between a guard and his charge, but to my fierce relief, he

didn't pull away. Instead his hand tightened around mine, nourishing my budding hope.

Despite my worries concerning the tower, my illness and limitations, and whether I'd be able to embrace my new hobby, they were nothing to the light now illuminating my heart. Because of the expectations I'd placed around myself, romance had never been a possibility I'd considered for my future.

But with every interaction with Quinn, those walls were crumbling brick by brick, allowing the sweet, beautiful feelings between us to grow. The larger they became, the more easily I was able to recognize them.

Yet my fear of exploring the unknown remained...though not as strong as it had once been, for the thought of a future with Quinn was far brighter. It was easy to disregard my worries the more I envisioned the wondrous landscape that lay ahead...and realized how much I liked it.

Would I be brave enough to embrace this future for myself? And what would I discover if I did?

## CHAPTER 8

*M*y brow puckered at Quinn's approach. Over the past few days he'd rarely bridged the distance between us while he guarded, and other than a few stolen conversations when we took our meals together, he otherwise paid me little attention beyond his duties...a fact that grew more torturous with each passing day the strange feelings battling in my heart raged, a war between my fear and my desires. With the ache that came from Quinn's seeming indifference, I was beginning to realize which emotion was dangerously close to winning.

The walls that had been carefully guarding my heart crumbled with each step closer Quinn came, leaving me vulnerable to the pain I'd fought to protect myself from...even though I knew Quinn was the last man who would ever hurt me.

My gaze darted towards where Melina sat at the writing desk, immersed in writing another letter to Corbin; despite not having the opportunity of sending it, I knew writing him brought her comfort. She wasn't paying any attention to us, giving Quinn and me the semblance of being alone, a thought that both thrilled me and riddled me with anxiety.

My attention returned to him. "What is it?" I stuttered, my voice shaking in rhythm with my frantically pounding heart.

He didn't speak, simply paused in front of me and extended his hand. Mouth dry, I stared at his hand before peeking questioningly up at him. He smiled and wriggled his fingers, inviting me to take it.

My heart immediately flared as his fingers enclosed mine, causing more of the bricks of the fortress surrounding my heart to crack; a few more, and all the feelings I'd been suppressing would break free.

I expected Quinn to tug me to my feet, but he didn't move. Instead he simply cradled my hand, gazing down at mine resting comfortably in his. His hold was gentle, as he always was in his devotion to me, yet firm, a testament to his belief in the strength I couldn't quite see in myself.

He ran a thumb across my knuckles, causing a shudder of warmth to ripple over me. A deep look filled his gaze as he peered up at me. He slowly grinned, almost...mischievously. "Are you feeling well enough for an adventure, Gemma?"

I managed a nod. In truth I was a little tired and a piercing headache was beginning at my temples, but I'd go anywhere so long as it was with him; I'd missed his companionship these past several days.

Even after he helped me to my feet, he didn't relinquish my hand. I analyzed the way he held it, trying to determine whether it was a *protective* hold or...something else. But one thing was certain: the longer he held it, the deeper the feelings my fears fought to keep back seeped into my heart; if Quinn held my hand much longer, I was certain they'd finally be victorious.

Silence reigned as we walked the corridors at my usual slow pace, but Quinn didn't seem the least bit impatient. I studied his profile in search of the truth concerning his feelings, but his countenance betrayed no answers. While part of me missed when things had been simpler, overall I liked the way the dynamic between us was shifting...and hoped they'd only continue to progress.

Our changing relationship left me feeling surprisingly shy, but I gathered my resolve with a wavering breath. "I'm relieved you sought out my company. I was afraid you were avoiding me." This wasn't the topic I'd meant to bring up first, but it was the one that had weighed heaviest on my mind.

He slowed as he glanced down at me. “Never, Gemma. I just...it’s complicated.”

“Need it be?”

He sighed. “I wish it didn’t.” Before I could inquire further, he hastily changed the subject. “You’ve been rather pensive ever since our conversation in the herbal garden. I fear I distressed you when I expressed my desires for you to leave the tower. Is that what’s troubling you?”

I bit my lip, unsurprised the conversation had shifted to my well-being, even as my heart warmed that he’d noticed my melancholy; despite my fears, he wasn’t as indifferent as he pretended.

“That conversation isn’t what’s occupying my thoughts.” It was my feelings for *him*, but that was the last thing I wanted to admit. Naturally, his careful observation noticed my growing blush and his concern deepened...as did his curiosity.

“I will allow you to keep your secrets...even though the wondering may cause me to go mad with curiosity.” He winked, a friendly gesture which melted away the lingering tension. No matter what happened, Quinn’s presence was steady and sure.

We resumed our stroll. Though the tower wasn’t very big, our route through the twisting corridors was unfamiliar and further than I usually walked.

“Where are you taking me?” I fought to keep my growing breathlessness from my voice; the last thing I wanted was to ruin time with Quinn by causing him to worry.

He cast a rather mischievous and almost boyish look over his shoulder. Quinn had always been handsome, but this emotion lit his features, causing my heart to give a rather urgent tug.

“It’s a surprise, Gemma.” He started to turn but paused mid-step to face me once more. “I know the thought of facing the unknown is difficult for you. Do you wish to continue?”

The anxiety that usually accompanied the thought was strangely absent, replaced instead by not only the warmth that



came from being with Quinn but the thrill at the thought of an adventure. “I trust you.” It was enough.

He gave my hand a squeeze before resuming his guidance through the hallways, maintaining his slow pace so as not to tire me. I wasn’t sure where he was leading me—the tower had shifted the layout of its rooms since the last time I’d explored, and I couldn’t think of a location that would make Quinn this excited, especially within a tower he didn’t trust.

We turned a corner into a long, unknown corridor. His brow furrowed and he slowed to a stop. “What’s wrong?” I asked.

He didn’t answer, only continued to look around with a rather lost look.

“Have you forgotten the way?” The thought was surprising considering Quinn had always been good with directions, even in a place where they often changed.

“No, I—” He ventured a few steps forward, squinting at the doors despite there being plenty of light. “I know one of these leads to where I wish to take you, but which one...” He carefully took in all the doors lining the hallway. “We’ve passed three rooms.” His statement almost sounded like a question.

I glanced behind us and counted. “We have.”

His shoulders relaxed. “Then it should be only a few more doors ahead on the left.”

Still holding my hand, he gently tugged me forward while extending his other to feel each door as we passed until he reached the fifth one, which opened to a set of stairs. Staircases were common in a tower of this size, but this one looked entirely unfamiliar, the air cool and musty, as if the stairwell was usually abandoned.

I peered at him curiously but didn’t question him as we began our ascent. My breaths come out sharply even as my legs began to burn from the climb, making the exhaustion I’d tried to hide from Quinn more difficult to mask.

“This better be worth it,” I panted midst a teasing smile.

He immediately swiveled to face me, expression concerned. “Are you tired?”

I considered lying but knew his observation was too astute for him to fall for it. “Not tired enough. My curiosity is far stronger. I’m eager to discover what mysterious location requires so arduous a journey.”

He bit his lip as his gaze drifted up the twisting stairs. “I can only hope that the next time the tower shifts its rooms it’ll make this one more accessible.”

My eyebrows rose. “You anticipate this not being our only journey to this secret destination of yours?”

His grin returned, softening the worry lining his expression “That’s my greatest hope.”

I’d been intrigued by the purpose of this unexpected adventure before, but now my curiosity was almost overpowering. He noticed the emotion and his grin grew.

After several more exhausting minutes that required another brief rest, we finally reached the top, where a single door awaited us on the landing. The nearby window offered a breathtaking view. The invisible barrier that normally surrounded the tower had faded, another sign of its weakening magic, which allowed me to take a moment to rest and lean out. A wave of dizziness immediately overcame me from the towering height, so instead of looking down I tipped my head back to peer up at the turret just above me, close enough for me to realize we were on the top floor.

“I’ve never been so high.” Though it was a little frightening, it was also exhilarating, giving me hope that I was braver than I’d initially believed. I leaned my elbows against the windowsill and took a moment to enjoy the fresh autumn air against my face, damp after the exertion from our strenuous climb.

Heat seeped over me as Quinn stepped up behind me, dispelling my shivers. Together we admired the view. I strained my gaze to peer as far into the distance as I could,

searching for my home even though I doubted it was within viewing distance.

I didn't remain at the window for long before my curiosity drew my attention to the door, desperate to discover what possibly lay beyond. What room would the tower keep so high, separate from the rest of the world?

Sensing my desires, Quinn reached around me to open the door. I stepped inside...only to stop short. The room was a replica of the apothecary from the Malvagarian palace, a place I was intimately familiar with considering the long hours I'd spent there being treated for my various ailments over the years.

Memories from my life before the tower stirred to within me, but instead of the usual dark ones that frequently haunted me, these were pleasant—the kindness of the healer who often tended me, Quinn's steady presence and support during every visit, the times Drake had tried to make me smile whenever I was nervous about a treatment, the frequent occasions Briar or my father had accompanied me, Reve's stories she'd told to distract me...my family.

An ache enveloped me. Being apart from them had been the most difficult aspect of my imprisonment, but I'd eventually learned to suppress that longing, alongside the other emotions that were too painful to feel. But I was tired of hiding the weaker parts of myself behind the fears I used as a shield.

I tentatively lowered it...and a wave of homesickness I hadn't allowed myself to experience in years washed over me, aching yet almost relieving. Overwhelmed, I sank onto a chair.

Quinn crouched in front of me, eyes concerned. "Are you alright?"

"It's just...so much." And unexpected. To have a replica of a place from home only reminded me of the life I'd left behind, one that was continuing...without me. "What is such a place doing here?"

“I found it during my search for an escape. I’m unsurprised such a room was included within the tower. What I don’t understand is why it’s tucked so far away when you’ve spent much of our imprisonment needing it.”

“Why did you bring me here?” I asked in a tentative whisper, hoping it was for the reason I myself yearned for.

“To fuel your passion. I keep recalling the way you light up whenever you work with herbs, the reverence that fills your voice whenever you discuss them...it’s similar to the passion that filled me when I was training to become a knight.”

*Passion...* several months ago I’d never have imagined such a word could be applied to me, but it was the perfect one to describe the emotion that enveloped me whenever I worked with herbs. He’d voiced my silent desires, ones I’d been unable to fully understand. My heart lifted in hope as I took the room in again, seeing it in a new light.

“What future could I possibly create with such a passion?” There was only one I could think of, an explanation for why he’d brought me to the apothecary rather than the herb garden.

His smile was soft. “Becoming a healer.”

My breath caught. “A...*healer*?” I’d never imagined I might ever be able to do something so useful. “But...I’m a sickly princess.”

“No,” he said gently. “You’re simply a princess who’s *been ill*, but your illnesses don’t define you. There’s so much more to you, Gemma. Can’t you see how strong you’ve become? You are so much more than the limits you put on yourself.”

My heart pounded wildly, not in fear but in hope. I ached to believe him, to see myself as he saw me.

With great difficulty, I tore my gaze away from his in order to take in the apothecary. I’d anticipated spending my entire life being forever defined by what occurred within these walls. For the first time I wondered if my future with this room would be different than the one I’d always expected.

It was a future I’d never envisioned for myself. Healers came from the lower classes, never from the nobility, and

certainly never from *royalty*. “But still, princesses don’t—”

“You need not separate the parts of yourself,” he said, as usual sensing my unspoken protests and silencing them. “You seem to believe that being a princess is preventing you from becoming anything else, but it is simply one aspect of what makes you Gemma. There’s no need to limit yourself; being a healer won’t change your royal identity. You can be both.”

I glanced around the apothecary once more, this time seeing it not as a room where I’d often been healed but instead as a place of *healing*. “Could I...?”

“If you find joy exploring herbalism, then you should pursue it. No more walls, Gemma.”

I could feel them trying to erect in an attempt to keep my desires trapped. I’d been building these barriers my entire life and I was tired of them, tired of limiting myself, of living below what I knew I could be.

Quinn’s breath caressed my ear as he leaned in close. “Even if we never escape this tower, you can still choose to no longer be bound by the prison you’ve created for yourself. Break free, Gemma.”

*Break free...*

His earnest plea stoked the fire that was currently no more than a single spark, a flame I yearned to grow. With it I could embrace the path I’d never imagined for myself. Even if I had, the old Gemma would have stood on the threshold gazing longingly down it rather than allow herself to take even a single step, for I’d trapped myself for so long I was even afraid to dream.

But what would I dream about if I allowed myself to?

I closed my eyes and imagined a life where I could fully live—one where I was no longer constantly bedridden, where I was loved by my family and treated normally rather than constantly coddled and kept apart from them because of my condition; for every day to be spent fueling my passion as I worked with herbs and used them to help others, for I understood all too well the pain, loneliness, and insecurity that

came from constant illness. If I could help others trapped in a similar position...my heart swelled at the wonderful thought.

I could see myself standing in the apothecary in a simple dress, working without growing tired. I handled each herb with a familiarity that had come from much practice, fully confident in my knowledge and my tasks to heal, to soothe, and to help. I could only imagine the joy that would come from such a future.

Someone else filled this vision, creating an even more beautiful picture—a man as familiar as he was dear, showing me another dream I'd been fighting to keep from my heart. My yearning swelled, and with it I knew I wanted more than purpose—I wanted to spend my life at the side of someone I cared deeply for. I was startled by the direction of my thoughts as well as the intensity of the feelings I'd only tentatively begun exploring, secret longings I was beginning to realize I wanted more than I'd ever wanted anything else.

My eyes startled open with a sharp gasp.

“Gemma?” Quinn sounded worried. “Are you alright?”

I couldn't look at him, afraid my fragile hold on my feelings would snap the moment I did. Desperate for a distraction, I forced myself to imagine not my guard but instead the time I might spend here as a healer as I slowly circled the room, taking in the shelves laden with jars of herbs and those that hung from the eaves. The herbal garden was primarily a garden and had thus been sparse by way of supplies, but the apothecary contained many more, including more advanced tools, ready-made remedies, a few beds, and not only more books, but more advanced herbal guides, as well as the general feeling of home.

I explored each plant and tool with my touch, often pausing to examine something more closely, particularly the faded titles on the books' spines. The more I explored, the more I wanted to *keep* exploring.

I glanced back at Quinn, who nodded. His gentle encouragement was all I needed. With a wavering breath, I opened the nearest book to the first page, which contained a

recipe for a simple tonic for soothing sore throats. I went through the list of ingredients, using the book as reference to find them. I studied each carefully before proceeding to chop, mince, mix, and create.

Quinn remained faithfully beside me, helping me with whatever I needed. I was grateful for his steady presence, not only doing whatever I required of him but also serving as my confidant, a man who helped me be my best and live the life I deserved.

At first we worked in silence, but then I couldn't resist the opportunity to ask him questions to help me come to know him on a deeper level. He shared stories about his childhood and his studies, speaking in particular about the years it'd taken him to persuade his parents, who'd wanted him to become an advisor to the king rather than a knight, which had always been his ambition. I especially enjoyed hearing about the hours he'd spent with his grandfather, whom he was especially close to. It was his grandfather who had eventually taught Quinn how to whittle, and he'd grown in his craft by recreating the beautiful things he discovered in nature, which he also loved.

Time seemed to still as his words enveloped me. I felt I wasn't just making a tonic but also exploring the part of myself that cared for Quinn, one I was coming to realize had been a part of me for a long time...I just hadn't recognized it. Instead I'd been so trapped by the fear that no one would ever see beyond my constant sickliness in order to love me that I'd been unable to love in return.

I finished the tonic. At first I stood admiring the pasty green liquid, feeling a sense of pride, warm and comforting. *I'd* created this.

Beaming, I swiveled around to show Quinn, only to become transfixed by the admiration filling his eyes. My breath caught, and for a long moment I found myself trapped by his gaze, unable to move. Then all at once I embraced him.

"Thank you for your help." But even after I'd extended my gratitude, I found I was unable to pull away. The feel of his

arms around me felt different and far more special than it had when he'd embraced me after rescuing me from the disappearing library. Perhaps it was because this time I was turning to him not only for comfort, but solely for *him*...and for all I felt towards him.

I could no longer fight against the emotions I'd been trying not to feel. My fears were nothing to the beauty of what I was experiencing now. How could I hold back my growing love for a man who had been the most caring, faithful friend?

*Don't fight it, I urged myself. Be brave. Allow yourself to explore this most beautiful of paths.*

I tentatively opened my heart...and once it was unlocked, there was no stopping the warm and beautiful feelings that enfolded me. I no longer wanted to. My heart opened further to reveal all I'd so carefully protected within it: Quinn was not just my unfailingly loyal guard who saw the best in me, he was my knight in shining armor, my dearest friend.

These feelings filled me with light, happiness, and all the love I felt for my guard who I now realized fully possessed my heart, even long before I'd realized it. Overwhelmed, I peered up at Quinn, only to lose myself once more in the tenderness filling his gaze. With that one look, there was no longer any doubt: I loved him.

What greater dream could I ever have than of him?



## CHAPTER 9

*M*y recent revelation concerning Quinn was both beautiful and torturous. It brought light to my otherwise monotonous days even as the secret haunted me. I yearned to share my feelings with him, yet I'd never done something so brave. I was a shy princess who'd spent my entire life trapped by sickness, often in bed within the same four walls that were nothing more than a prison.

While keeping my feelings protected within my heart felt safe, I realized this beautiful emotion was yet another victim to the prisons that filled my life, one too precious to remain locked away forever. The thought of confessing my love felt terrifying, a gesture braver than anything I'd ever done, well beyond the reach of the old Gemma.

Yet hadn't I already begun to do brave things? I was breaking the barriers that held me back one by one, slowly and often with great trepidation, but breaking them all the same. Overcoming such an obstacle made my feelings seem less frightening and instead more a challenge I desired to overcome, a mountain whose summit I yearned to reach. If I could climb to the top, I was certain nothing else would stand in my way in the life I wanted to live.

Yet fear was a very effective jailer, often visiting to whisper dark reminders of the reservations holding me back. *You can't confess your love. Surely he'll reject your feelings, for he has no reason to care for a sickly and useless princess.*

My fears quickly whispered another horrible possibility to my anxious mind: if he didn't feel the same way not only

would our friendship change, but since he and I were together all the time...in close quarters...indefinitely...any unrequited feelings would be all the more torturous—and humiliating.

These dark thoughts curled around my heart, making it difficult to untangle myself from their hold. I knew I shouldn't believe them, a battle easier to win when my observations of Quinn gave me reason to hope that he cared for me the way I longed for. His expression was always so soft, his eyes tender...surely he wouldn't look at me in such a way if all he felt was indifference.

Due to his position as my guard, I knew I had to be the one to make the first move if I had any hope of creating something more between us. The thought was both frightening and exhilarating, especially when I imagined my beautiful future should he accept my feelings. Even the tower would become a less stifling prison if I had love to live for. With it and my newly discovered purpose with my herbs, the future was looking far brighter than the shadows from my past had ever given me reason to hope.

Once I had decided to share my feelings, I waited for the perfect opportunity...and one soon came. I awoke early one morning to the sun peeking over the horizon and the sunrise tumbling through my bedroom window.

I pulled on a dressing gown and pattered to the balcony in my bare feet. Usually my unhappy memories and fear of heights kept me away from it, but this morning I found myself drawn to the beauty lighting up my room.

My breath hitched in wonder the moment I stepped outside. The sky was ablaze with gold and orange light, the perfect backdrop to the surrounding forest whose leaves were cloaked in the colors of autumn. The entire world was orange, ruby, and gold, a sight so wondrous I was left breathless.

I settled on the stone floor and slipped my arms through the railing, holding my body close to the tower, a way to ground myself as I savored the beauty before me. In this position I watched as the sun rose higher, tinging the sky with blue and casting patterns of golden light across the tree tops.

Despite the lovely sight, my heart ached with a strange longing to be watching the unfolding beauty not from several stories above but from the ground; not to be looking down but instead standing beneath the canopy of branches, a cocoon different than the one I currently inhabited but one I was sure would feel just as secure.

Quinn's familiar footsteps sounded behind me, dispelling my musings. Nerves twisted my stomach, such a contrast to the warm wonder the scene had caused to envelop me. We were alone, making this the perfect moment to share my feelings with Quinn. I couldn't have asked for a more beautiful and peaceful setting.

I gathered every ounce of courage close and with a wavering breath swiveled around to face Quinn. He hovered near the doorway, his brows drawn with surprise and obvious concern.

"Are you alright, Princess Gemma?" I sensed his unspoken question in the inquiry—why was I on the balcony I'd previously always avoided? Though the balcony was recently formed—having been created a year into my imprisonment as the tower encouraged me outdoors—this was where I'd stood as I watched Mother and Reve abandon me after trapping me in the tower. I used to stand here every day to watch for Mother or Reve's return...only they never came, and I'd eventually given up.

I motioned to the view. "It's so lovely. I can't believe I've never noticed before." To think I'd wasted so many sunrises within the walls of the tower. He still looked puzzled, so I continued. "I suppose the beauty was stronger than the memories of this balcony."

His shoulders relaxed. "I'm grateful time has healed the hurt you experienced from that horrible event so you're able to enjoy such a wondrous morning. There have been many lovely views in the locations the tower has brought you to."

I felt a twinge of regret that I'd chosen to experience so little of the beautiful views the tower had offered over the years. If the turret ever regained enough magic to shift

locations again, I would be certain not to miss any of the new wonders it brought me to.

In his unique way, Quinn sensed my melancholy and stepped closer, his jaw set with determination. “I promise you’ll escape this tower, and then nothing will keep you from experiencing all life has in store for you ever again.”

To see more of the world...for a moment, I allowed myself to imagine the possibility of having more moments like this, and for once the thought of leaving didn’t feel quite as terrifying or even impossible. Yet I still couldn’t quite let go of the security that came from the tower. I tightened my arms around the railing.

“Perhaps.”

He frowned at my answer, knowing me too well for me to hide the reason I still resisted the thought of breaking free. He studied me a thoughtful moment before sighing and bridging the remaining distance to stand beside me. My heart flared to life at his proximity, reminding me of my purpose. My nerves returned in a rush, making it difficult to find my voice.

“Won’t you sit down?” I managed. “It’s rather disconcerting having you loom over me.”

He hesitated before settling close beside me so that I was enveloped in his warm, cedar-wood scent, which both lent me courage and escalated my anxiety. I hoped that after my confession such closeness between us would become commonplace rather than something to be shy about.

This desire was strong enough to push past the fear blocking my voice. But I’d no sooner regathered my courage than Quinn broke the silence, cutting off my confession before I could even speak. “Is there another reason you ventured to the balcony? Did you have a nightmare?”

The words I’d prepared departed in a rush. I released a whooshing breath. “No, nothing like that.”

I sensed his gaze and glanced over to find him watching me with a furrowed brow. “It’s much easier to see you in the light.” He gave his head a rigid shake. “Forgive me for prying,

but you seem rather out of sorts. Please know that if there's anything I can do to help you, you need only ask."

My heart swelled at his loyalty. His words were the invitation I desperately needed to regather my courage and the words that seemed to have scattered around me like the autumn leaves carpeting the ground below. Even after I'd found them, it took a moment to arrange them in the proper order.

"I...have something on my mind that I want to share with you..." My voice faltered again and I hastily looked away, pressing my forehead against the balcony bars to stare out across the landscape that stretched as far as my eyes could see, my gaze unfocused, causing the colors to blur together.

"What is it, Princess?"

Despite his gentle tone my fear had returned, rendering me silent. He waited a patient moment before scooting closer to rest his hand over my first clenching the railing bar until I relaxed.

"What is it, Gemma?"

His tender use of my name was the key to unlocking my bravery, for with it I felt we were more than a princess and her faithful guard, but two companions who'd grown ever closer over the years we'd spent together. I felt the walls guarding my confession crumble, releasing my feelings from the protective prison that had kept them bound.

I took another wavering breath to push away the last of my fear. "I—I love you, Quinn."

The moment the words escaped, my shyness returned. Heat enveloped my cheeks and I pressed my face back against the railing...and waited.

Silence followed my confession, not warm and comfortable as it'd been moments before, but taut with tension. It was just as my fears had warned me when they'd tried to convince me not to confess my feelings. But despite the awkwardness surrounding us, the bright hope that had encouraged me to open my heart wasn't entirely extinguished.

*It's too soon to despair*, it tried to reassure me. Surely his silence was simply because he was shocked.

I stole a tentative peek at him. His face was pale and his eyes wide with surprise, but they were also lit...with joy? The glimpse of this tender emotion caused my frightened heart to lift.

But my hope was short-lived before it crumbled at the guarded look that suddenly settled over him. The joy I thought I'd seen vanished in an instant, replaced by fierce regret.

“Gemma—*Princess*—I'm deeply honored by your feelings, but—”

I stiffened, knowing exactly where this conversation was going and unsure I was strong enough to endure it. *He's rejecting me.*

Even though the fearful part of me had expected it, the rejection hurt all the same, a pain made worse when it confirmed all the stories I'd spent my life telling myself—no one would ever want an ill, pathetic princess. Despite having believed in this future for so long, it was still crushing.

He watched as my shoulders shrank as I curled into myself and he scooted closer, looking less regretful and more desperate. “Please, Gemma, I'm not trying to—I just...don't want to hurt you. You don't truly care for me the way you think you do.”

My sadness shifted in an instant. My gaze snapped to his. “You doubt my sincerity?”

He hesitated. “While I don't doubt your feelings, for the past three years we've been almost completely alone within this tower...with no other men. It's not surprising that you'd think...you feel more for me than you actually do.”

I frantically tried to make sense of his words. “You think I care for you because there are no other options?”

He shifted anxiously, looking as if he wanted to reach out but was holding himself back. “I've protected you for many years. It's understandable that you'd grow attached...I don't want you to force yourself to care for me.”

As well-meaning as his words were, they made me feel like a child. How could I think otherwise when the man who knew me best only viewed my attempts to take control of my life as naive? If *he* couldn't see more in me, how could I possibly see it in myself?

I swallowed the flare of tears suddenly clogging my throat. "I'm not forcing anything. I genuinely love you."

Again, hope and despair warred over his expression. "It's truly my greatest honor for you to feel anything towards me, Princess, but the truth of the matter is you deserve far more than me."

I stared at him in disbelief. No one had ever shown me greater kindness and devotion than he had, and yet he felt himself *undeserving*? "What obstacle could possibly keep us apart? You're the son of a lord, a title that makes you a proper match for a princess, especially a younger one who's never had any expectation to make a political alliance for her kingdom."

He bit his lip. "It's not my title that's the objection..."

Then what could it possibly be? I studied him closely. For a moment he stared back with a look that was almost one of... yearning... before he closed his eyes and hastily looked away with a rigid shake of his head. "Not only is your title befitting my own, but you're one of my father's most devoted knights, a man who's repeatedly demonstrated his loyalty; the fact you're in this tower at all when you had the option of remaining free is testament enough of your character."

He shifted again, looking more unsettled than I'd ever seen him. Emotion rarely slipped through his rigid mask, for he guarded his feelings almost as faithfully as he protected me. But his mask faltered now, allowing me a glimpse of his vulnerability. I watched the war of his inner battle as it played across his expression before it ended in an instant.

His shoulders slumped with a weary sigh. "There's so much more to it than you could possibly know. I wish I could tell you, but it's not your burden to bear."

My emotions rose. “After all you’ve done to help carry my own burdens, how could you not grant me the same opportunity to help shoulder yours in return?”

“It’s too heavy to force upon you.”

I lifted my chin. “Shouldn’t I be the judge of that? Your position as my guard doesn’t allow you to dictate my course.”

I blinked in surprise at the defiance filling my tone. I rarely stood up for myself. But as proud as I was for taking this step, I knew it wasn’t enough. Attempting to seize control over my own happiness was impossible when what I most desired was impossible to claim; as desperately as I wanted to hold on to him, Quinn had rejected me, causing him to slip away.

He stared at me in shock at my outburst before offering a soft smile. “Of course you should take control of your life; I want nothing more for you than your happiness. But my position as your guard makes it impossible to offer what you think you want from me. I’m your protector. Being with you would distract me from my duties, and nothing is worth jeopardizing your safety.” His firm tone gentled. “You have a tendency to set your sights lower than you deserve. But the truth of the matter is you’re destined for greater things. You must see yourself as a princess and settle for more than a mere guard.”

Each reason felt like nothing more than an excuse. In his eyes I sensed a secret that confirmed he wasn’t telling me the entire story, forcing me to fill in the blanks on my own.

“These are all merely excuses when the truth of the matter is our not being together is not about these perceived obstacles, but your own desires: you don’t care for me enough to be with me.”

His jaw clenched and he refused to meet my eyes. He didn’t even try to deny my statement...which only confirmed it. My breaths came out quick and sharp. This was the outcome my fears had anticipated when they’d tried to persuade me from my confession...and they’d been right. Despite the encouragement I’d received in the past that if I but faced my fears I could overcome them, instead they were



becoming real, reminding me why it was dangerous to try to rise above them in order to dream of possibilities of making something more of my life.

I'd been foolish to think there was something beyond this tower, this life...*me*.

Quinn saw the change settle over me the moment it occurred—the all-encompassing defeat. “Gemma—er, Princess, are you alright?”

His eyes widened as a tear trickled down my cheek before I could stop it, a falter in my composure that made me feel even weaker than I already did.

“*Gemma?*”

I couldn't answer him, too overcome to even attempt to explain what I was feeling. But Quinn seemed to find the silence unbearable. As my second tear escaped, he straightened to his usual defensive stance, as if readying to fight off the emotions tormenting me...despite the fact that he'd been the one to cause them.

“Tell me what I can do for you, Gemma.” Desperation wrenched his voice, pleading for me to confide in him. But I'd already tried to, only to get burned. How could I risk becoming hurt again? For now that he'd rejected my sweet, tender feelings, I was certain he'd reject anything else I attempted to share.

Fear whispered these thoughts to my mind over and over, compelling me to believe them, especially when their initial warnings had already been proven correct.

Though deep down I knew Quinn hadn't intended to hurt me and was therefore no less worthy of it, his rejection had still shattered the trust I'd tentatively extended towards him, a thought made more unbearable because I'd never been brave enough to give it to anyone else.

I stared unseeing across the surrounding scenery. Moments earlier it had still been beautiful, but now it was tainted. Like the last time I'd come to this balcony to watch for my mother's return, once more it had become a place of

disappointment, one of many that continuously tainted my life. Though my tower had protected me from the outside world, it hadn't been able to guard me from heartache when I'd dared wish for something beyond its walls.

I'd been foolish to attempt to be brave, to open up myself up to the possibility of *more*. There was no world beyond this tower, and it was time I accept it and be content within my prison.

"Gemma?" Emotion wrenched Quinn's voice and I was certain his expression matched his desperation, but I didn't dare look at him. Whatever empathy I'd find would only be given out of duty because he'd failed to protect me in this instance, despite his desires to.

Deep down I knew his rejecting me had been solely to protect my heart before I lost it more completely to him and his disinterest caused it to break further, but that didn't change the fact his rejection had broken it all the same, leaving me with no idea how to repair its shattered pieces.

Suddenly the proximity I'd yearned for became unbearable. I couldn't remain here a moment longer. I stood without a backwards glance. "I was wrong to venture out onto this balcony; there's nothing beyond this tower, nor will there ever be."

And without another word I left him sitting at the railing, one I knew in my heart I'd never return to.

## CHAPTER 10

Try as I might, I couldn't brush off Quinn's rejection. It seeped into my heart, a sadness too powerful to resist the longer it eclipsed me, causing me to become withdrawn and solemn. No matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't pull myself out of my melancholy; instead I sank deeper with each passing day.

My heartache came from more than Quinn not caring for me the way I felt for him. It had taken a lot of strength to tentatively attempt to break free from the limits I'd placed on myself...only for the attempt to shatter. As a result, the bars of my prison grew thicker, barring me from the future I'd finally allowed myself to hope for, one my fears had succeeded in convincing me was impossible.

My mood was not lost on my companions, especially Quinn. I sensed his growing worry, and due to the nature of our last conversation, he undoubtedly feared he was the cause of my distress. Unable to bear a confrontation, I did my best to avoid him, choosing to withdraw further into myself. Even with all its limits and insecurity, my mind felt like a far safer place to be, my doubts a shelter where I could hide, just like the security of the tower. It hadn't yet led me astray, so why would it do so now?

Quinn sensed my unspoken desires and honored them by keeping his distance, as if doing so could lessen the pain he'd caused me. Yet his duties meant he was always nearby, guarding me vigilantly, as if his extra attention could make up for what had transpired between us. I ignored him as best I

could, not because I felt he deserved the silent treatment—I cared too much for him to be so petty, for it wasn't his fault he couldn't care for me the way I felt for him—but my pain made it impossible to do anything else.

My heartache caused me to become ill once more, a condition which as usual trapped me in bed...but for once it didn't feel like a prison, but instead a haven. For this sickness was different than the one that often afflicted me—instead of being an illness of my body it was a condition of my heart, making it more difficult to endure than even my most serious sicknesses. It was more than the pain of unrequited love—it was also a loss of hope, for it wasn't until I'd allowed myself to imagine a future with Quinn that I realized how desperately I wanted it.

The days since his rejection blended into one another. The only noticeable difference in today compared to the days that had come before was when I caught a glimmer from within my bedroom mirror, a spark of light that revealed it had something to show me.

I tried to ignore it, but it was as if the mirror was reaching invisible tentacles out to entwine with my curiosity, a silent urgency to look within it. Attempting to ignore this lure didn't make it go away—it only intensified, beckoning me closer to peer into the glass...

I didn't fight it, having experienced it often enough to know that in the end it always succeeded in getting me to heed it. Even though I had no doubt it'd be bad, part of me even *wanted* to see the vision awaiting me; the pain that would surely result would serve as a distraction from the one currently riddling my heart.

I mechanically walked towards the mirror. My movement attracted the notice of my handmaiden from where she'd been working on her trousseau. Her shoulders tensed and she swiveled around to watch me approach the looking glass. I sensed her unspoken protests, for she knew all too well what sort of images the mirror would show me, even if she had never seen any herself.

I slowed several feet away, finally hesitating. I was unsure whether I had the emotional strength to bear whatever the mirror would reveal. Its lure intensified, stronger now that I stood so close. At its urgent tug, I obediently heeded its silent wishes to close the remaining distance and peer inside.

I expected to see another vision from the tower...so I was surprised when at first I only saw my reflection. I'd always avoided mirrors considering they only reflected the effects from my condition—pasty skin, gaunt eyes, my pretty features dimmed by illness—and this was no exception. As I stared at my appearance, I analyzed each and every flaw. It was no wonder Quinn hadn't been able to see past *this*.

As if my negative thoughts had acted as a silent cue, the familiar hazy grey mist clouded the mirror's surface. It swirled lazily before clearing to reveal the very memory I'd spent the entire week trying and failing to forget.

I tensed and tried to look away, but my gaze remained locked to the scene from the balcony as it unfolded across the glass—my confession, Quinn's rejection, my fears' triumph that robbed me of the future I longed for, making the bars of my cage impenetrable. My heartache expanded, consuming me until I feared I'd drown.

Even after the vision finally faded I couldn't move. It took a long moment for anything to penetrate my anguish, but gradually I became aware of my handmaiden's frantic voice.

“Princess? *Princess?*” Melina's voice, taut with concern.

When I didn't answer she cautiously approached. I scarcely heard her earnest pleas for me to step away from the mirror, nor noticed her turning me away, finally severing the connection that had forced me to look into the glass. I reluctantly allowed her to ease me into a seat.

“What did you see?” Melina's voice was sharp, urgent.

I didn't answer, nor could I still my shaking. I simply remained rigid in the chair, my hand pressed against my pounding heart, each beat a measure of the memory's painful effect.

She crouched in front of me. “What’s troubling you, Princess?” Her voice was so gentle.

I couldn’t bear to explain. It was bad enough being trapped in the memory, only to be forced to relive it yet again in such vivid detail.

“Princess?”

I squeezed my eyes shut, silently urging the memory to leave, but it only continued to play out against my eyelids, haunting me more than any other vision the tower had shown me, for this one had been the manifestation of my greatest fear, one which only confirmed that the longings of my heart would forever remain out of reach.

I ached to escape, to do *something* to free myself from the pain...but what?

The tower stirred, so faintly it took a moment for me to decipher its urgent desires to take me somewhere. I debated the wisdom of listening to it before gratefully seizing the distraction it offered. I stood slowly, keeping my hand on the wall to remain steady.

“I—need to leave this room, to—” My explanation faltered and I simply left. Melina silently followed, clearly not wanting me to remain alone while in such a state.

Quinn was in his usual place near the door but I didn’t even look at him as I passed, certain doing so would cause me to lose my fragile hold on my faltering composure. But though I tried to ignore him, I sensed his presence as he silently followed us through the corridors at a distance.

I had no particular destination in mind, so I allowed myself to follow the tower’s invisible guidance...only to find myself standing outside the door to the apothecary, no longer at the top of the tower but shuffled closer to my bedroom.

This was the last place I wanted to be. I’d avoided both the herbal garden and the apothecary ever since Quinn’s rejection, for not only did they remind me of him, but my acute heartache had eclipsed the joy that came from my budding hobby. I was almost afraid of exploring my passion and

allowing anything to penetrate my grief, for though my pain was confining, it also felt almost...safe.

There was little point in exploring my growing passion for herbology, not when Quinn's rejection had only proved that any attempt to break free from my limitations was futile. It was better to let my passion go now rather than deepen my love for it, only for it to eventually slip away, a loss that would be even more unbearable after losing Quinn.

I hastily turned away from the door and walked determinedly in the opposite direction, down several other corridors, and even up another flight of stairs...only to find myself face to face with the apothecary door once more. I immediately turned and walked away, but no matter which hallway I traipsed or my intended destination, I always found myself at the same place.

The tower was certainly stubborn. I sensed its struggling magic, which quickly became exhausted with the repeated effort of moving the apothecary. I too was growing tired from my strenuous trek. This as well as my concern for its well-being compelled me to finally give up the fight.

"I don't see why you're so insistent on having me continue my herbalism studies," I muttered quietly enough so only the tower would hear.

The tower responded in only a single word: *healing*.

I nearly snorted, but I'd no sooner dismissed the ridiculous idea than a possibility occurred to me: could it mend a broken heart? My mind caught hold upon that idea. This was, after all, an enchanted tower. Perhaps it had powers that could relieve the all-encompassing heartache I longed to escape.

With that thought I finally heeded the tower's wishes. I felt its fierce relief and a sense of peace as I stepped inside the familiar apothecary walls; it was as if I'd entered a haven, a place far safer than where I'd allowed my thoughts to drift this past week.

Though I was in no state to actually work, now that I was here I didn't want to leave. I strolled around the room to finger

the bottled remedies, allowing myself at least this brief interaction with my passion.

Melina had followed me into the room. “You’re not going to work?” she asked.

I shook my head. “I don’t think I can.”

She was silent a moment. “I know it’s not my place to ask, but...what’s happened? You’ve never seemed so upset, not even the day...we became trapped.”

I paused in tracing the bottle of fireweed leaves in order to compare my current feelings to those from what had previously been the most traumatic moment of my life. The pain from Quinn’s rejection felt far more raw. “That is an accurate assessment.”

I spared her a single glance and registered her shock. “What has happened?”

I hadn’t planned on telling her, for the last thing I wanted was to relive the moment. But being back in this room had caused the walls I’d built around my heart to falter, allowing my vulnerability to slip free.

“I wish there was a remedy for a broken heart.” Though I doubted any herb would be strong enough to numb the all-consuming pain I currently felt.

Confusion puckered her brow...before her eyes widened. “Quinn?” she whispered.

My gaze darted to the door to ensure it was shut in order to block Quinn—who undoubtedly stood faithfully on the other side—from our conversation before I slowly nodded.

Melina didn’t speak for a long moment as she struggled to find the right words. “What happened?”

I wearily settled in a seat with a heavy sigh, already exhausted from the confrontation. Melina scooted a chair over and leaned close with a look inviting me to confide in her.

And suddenly I couldn’t my pain contained any longer. “You were wrong. He’s not in love with me at all. He told me so.”



Her breath caught and for an agonizing moment she stared in disbelief. “When did this happen?”

“Last week, after I confessed my own feelings for him.”

I half expected her to look triumphant that she’d accurately understood my love for my guard long before I did, but she only looked somber. “And...he rejected them?”

Her saying the words out loud confirmed them. A fresh stab of pain pierced my heart. “He did. I’ve not only been haunted by that moment all week, but the mirror just forced me to relive it in acute and agonizing detail.”

She continued to stare, seeming at a loss for words, while I sat miserably in silence. “There must be a reason he rejected you.”

“It’s because he doesn’t love me,” I said hollowly.

“I don’t believe that. You must tell me exactly what he said.”

I was certain it wouldn’t make a difference, but I forced myself to think back to that horrible moment in order to recall his exact words. “He said he was honored by my feelings before he tried to convince me I didn’t actually care for him the way I thought I did.”

Though she rolled her eyes, to my surprise she was smiling. “So he didn’t actually claim *not* to love you.”

“That makes no difference. He doesn’t.”

She shook her head. “He *does*, I’m certain of it. The way he looks at you...it’s how Corbin looks at me.”

My heart twinged in guilt at the mention of her fiancé. While Quinn didn’t seem to care for me the way I did for him, Melina had the assurance of being loved by the man who possessed her heart...yet no certainty of a future with him so long as she remained trapped within the tower. I wasn’t sure which was a worse fate.

“Have I told you the entire story of how Corbin and I got together?” she suddenly asked.

I was almost tempted to lie rather than invite her to share her happy love story, something which would be an unbearable recitation considering my own didn't have a happy ending. But I reluctantly shook my head.

She took a long breath and began. "About a year before we got together, I shared my feelings with him. I'd noticed several encouraging signs that our friendship was deepening into something more, leaving me certain he'd reciprocate my feelings...only for him to reject them."

I'd never heard about this part of her romance. "He did? But...you two are engaged. How did that happen if he initially rejected you?"

Her smile was wistful. "Our engagement is only the end of the story, not the journey it took to get to this point."

I only continued to stare. "But...he must love you, so why would he reject your feelings?"

She sighed. "Because as dear as our men are, they suffer from an ailment known as manly pride. I later learned that Corbin had been terrified of accepting my feelings due to his circumstances. He comes from a poor background and grew up witnessing his father's regret at being unable to adequately provide for his wife and family. Corbin absorbed these feelings and grew to fear marriage because he believed any woman he chose would be miserable in the life he had to offer."

"What changed his mind?" I asked.

She smiled. "*Love*. In the end, it was an emotion stronger than his fears. Our feelings for one another made it too difficult to remain apart, so he finally discussed his reservations with his parents...only for them to assure him how happy they were together. Knowing his mother didn't regret marrying his father finally gave Corbin the courage to pursue a relationship with me." She leaned forward, her expression earnest. "Love initially kept my beau away from me, even if at the time I didn't know that was the reason. I'm wondering if something similar is happening between you and Quinn."

I ached to cling to the hope she offered, even as I fought to keep the emotion buried. “But...what reason would Quinn have for staying away?”

She shrugged. “It could be anything. But despite his distance, I recognize the way he looks at you. Nor are you the only one who’s been suffering this past week; your pain is hurting him...and not because he’s your guard. His care for you is deeper than honor and duty. Don’t give up hope. With time, I believe things will work out.”

She left me alone. For a long moment I simply sat there, allowing her words to seep over me. *Could* Quinn possibly care and was choosing to stay away for a reason other than indifference? The hope I fought to suppress tugged on my heart once more, urging me to believe.

And part of me did. My handmaiden’s story hadn’t ended when she’d been rejected, even when she’d believed it had. It’d taken time along with many twists and turns for her to achieve her happy ending...but in the end it’d come. I wasn’t sure whether an engagement was part of my own tale, but in this moment I allowed myself to believe my own story hadn’t ended either.

With this shift in my thoughts, I could finally hear the silent beckoning from the herbs filling the room as the passion I’d tried to bury began to awaken. Even if Quinn and I didn’t have a future together, there was no need to lose everything simply because I’d lost him. Despite my pain making me feel as if I couldn’t go on, life would continue, and I could find joy again...beginning now.

At my silent resolution, the tower suddenly stirred once more. It had been rather silent after leading me to this room, as if exhausted from its efforts in bringing me here. I rested my hand on the wall, allowing its faint message to seep over me—*there are more ways to cure a broken heart than with magic.*

I barely had time to ponder such a strange message before I sensed its desire to show me something. I followed its invisible guidance, and on my third turn about the room, I

suddenly noticed a tucked-away cabinet, one I'd never seen before; I half wondered if it'd only just appeared.

I crouched on my heels and peered inside to discover an ancient book. My skin tingled as I caressed the cover, and a cloud of dust surrounded me as I pulled it out. By its title I realized it was another herbal guide. Curious, I thumbed through the yellowing musty pages, scanning the faded titles of the recipes, each of which described different elixirs.

I paused on the fifth remedy and stilled, my breath catching. I read the recipe's description again, not once but twice, not daring to believe the condition it professed to aid—for it matched the one that had ailed me all these years. Could this be...a cure?

Excitement rose. I immediately got to work, gathering the needed ingredients before immersing myself in creating the elixir. As I surrounded myself in the scents of minced herbs and settled into my familiar preparations, a feeling stirred within my heart, one I'd previously thought dead.

This warmth didn't mend my broken heart, but it did provide a semblance of peace as I focused on a meaningful purpose rather than allowing myself to wallow in my own misery. If I could cling to this passion, I needn't entirely drown in darkness.

When I finished, I had a vial of orange liquid that matched the color described in the book, yet I still double-checked the ingredients and instructions to ensure I'd done it right. I had, though I still hesitated in drinking it, unsure I could trust my efforts considering my inexperience.

The tower's soft and gentle encouragement enfolded me like an invisible embrace, lending me the bravery I needed. With a wavering breath, I drank the elixir.

It was warm and soothing, and moments after sipping the citrus liquid, the exhaustion from my latest bout of illness began to dissipate, providing relief from the exhaustion that had plagued me for so long it felt like an extension of my body. I'd grown so used to carrying the burden of my condition I almost didn't notice it anymore, and though the

elixir hadn't cured all my symptoms, it did lift much of the burden from my shoulders, leaving me feeling better than I had in years.

Midst my disbelief and excitement, I tried not to get my hopes up too much just in case this remedy's effects were temporary like the many I'd tried in the past. I held the vial of tonic close, a gift from the tower that allowed me to believe that perhaps this one would be different if I took it regularly, and in this moment that was promising.

Time would tell whether this elixir would merely disguise my symptoms or actually heal me. In the meantime, though herbology hadn't cured my broken heart, it'd given me a purpose that would stave off my heartache. And that, for the moment, was a start.

## CHAPTER 11

I took the elixir over the next few days and continued to steadily improve, for each dose either eased a different symptom or alleviated others when they eventually returned. And though those flare-ups were discouraging, overall the trajectory was positive. My hopes increased, yet I wasn't ready to believe I'd found a cure, so for the time being I kept my new tonic a secret from Quinn and Melina.

But while my health was improving, my relationship with Quinn remained distant, something that grew more unbearable with each passing day. Avoiding him felt like the safer path, so despite how much I missed him, I made no move to bridge the unbearable distance. I didn't know if I dared hope that what Melina had said might be true. I was afraid if I spent too much time with him, I would look for clues that he felt the way she still believed he did, so I avoided him altogether.

Being near him only reminded me of all I'd lost; he'd become one of the frequent visions the tower showed me in its mirrors. His rejection tainted our friendship, and, unable to bear losing him completely, I stayed away in order to preserve what I could before it too was stolen; if I couldn't have Quinn, I wanted to at least keep our friendship.

I should have known I couldn't avoid him forever, for in the end his concern for my well-being was stronger than his need to keep away. Which was how he finally tucked his whittling away and left his usual guarding post to bridge the vast gulf his rejection had created between us and approach

me one afternoon as I attempted to read in the parlor. He normally didn't disturb me, especially when I studied herbology, but he'd been watching me long enough to tell I hadn't turned any pages for half an hour, my book merely a cover for my restless desperation for a distraction.

"Princess?" Quinn's voice was hesitant. Fear for the upcoming confrontation tempted me to ignore him, but he sounded so nervous and I cared too deeply for him to play such a petty game.

I looked up to find him shifting anxiously from foot to foot, so opposite his usual rigid manner. "Yes, Quinn?"

He released a whooshing breath. "Despite how long I've been trying to figure out how best to broach this conversation, I'm unsure how to begin."

My pulse hammered nervously, and for a moment I was tempted to put off a conversation that would undoubtedly be difficult to endure. But Quinn looked so anxious, giving me hope that he was also burdened by what had transpired between us. If he wouldn't let me share his other burden he'd alluded to, the least I could do was help alleviate this one.

I patted the spot beside me in the window seat, inviting him to join me, but he rigidly shook his head. My heart prickled at the rejection, but I hastily shoved the emotion away before he could detect it. "What do you wish to discuss?"

But my attempts to mask my hurt failed. He studied my expression a long moment before he silently settled beside me. Though I welcomed the cedar-scented warmth of his comforting presence, it only reminded me of the last time we'd sat so close and the painful direction that interaction had taken.

I stiffened and leaned away. "You don't have to sit near me just to appease me."

He sighed. "Believe me, I'm not doing it to appease you. If only you knew how much I long to be near you every waking moment."

My heart lurched at his words, far different than the ones he'd spoken to me before. "What?" I stammered.

The corner of his mouth lifted slightly. “Your shock isn’t surprising, not when our last conversation gave the complete opposite impression of my true feelings.”

I didn’t want to revisit that dark memory, yet the unresolved hurt made it difficult to keep it in the past where it belonged. “When you rejected me.”

Fierce regret filled him as he scooted closer. “Oh, Gemma, it pained me to do such a thing; only my caring for you gave me the strength to push you away. Yet in the days that followed, I realized that in my effort to protect your feelings I was doing the very thing I hate the tower for: taking away your choices. You should be free to choose the life you want to live.”

He hesitated before taking my hands to hold them comfortably in his, something he’d never done before. My breath caught and I kept very still in case one movement caused him to pull away.

“Quinn?” I stuttered.

“I didn’t tell you the real reason why I can’t accept your feelings, which isn’t fair to you. So I must not only apologize, but be honest with you...to share my burden if you’re certain that’s what you truly want.”

I nodded. “I want to help you, so please trust that I’m able and allow me to.”

“Please forgive me that my attempt to shelter you made you believe I doubt your strength, when nothing could be further from the truth.”

My heart swelled. This was how I wanted to be seen by him—not as the weak princess, but one strong enough to help others, to live up to the title she’d been born to.

He gave my hands a reassuring squeeze, a gesture that felt both comforting and natural. “I will share my burden...but my first and foremost concern is always you. Something is troubling you. At first I feared your sadness came from my cruel rejection, but the more I’ve studied you, I’m beginning to think it’s something more.”



I should have known I wouldn't be able to hide my feelings from him, yet my reservations kept me silent. I was afraid of sharing this part of myself, especially after what had happened the last time I'd allowed him a glimpse of my heart. I lowered my eyes and didn't answer.

“Gemma?” His tone was pleading for me to confide in him, but still I couldn't answer. “Did I...hurt you worse than I feared when I rejected you?” He sounded utterly distressed at the thought, which acted as the key to finally unlocking my suppressed feelings—it'd be far too cruel to leave him wondering.

I kept my eyes lowered, afraid I'd lose my resolve if I looked up. “It took great courage to confess to you. My fears tried to hold me back but I ignored them. I wanted to be brave, to take a step forward in my life, but in the end...my fears turned out to be right, and now I'm afraid I'll never be strong enough to overcome them again.”

He released a fierce groan and pressed his forehead to our clasped hands. “Oh, Gemma. Of course you'd feel that way. I should have known...despite my intentions, what I thought was best for you has only hurt you. I'm so sorry.”

“It's not your fault.” The last thing I wanted was for him to shoulder the blame for my weaknesses and insecurities.

His gaze snapped up to mine. “Of course it is. I more than anyone know how much you fear the outside world, how hard you've been trying...so for me to not even consider how difficult it must have been for you to open up to me, leading me to hurt you in such a way...I'm deeply sorry, Gemma.”

Again I wanted to reassure him it wasn't his fault—my insecurities were my own burden to bear, and it wasn't his duty to step carefully in order to avoid making them heavier—but I knew he wouldn't listen, not when he was so determined to protect me from everything he could. The man was deeply loyal; it only made me care for him all the more.

His shoulders slumped, as if already wearied by my most recent confession. “Knowing the full consequences of my rejection only increases my need to share the true reason for it.

The reasons I initially gave were nothing more than excuses—it's not my title keeping me from you, or even the fear that you're only settling for me because I'm the only man you've had a chance to come to know, for you're more sensible than that. Please forgive me for causing you to think I believed otherwise; I was simply frightened of you knowing the truth, because I fear you loving me will only add to the curse already afflicting you, a thought I cannot bear.”

I frowned. “How could that possibly happen when you've done everything in your power to make this cursed confinement more than bearable?”

He opened his mouth to answer...only for his words to falter. The anxiety twisting his expression caused my pulse to palpitate wildly.

“What is it, Quinn?” I asked shakily. “Please share it with me.”

He took a wavering breath. “You're not the only one trapped by a curse, Gemma.”

I puzzled over his words for a moment before I suddenly understood, causing the apprehension shrouding me to deepen. “You're cursed as well?”

He slowly nodded. “It began with my great-grandfather. The story differs on how it befell him, but the nature of it is clear: it would not only afflict him, but pass down to one member of his family every generation...and I'm the one who's inherited it.”

I stared at him to frantically search his face for any sign of what could possibly be afflicting him...but he seemed perfectly healthy, with no indication he'd inherited a family curse. Whatever its nature, it didn't trap like the one afflicting me or my brothers. Could it be similar to the one afflicting my sister, Reve, where something was being taken?

“What is the nature of your curse?” I managed.

He took a steadying breath before straightening with resolve. “I'm going blind, Gemma.”

My breath caught and for a moment I was speechless. He was going...*blind*? No, he couldn't...I searched his hazel eyes for any sign that his sight was fading, yet his gaze was steady, leaving me no doubt he could see me.

"You can't be," I murmured. "It's impossible." It *had* to be; it was simply too horrifying a possibility to even consider...even though I knew he'd never lie to me about such a thing.

"It's true," he said. "I've been steadily losing my sight ever since I turned eighteen. At first I remained in denial, for I have three other siblings who could have potentially inherited the curse instead. If I admitted that it had befallen *me*...I knew it'd change everything. I'd finally become a knight and earned my position as your guard, and going blind would rob me of those dreams.

"But denying my curse didn't keep it from gradually stealing my sight. The changes were subtle at first—blurry vision on occasion, difficulty seeing in the dark, faraway objects being almost indiscernible. Then it began affecting other things: colors, my close-up vision, shadowy sight even when I was surrounded by light. Shortly before your imprisonment I couldn't deny my condition any longer, and it's only worsened since then, to the point that my sight is almost completely gone."

I gaped at him in disbelief. This couldn't be true, not when I often felt him watching me, often saw him navigate his way around the tower with no hints that he was struggling...but I'd no sooner thought this than I remembered the times when he *had* struggled—the moments of him searching with his hands for an object rather than with his eyes, times when he'd scooted closer to me and even then he'd still squinted, that day in the kitchen he'd cut his thumb because he'd said the color of the potato was too similar to the wooden table.

All because...he was losing his sight? The thought twisted my stomach, yet it did nothing to sway my heart. "Is this why you think I can't love you?"

“You don’t understand.” Desperation caused his voice to rise. “This curse will taint the rest of my life...as well as anyone I chose to share that life with. What’s more, it will pass to one of my children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren...on and on throughout the generations. If you choose me, that won’t just be my story, but *yours* as well. Your life, already marred by the curses of your family, your illness, and the curse of this tower will forever be trapped in another that you’ll never be able to escape. You’ll have to watch as it hurts both me and your other loved ones throughout the generations, one of your *children*. How can I ask that of you, Gemma? I can’t.”

I couldn’t speak, I could scarcely even think through my shock and despair. Pain filled my heart as it broke—not for myself, but for *him*. To think that for years he’d lived with the fear of potentially losing his sight, only for it to slowly become his reality, robbing him not only of it but of his purpose and the future he desired.

“Is there truly no way to break it?” I asked. “Maybe there’s a cure—”

His hollow laugh cut off my words. “My family has spent four generations searching for one to no avail. Once my great-grandfather, grandmother, and father lost their sight, it never returned, and I’m under no illusion I’ll be the exception.”

This news only escalated my despair, causing it to press against my chest so heavily I could scarcely breathe. I took several steadying breaths, fighting to maintain a sliver of calm. “How much sight have you lost?”

“Nearly all of it.”

My heart flared. “That can’t be true.” It was too much to think that Quinn—my dear, kind, loyal, sweet guard—was so close to seeing *nothing*...no, I couldn’t bear the horrible thought. “You can see me now, I know you can.”

His look became less wistful and more tender. “The curse’s mercy has allowed me to still see you quite well. Though everything else is fading, you are still quite clear. But I have no doubt the progression will soon take even you away from me; already you’re becoming fuzzy when we’re not this close.

But if you can at least be the last thing I see...I can be content.”

His resignation only caused my panic to rise. No, this couldn't be true. But even if it was, it changed nothing. I couldn't bear for even something as tragic as this to keep us apart.

“I still love you, Quinn. I'd rather have you with your curse than not at all.”

He gently wiped the tears that had appeared on my cheek with his thumb. “You don't know what you're asking. I care far too much to force you to endure any kind of pain just to satisfy my selfish need for you. For I love you too, Gemma. I always have, and because I always will I could never force you to endure this for me.”

Warmth encased my heart at his beautiful words, ones I'd longed to hear from him ever since discovering my true feelings. “You love me?” I managed breathlessly.

His eyes shone with the sincerity of his feelings. “I've always loved you. When you confessed your own feelings for me, I wanted nothing more than to return them, but I knew doing so would make it far more difficult to do the right thing and let you go.”

“But you don't have to,” I said desperately. “Please, Quinn.”

He shook his head, crushing my hope before it could even take root. “How can I even entertain the notion of our being together? It's what led me to convince you of my indifference even though nothing could be further from the truth. You have no idea how torturous it was to reject you and to see your resulting pain, knowing I was the cause. Only now do I realize it was unfair of me to make that choice on your behalf without telling you everything. If you had to shoulder a burden, I'd rather you carry the knowledge of my impending blindness than falsely believe I don't care for you the way I do.”

“You claim that telling me the truth was to grant me the choice. If I still choose you despite knowing everything, would

you really deny me?”

Hope shone in his eyes. “If I’m truly who you want, despite everything...” He sighed. “But Gemma, you must consider this carefully. Please don’t force yourself to settle for me. One day you’ll be free from this prison and will have your pick of any man you choose; if that man is me, you must be certain you want a life partner who will forever be blind, that you’ll be able to bear watching it one day claim one of the children—”

My breath caught and I finally fully understood every aspect of my future should I choose him: of living my life with my sight while my husband remained trapped in darkness, one in which there was no hope of escape; of wondering which of my children—if despite my frequent illnesses I should be blessed to have any—would suffer the same fate and watch them endure the same heartache Quinn was experiencing now. Could I willingly choose such a path?

I didn’t even need to consider my answer, for I’d already made my decision. Just as Quinn had willingly chosen to enter this prison with me, I would go anywhere with him. “It’s impossible to know what the future holds. One thing is certain: I want you in it, no matter the cost. I choose you, Quinn. If I ever leave this tower, it will only be with you at my side.”

Though joy lit his eyes, he remained wary. “But we likely have no future together, not even one where we continue in the manner we are now. Because of my curse, the moment we leave I can no longer be your guard.” His expression clouded. “I’ve been a guard for so long...I’m not sure I can be anything else. What will my purpose be?”

“I’m certain you’ll find one,” I murmured.

He didn’t respond, nor did he look at me, his gaze fixated on the window without seeming to even be noticing the view. I took in the somber lines filling his expression. Though the outside world offered him nothing, he remained unwavering in his desires to help me escape the tower. Such a selfless sacrifice wrenched my heart even as it deepened my love for him.

It was a struggle to speak past the tears clogging my throat. “Whether you’re my guard or not, you’ll always have a future with me. Please, Quinn.”

His gaze slowly returned to mine. “You’d really want—”

“Yes, Quinn. Always.”

He sighed. “While I desire you to have something better than I have to offer you, I cannot take away your choice, nor am I selfless enough not to accept you should I be the one you choose. But Gemma”—he leaned closer, his look intense—“such a decision cannot be made in haste. You must be certain. Please, grant me time. I need that for you.”

I ached to protest, for I knew my decision would remain unchanging. But I knew how much Quinn needed this. If time was what he required to allow us to be together, then I would give it to him.

The bright future I longed for was within reach, meaning my earlier bravery in sharing my heart hadn’t been in vain. If I’d had the courage to take the first step in claiming it, surely I’d be brave enough to accept all that came with it, and though it was far different than what I’d expected my future with Quinn to entail, if he was with me I had no doubt it’d be worth the cost.

## CHAPTER 12

No matter my sincere desires, Quinn was relentlessly stubborn, refusing to look at me, no matter how many times I attempted to get his attention, which was remarkably lacking considering his position was to keep an eye on me. It was more difficult to endure his distance considering the changes occurring with the tower—another pantry of supplies had vanished, leaving only one left. Melina had spent hours this afternoon sorting through what remained and was still in the kitchen occupied with the task.

I sat curled up in the parlor window seat with my embroidery, but needlework was the furthest thing from my mind. Instead I watched Quinn. At first my stolen glances had been hesitant and subtle, even shy, but my escalating frustration soon made me more overt.

Despite my repeated attempts to catch his eye, he stared rigidly ahead, jaw tight, body stiff, not even warranting me a single glance. He was so adamant in ignoring me I was beginning to doubt he'd look over even if I found myself in distress, considering how faithfully he ignored my current one now.

It was as if our sweet confessions the week before hadn't even happened, for what good were declarations of love if he refused to act on them? Though I knew he only intended to protect me, his refusal brought me pain by denying me the life I most wanted. I'd never imagined my fiercest advocate would hurt me so deeply.



My heartache swelled, stoking my desperation. I took a wavering breath. “Quinn?” I spoke his name tentatively, not expecting him to respond.

He didn’t immediately answer, knowing by now I truly didn’t truly need anything, for I’d been calling his name all week simply to draw his gaze towards me. I waited for an impatient moment, but when he continued to refuse to spare me even the briefest glance, my annoyance swelled.

I slammed my embroidery down. “*Quinn.*” My voice was more firm.

His stoic expression faltered slightly but he *still* didn’t look over...though his head slightly tilted in my direction, enough that I caught a brief look of his internal battle before he tucked the emotion behind his usual stoic mask. This glimpse was enough to lend me courage.

“I never would have imagined my dearest friend would treat me so poorly.”

My rising emotions caused my words to come out sharper than I intended, causing him to flinch. He hesitated an agonizing moment more before he *finally* glanced towards me, his expression rigid; only the agony swirling in his eyes betrayed what he was truly feeling—this was just as difficult for him as it was for me.

“It isn’t my intention to hurt you, Gemma.” I relished the sound of his voice; they were the first words he’d spoken to me all day.

Though deep down I knew Quinn would never purposefully cause me pain, it didn’t change the fact that his denying me did just that, reminding me that the future I desperately wanted remained out of reach. “You’re taking your position as my guard several steps too far, protecting me from something I have no need to be guarded from.”

His shoulders slumped with a sigh, as if the burden he carried had suddenly become too heavy. “I don’t deny it, nor do I doubt your desires are sincere. But I fear you’re being swayed by emotion when I’ve had years to consider our

dilemma logically. As much as I want otherwise...this is the way it must be.”

My hurt increased...as did my desperation. “But must you continue to ignore me?”

“I’m guarding you as devotedly as ever, but I’m afraid I cannot give you anything more.” And he turned away, signaling the end of this trying conversation.

I tried to fight my tears, but they came anyway. My emotions were rising. I frantically attempted to gather my faltering composure but I felt it slipping through my fingers beyond my control. I hastily stood, steadying myself on the wall as the world swayed. I hadn’t had as many dizzy spells lately and was discouraged by the relapse.

Quinn was paying closer attention than I’d assumed, for my dizzy spell caused him to swivel around to face me. His eyes widened and he hastened several steps towards me before stopping midway. “Princess?” he asked hesitantly.

His reverting back to my title instead of my name only increased the emotion threatening to overpower me. “I want to return to my room.”

When I was certain I was steady on my feet, I brushed past him into the corridor. He followed close behind and eventually walked rigidly at my side to peer worriedly into my expression, his hands hovering near me as if he debated whether to let me walk on my own or offer his support.

“Are you well?” He brushed his fingers against my brow checking for a fever, but I hadn’t had one in nearly a week, though I wasn’t sure whether that was the elixir’s doing or pure coincidence.

I’d almost rather have a fever than what was truly ailing me. I bit my lip to keep it from trembling. “No, Quinn, I’m not.”

He seemed to sense the true reason for my distress had little to do with my health. I caught a glimpse of his regretful expression before I hastily looked away, staring rigidly ahead for the remainder of the journey to my room, which I entered

without a word before closing the door on him. Even though I could no longer see him, I sensed him just beyond the door, not just to guard me but because his concern wouldn't allow him to be anywhere else.

I leaned my back against the door, weary from the brisk walk and my raging emotions. I could feel Quinn's presence on the other side, the closest we'd been in days...and likely the closest we'd ever be when the closed door represented the obstacles Quinn had allowed to come between us, ones he refused to overcome.

I slid down to settle on the floor and pulled my legs to my chest to rest my forehead on my knees. Even after my tears had passed I remained in this position, paralyzed by the all-encompassing sorrow and sense of helplessness shrouding me, unwelcome yet familiar considering its frequent presence throughout my life. Would I ever free myself from it?

I wasn't sure how long I sat in this uncomfortable position before I sensed something I hadn't in a long time—the tower's magic. I felt it in the stones, a prickly feeling that used to be quite frequent before the tower's enchantment had begun to fade. I rested my hand on the floor, expecting it to be cold to the touch, but it was warm. I spread my hand to rest my palm against the stones and the tower's power tingled my skin.

I glanced around the room for any other sign that my old friend had returned...but there was nothing. "Tower?" I asked hesitantly.

At my inquiry, the stone warmed in response. At least *it* wasn't ignoring me. This knowledge compelled me to express the despair encasing my heart.

"I don't know what to do." I kept my voice lowered to a whisper so I wouldn't risk Quinn overhearing me through the door; by the heat pulsing from the stones against my touch, I knew the tower was listening. "I love Quinn, and he's told me he loves me...yet he refuses to allow us to be together. Despite his...affliction, I still want to be with him, yet I have no idea how to reassure him of the sincerity of my desires. I feel so lost. Please help me."

Unlike the enchanted garden back at the Malvagarian palace, the tower didn't answer in words. Rather, it responded through impressions, thoughts, and images, as it always had whenever sharing the memories in the hall of mirrors. The impressions were subtle at first before they filled my mind with an image so clear it was as if I were recalling a memory.

The image was of Quinn and me sitting together on the turret roof, our hands laced together and my head on his shoulder. Accompanying the vision was an idea that blossomed so naturally within me I'd have believed I'd come up with it myself if I hadn't been certain it'd come from the tower.

The best way to persuade Quinn was to give him a glimpse of how beautiful a future together would be. If he could experience a portion of that joy, perhaps he'd then be willing to fight for it—allow *me* to fight for it—no matter the cost.

Renewed with purpose, I stood and faced the door...only to pause with my hand on the handle, my brow puckered. "The top of the turret?" I asked in a whisper, unsure whether that was really the tower's intended destination or simply a romanticized suggestion.

Resting my hand against the stone once more only confirmed the tower was in earnest, and upon sensing my skepticism it promised to not only protect me but show me the way. Despite my rising apprehension towards the idea, I trusted the tower. If it was using some of the last of its magic reserves to impart its idea, the least I could do was heed it.

I took a wavering breath and opened the door, where I was greeted by Quinn not in his usual guarding position but frantically pacing. The moment I stepped into the corridor he swiveled to face me, his expression panicked.

"I'm so sorry, Gemma. I know I'm the reason you wanted to be alone, and I'm tortured by the thought I hurt you." He wrung his hands.

My heart swelled at his devotion, softening the last of my annoyance with him. Though I hated him staying away, I knew he only did it because of how deeply he cared for me. As

always, he only had the best in mind for me, even sacrificing his own wants for what he felt would best lead to my happiness.

Now I needed to persuade him that my greatest joy would only come from a future with him in it. “I understand your reasons, even though I don’t share your concerns.”

He sighed. “I’m afraid to believe you, because if I did...it would be impossible to do the right thing in letting you find happiness outside of myself.”

Despite his continued stubbornness, his words gave me hope that with the right persuasion he’d come to realize my sincerity...but would this outing be enough to convince him how much I needed to be with him, despite the affliction he was determined to make an impenetrable obstacle?

Though the tower’s magic was weakening, I sensed its eagerness to be of assistance. It was time to see just what sort of courtship it had in mind.

The invisible magic stirred to give me an impatient tug, urging me to follow its silent guidance. Quinn’s head tilted, as if he for the first time sensed it too. “Is that...”

“The tower,” I finished. “There’s somewhere it wants to take me. Will you accompany me?”

The question was unnecessary considering his devotion wouldn’t allow him to do anything else, but I was unprepared for the intensity filling his gaze as it met mine. “I’ll go with you wherever I’m able, Gemma. Always.”

My emotion swelled again. Perhaps all I felt for this dear man wouldn’t be in vain.

This thought guided each of my steps as I followed the tower’s silent directions. Its limited powers made its impressions against my thoughts weaker and more difficult to follow, but with Quinn also listening, together we were able to navigate according to its directions.

The tower’s magic led us through several corridors before taking us to an unfamiliar back staircase hidden behind an

obscure door. Quinn's eyebrows rose. "Do you want to continue?" he asked.

I had more than enough energy to press forward, something that wouldn't have been true before my elixir, and I was grateful. At my nod he took the lantern from a nearby table and led the way, keeping close beside me, his presence steady and comforting as it always was. Despite having more strength than I used to, my legs burned with each step and I quickly grew tired, but the promise of what lay at the top of the staircase gave me the energy I needed to press forward.

With each step I felt Quinn watching me carefully. "Do you need to rest?"

"I'm fine. I haven't been as tired ever since I started taking the elixir the tower led me too."

"What elixir?"

I stilled. I hadn't yet told him? I hastily remedied that in a rush of words, as if speaking them quickly could make up for my delay in speaking them at all.

Joy lit up his eyes. "You're getting better?" Wonder filled his voice and he stepped forward to take my hands, holding them close...before remembering himself. With a blush he hastily released me, but his smile didn't fade.

"I am. Not only do I have more energy, but my headaches and fevers are less frequent."

"And you don't cough nearly as much," he added.

I studied his expression. Despite how pleased he looked, I also detected some hurt. He noticed me watching and offered me a smile that seemed both forced and sincere.

"I'm so happy for you, Gemma." And while he sincerely looked it, after a moment he added, "I wish you'd told me sooner."

"You insisted on distance," I offered weakly by way of explanation.

He frowned. "I'd think you would realize your health is still a concern for a man stubbornly determined to remain only

your guard.”

Remorse prickled my heart. “I’m sorry.”

He released a whooshing breath and smiled again, this one softer and more genuine. “You did what you thought was best, but it doesn’t matter now. It’s truly so unbelievable but amazing. I’m sincerely happy for you.” And with a lingering smile he started back up the stairs and I followed.

The staircase narrowed the further we ascended, and when we reached the landing I discovered we’d climbed to the top floor and now stood directly beneath the turret. The lantern’s light flickered around the room as Quinn lifted it. There were no windows, no doors, not even any furniture. But before we could decide whether or not to return downstairs, a door suddenly emerged from the stone.

Based on the vision the tower had shown me earlier, I knew this led to the turret’s roof. I pushed it open, but before I could get a good look beyond it, Quinn seized my wrist, stopping me. My heart jolted at his heated but welcome touch.

“It’s too dangerous, Princess. Allow me to go first.” He didn’t even await my agreement before he inched forward, keeping his body in front of me like a shield as he peered tentatively out. I scooted closer and stood on tiptoe to peek around him, my heartbeat escalating when his firm body pressed against my own.

A wave of dizziness overcame me at the height, but despite how far we were from the ground, I wanted to do something brave, to seize control of my life by doing all in my power to create the tower’s vision. Taking this step would be the first in claiming the future I desperately wanted. Not to mention going outside for the first time in three years would be well worth the frightening height.

Yet my desires didn’t fully eclipse my reservations, for we were quite high...but it wasn’t my fears I had to convince to take this chance but my stubborn, overprotective guard. “I want to sit on the turret.”

He gave me a look like I'd lost my mind. "No, Princess, it's far too dangerous—"

I stepped around him and leaned further out the door. It opened onto a narrow balcony I was certain hadn't been there before, one that twisted around the circular turret to a small set of stairs that led towards the tower point, where makeshift seats had already been created. My heart swelled at the thought that the tower's magic was working in such a way for *me*, as if it too wanted me to claim my happiness with Quinn. I was determined not to waste its gift.

A cool breeze blew through the open door to caress my cheeks, damp from the tower climb, giving me a taste of the world I'd been hidden away from for far too long, but unlike before, I now yearned to see more of it. If I could take this tentative first step in exiting the tower, perhaps I'd be closer to the future I longed for...one with him.

"The tower has taken the necessary precautions; it's perfectly safe." I tried to edge around him so I could step fully outside, but he immediately stepped in front of me, blocking me. I peered up at him with my most imploring look. "Please, Quinn. I know how important it is to you that I experience more of the world."

He released a long breath. "Doing it by climbing on top of the turret roof wasn't at all what I had in mind."

"Yet it is the closest to freedom I can currently experience. The tower's protective enchantments won't falter now, especially considering it's the one who led me here."

"You know I don't trust the tower." But his resistance was faltering. I watched as he worked through my words. Whatever he felt about the tower's motives for trapping me, he couldn't deny the moments it'd protected me and tried to lighten my heart, proving it sometimes behaved as more friend than foe.

I rested my hand on his arm, thrilling at the feel of his muscles beneath my hand. "Please, Quinn. I need this."



The words had the magic effect I desired. He took in the hope filling my expression and his resistance faltered, declaring my victory.

I beamed and he eyed it almost accusingly, though his stern expression couldn't mask the joy filling him at seeing my own. "I just can't resist making you happy. Very well...but *only* if I ensure it's safe."

I bounced impatiently on the balls of my feet as he stepped fully onto the balcony and examined the area thoroughly. The assessment took far longer than I wanted, considering he relied more on touch than his weakening sight, but in my desperation I forced myself to remain patient. If Quinn needed this for his own peace of mind, I could grant him that.

I brightened at the reluctant approval in his expression when he stepped back into the tower and clasped my hands in delight. "Are we going on an adventure?"

My obvious exuberance further softened him. He chuckled and gave my ear a playful tug. "We are." His expression gentled. "It's been a while since you've been this happy."

I wanted to remind him that allowing us to be together would grant me the joy he desperately wanted for me, but I didn't want to risk sullyng his mood and thus ruining whatever excursion the tower had in mind. "How can I not be happy when I have an opportunity to go outside with you?"

The smile his grave expression had fought to keep back fully emerged. "Even if we can't entirely escape the tower, I'm grateful you can still experience more of the outside world." His serious expression returned. "You must let me keep a firm hold on you; your safety is my first priority." And he extended his hand.

My stomach gave a little thrill at the prospect of holding his hand, and I sent a silent thank you to the tower for providing an excuse for Quinn to break his usual protocol in touching me. I rested my hand lightly in his, relishing the sensation of his rough skin against my palm and the gentle way his fingers enclosed my hand, which fit perfectly within his.

For a moment time seemed to stand still, our breaths escalating as we stared at our clasped hands. He broke the reverence first when he severed his gaze and faced forward. "Remain close to me." And together we stepped out into the twilight.

## CHAPTER 13

The experience of stepping outside was more than just leaving the tower; I felt as if I'd finally gained control even when it felt as if it was slipping away. Though I'd experienced a few moments on the balcony, nothing compared to being at the top of the world, of doing something daring, and of allowing my heart to guide me down an uncertain path in hopes that it'd lead me to my desired destination: Quinn.

The balcony from my bedroom was much lower and faced a different direction. From my height and vantage point now, I could overlook the surrounding forest in a way I never had before. The view was breathtaking. Being trapped inside had caused me to forget how much of the world there was, but here I could see everything as it stretched as far as the eye could see.

I saw not just the trees I'd grown accustomed to, but also beyond—to the mountains, a secluded lake, and rolling hills. I knew Malvagaría's landscape was diverse, but to see it for myself was another experience entirely, allowing me to come to know my kingdom in a way that went beyond the books I'd read and the stories my family had shared with me.

The entire world was ablaze with vivid color as sunset played out across the sky, lighting up both the forest and the new emotion aglow within me, one I yearned to nourish. It was an intoxicating feeling that stoked my growing desires for freedom, for once stronger than the fears that had held me back for so long.

In all the years I'd been bedridden, I'd never imagined an experience such as this. It gave me hope that my future could be different than what I'd previously envisioned. This thought nestled more deeply in my heart: how much had I allowed my circumstances to keep me from the life that deep down I'd always wanted to live? Could there possibly be something *more*?

I felt Quinn's steady presence beside me as well as his gaze, more interested in me than the breathtaking view. I stole a sideways glance. Tenderness filled his eyes as he watched me. "You're lighting up. Is this bringing you joy?"

I scooted closer to the railing as much as I could with Quinn's firm grip around my hand. "It's even more beautiful than I imagined."

"How did you imagine this moment?"

I considered. "I never actually gave it much thought." I'd been so convinced there was little to experience outside the tower that I hadn't even dared to hope otherwise. The thought made me deeply sad.

Quinn smiled gently. "Now that you've taken this first step, it's no doubt the beginning of imagining all sorts of possibilities for yourself."

Every one that already filled my mind contained *him*.

We admired the view a few minutes more before the tower gently guided us towards the stairs that had been created from the slates of the roof, which would take us on top of the turret. Quinn was understandably more wary by this prospect, but once more relinquished the fight at my earnest pleas. He carefully guided my steps, keeping himself behind me so he'd be able to catch me should I slip.

It was one thing to imagine this moment and quite another to actually live it. The tower's makeshift stairs were small and rather uneven, making each step precarious. I'd never imagined I'd ever embark on such a venture, but Quinn's presence behind me lent me courage. No matter what we

faced, I knew that so long as we were together we could do anything.

The heat of his chest pressed against my back, dispelling the coolness of the settling night and proving quite distracting, making each of my breaths shallow as I ascended.

We reached the place where the tower had arranged for us to sit. The moment I'd settled, my earlier fear returned in a rush and a wave of dizziness overcame me. To think I was on the *tower roof*. I hooked my arms around his to steady myself.

“Are you alright?” he asked.

The world was still swaying, making it difficult to find my voice. “I think so.” By the way my voice shook, I wasn't surprised he remained unconvinced.

He bit his lip. “Perhaps this wasn't such a good idea.”

“I'll be fine; I just need to get my bearings.”

Considering how high we were, it took surprisingly little time, but even after my dizziness settled I didn't release his arm, grateful for the excuse to touch him.

The mischievousness accompanying his worry as he studied me made it clear he knew the real reason I clung to him so tightly. Thankfully he made no move to pull away, whether for my protection or because he desired to be as close to me as I longed to be with him. The tenderness filling his look deepened, causing hope to enfold my heart; perhaps his battle to resist me was more difficult for him to fight when sitting so high.

Once the world stopped spinning, I was better able to appreciate the spectacular view. The night was settling, allowing the first hints of stars to light the velvety sky. The silverly moonlight cast dancing patterns across the treetops, illuminating the setting before us, a place we'd remained ever since the tower's fading magic had prevented it from changing its location. I found myself immersed in the surrounding beauty—the endless sky caressing the surrounding forest, the ocean of stars so close I almost felt I could tumble inside with one breath.

All of a sudden the scenery shifted, gradually at first. Rather than the sky growing darker and the stars brighter as night settled more fully, the sky began to lighten, as if the night were ending rather than just beginning. I exchanged a perplexed look with Quinn.

“What time is it?” I asked.

“Not long after sunset. Even if it were near morning, dawn wouldn’t be arriving this quickly.”

I was so occupied with the sky that it took me a moment to notice that not only was it lightening, but the landscape stretching around us was also changing. My breath hooked. “What’s happening?”

“I...I’m not sure.” Quinn’s eyes widened as he slowly took in the shifting surroundings. “From what little I can see, I think I recognize this scenery. I’m certain we’ve been here before.”

The forest melted away, replaced first by rolling green hills, then majestic mountains, before taking us to a lake that allowed us to see the tower’s reflection within the water with us sitting side by side at the top.

“I believe the tower is taking us to the places from its history, allowing you to see it now that you’re no longer trapped inside,” Quinn said reverently.

It was as if the world around us had become a canvas. Each vision unfolded one by one as the tower created each new place, painting not just the sky in vivid colors but the entire landscape as the tower moved through different places and times from the past three years without actually physically transporting us there.

The story continued; not only did the scenery transform, but the seasons changed—spring, summer, autumn, winter, creating a variety of visions in the shifting landscape. I saw flowers of all types and colors, animals I’d previously only seen illustrations of in books, and a variety of scenery. For the first time I was truly experiencing the world.

I rested my hand on the slates of the roof. I could feel the tower's magic diminishing with every vision; considering its diminishing magic, it'd rendered a great sacrifice to create a magical experience on my behalf. Gratitude filled my heart for its matchmaking efforts. I needed to do whatever I could so its sacrifice wouldn't be in vain.

I broke the reverent stillness first. "Did you ever imagine your post would lead you here?"

He chuckled. "Never. It's been quite the unexpected adventure."

He said nothing more, causing another question to burn my tongue, one I'd ached to ask for years but had never done so for fear of his answer. "Do you...ever regret it?"

The rising sun illuminated his concern as he shifted to more fully face me. "Regret what, Gemma?"

"Staying. The day I became trapped..." My fear swallowed the remainder of my words. I'd never spoken of that day to Quinn, and I'd done my best not to relive it.

But that was the thing with memories—even when they didn't play across my mind's stage they were always there, waiting in the wings for when I was ready to face them.

I'd felt too afraid to speak of it before, but I felt brave enough to now. I took a wavering breath. "The day I became trapped...Mother gave you a choice. You didn't have to remain in the tower with me...yet you chose to. Why?"

"It's because...oh, you know why." A rather adorable crimson blush stained his cheeks.

"Please share it with me all the same." Though I suspected his reason, I needed to hear him say it.

He released a heavy sigh. "As much as I want to say the words, I'm afraid speaking them out loud will make it more difficult to do the right thing. You know...how I feel about you, dear Gemma."

"So love is what imprisoned you with me?"

He smiled. “That’s not how I see it: love made it so nothing could keep me from remaining by your side to ensure your happiness in any way possible. It was a choice, not a prison, that kept me here.”

My relief caused my shoulders to curl in on myself. He frowned.

“Has this worry haunted you all these years?”

I nodded. “It only grew the more you brought up your desires for me to leave.”

“My wishes were only for you,” he insisted. “Please believe me when I assure you that everything I’ve ever done is on your behalf.”

I did, for trusting him was as easy as loving him.

The reverence of the moment enfolded us and seemed to lend him bravery, for his fingers went to my hair, almost hypnotically. He tugged a few of my pins loose and my long hair and it tumbled down my back before catching in the gentle breeze.

I held my breath as Quinn played with my hair with a look as if nothing had ever fascinated him more. “You’re hair is so beautiful. Too bad it’s not longer. Then we could use it to climb down the turret wall and escape.” His lips curved up in amusement at the thought.

“Now that the force field has faded, we could always use bedsheets instead,” I teased.

For a moment he looked wistful, as if seriously considering the idea...but it didn’t last long. “It’s too dangerous. I could never risk you doing something so reckless when I’m charged with your protection.”

The thought of climbing down the turret was admittedly terrifying, but the feelings faded away at Quinn’s continued attentions playing with my hair.

The moment between us deepened, so different than any I’d ever experienced before, one beyond the friendship, loyalty, and devotion that already existed between us. These



feelings gave me the courage to graze his cheek with my fingertips in order to satisfy my need to more deeply explore what was happening between us.

“I know you want to give me happiness, which makes it difficult to understand why you insist on staying away.”

He lowered his hand from my hair, leaving me yearning for his touch to return. “We’ve already discussed this. Staying away is the only way for me to give to you.”

“I want to give to you too, to live a life with you. No matter how impossible you believe such a future to be, my desires will never change, nor will I ever give up. I will wait however long you need until you finally believe me.”

He looked both awed and frightened by the prospect before he managed a weak smile. “I knew you had the strength to fight for what you want. I’ve spent too many years watching you trapped by your beliefs about yourself. You fighting them now gives me hope that you finally realize you deserve happiness. That’s all I want for you.”

I rested my hand over his, and after a moment’s hesitation he flipped his hand over to stroke my palm with his fingers. My breath hooked at the contact and I gave him a questioning look, for as much as I welcomed him touching me, I hadn’t expected him to breach the rigid boundaries he’d set between us. He blinked down at his hand in surprise, as if only now realizing what he was doing, but to my relief, he didn’t cease his tantalizing touch.

So far this scene was playing out just as the tower had imagined—our hands laced together as we sat side by side overlooking the unfolding view from the turret roof. Only one piece was missing. As much as I desired to bridge the distance between us, I felt shy, unsure whether Quinn would allow it. But the tower’s silent urging reminded me to be brave; the fact I was sitting on the rooftop only confirmed I already possessed the courage I needed.

With a wavering breath, I scooted myself closer to Quinn and rested my head on his shoulder. He stiffened at first before releasing a contented sigh as his arm looped around my waist

to pull me closer. Encouraged, I nestled my head more cozily against him.

He rested his head against mine with another sigh. “I shouldn’t be doing this.”

“Don’t ruin it for me,” I pleaded.

Thankfully that silenced him, and in this position we sat, staring out across the forest the tower had returned us to after its show. But it appeared it wasn’t entirely finished with its performance and had one final surprise: fireworks lit the sky, a beauty which I’d never before seen.

“Oh...” I breathed in wonder as I marveled at the artistic patterns and colors, the perfect conclusion to the most magical night I’d ever experienced.

The fireworks lit Quinn’s expression, allowing me to bask in the smoldering intensity of his gaze and admire his handsome features, ones I longed to explore with my fingertips.

He was so close, enough for me to easily lean up to close the last remaining distance between us. Longing filled his eyes as they flickered down to my lips, revealing his own sweet desires that, like mine, seemed to have only grown from the reverence of such a moment. Rather than being trapped within the walls we surrounded ourselves with, in this moment we were creating our own story...and I knew exactly how I wanted it to end.

This desire lent me the courage to caress his cheek and lean up. At first he remained still, giving me hope that he’d allow what I most wanted. But at the last moment he pulled back with a groan, not completely but just enough for my hand to fall limply to my side.

“No, Gemma, we can’t.” Torment filled his pleading tone.

His rejection was sharp yet not all encompassing, for I’d seen his desire to kiss me, and with it the assurance he loved me. In one courtship outing we’d gone from not speaking to tentatively exploring our feelings for one another, and with that there was progress.

“I’m tired of being held back,” I murmured. “I know what I want and refuse to give up.”

Hope warred with his doubts. “The circumstances haven’t changed. I’m still going blind.”

My heart lurched at the horrible words. We hadn’t spoken about his curse since he’d shared it with me. My gaze seeped into his, relishing the way he looked when he could see me. I couldn’t deny I’d miss that special look, nor could I lie and claim that the thought of his future without his sight wasn’t both frightening and heartbreaking. But it was nothing to a future without him.

“The circumstances haven’t changed,” I said. “But *I* have. I refuse to have worked so hard to escape the cage I created for myself only to experience a half life. I won’t give up until you’ve also broken free.”

Somehow I needed to help him escape the prison of his doubts and fears, just as he’d worked tirelessly to free me from mine. Only then would he realize that my greatest need was not for him to protect my future from any sadness but my heart. No matter the risks, that was what was most important to me.

I knew I would need to convince him of this, even if I didn’t yet know *how*. Every journey began with a single step, and though I could still see Quinn’s fears raging in his eyes, I knew we’d at least begun the journey, one I wouldn’t give up until I’d reached the end. Our love was stronger than either of our fears, which would allow us to overcome them one by one until none remained.

## CHAPTER 14

The pleasant afternoon breeze caressed my cheeks at my place near the tower window while the golden sunlight illuminated the herbology book in my lap, but the tranquil moment shattered as a deafening crash suddenly echoed from several floors below, piercing the silence. The force caused the tower to shake, sending my book tumbling to the floor and nearly upending me from my seat.

Melina's gaze snapped up from her embroidery, her eyes wide with fear. "What's happening?"

I couldn't answer. I clutched the arms of my chair with white knuckles, a grip that didn't loosen even after the tower stopped shaking and a taut silence settled around us.

We didn't move or speak for a long moment. Melina stirred first, striding to the door to yank it open and peer into the hallway, while I remained riveted to my seat, my heart pounding painfully in my chest.

Melina whirled around, her face pale. My pulse escalated. "What is it?" It was difficult to speak as my mind whirled with every possible explanation for the potential destruction such a noise might have caused.

It took her a moment to find her voice. "Quinn isn't outside the door."

My heart lurched. "He's not?" Only this news could compel me to shakily stand. The rumbling tower had made me lightheaded; I reached for the wall to steady myself, but before

the world could still, my urgency compelled me to stumble towards the doorway.

I clutched the doorframe for support and peered into the shadowy hallway, completely dark save for the single candle lit near my bedroom. Candles had been the most recent supplies to vanish, so we rarely kept one lit for the corridors unless Melina or I was traversing them, for Quinn insisted he'd not only memorized the tower hallways but had grown used to navigating his way through darkness.

The flickering orange light illuminated several yards from the doorway before being swallowed up in the thick blackness, but despite Quinn's unwavering devotion to his post just outside my door, he wasn't in sight.

My panic escalated. "Where is he?"

Melina bit her lip even as her gaze futilely scanned the small illuminated area. "I'm not sure. He always remains close, unless he's—" Her words faltered, but not before she'd triggered my curiosity.

"Unless he's...where? Do you know where he's been going?" It was unsurprising he'd told someone what he was up to, but I was annoyed that someone hadn't been *me*, especially with the understanding slowly developing between us. His only reason for remaining silent was likely to protect me. I was tired of being coddled.

Melina hesitated until my sharp look compelled her to speak. "He's been spending time in the cellar."

My brow furrowed. We had a cellar? Why would Quinn find such interest in it?

"Take me to him. I must ensure he's not harmed." And that he was actually in the cellar, for the only other alternative was that he'd been in a room that might have trapped him the way I'd been the last time the tower shook. If he was, we'd need to find a way to rescue him.

I watched Melina's inner battle as she debated the wisdom of such a venture before faltering at my clear desperation.

Considering she was in love herself, she understood my fierce need. Relief washed over me at her nod.

She took the candle from its place near the door and led the way through the cold corridor with me following close behind. My heart pounded more wildly with each step that took me further from the comforting cocoon of my room, for each one ventured deeper into the darkness and the unknown, filled with uncertainty and fear.

But despite my all-encompassing worry, it wasn't strong enough to completely smother my curiosity; the sense of mystery guided me almost as much as my need to assure myself that my faithful guard was well. What had he been doing in the cellar, a place as far from guarding me as he could get in this tower?

Despite the faint, flickering light from our candle, the darkness seemed to grow thicker the further we traveled, the air colder. With every step, I searched not just for Quinn but for the destruction that might have caused the booming noise that had preceded the tower's shaking, but nothing appeared out of the ordinary...which only heightened my apprehension.

I wasn't entirely sure whether or not it was my imagination, but the hallways seemed more twisty than I remembered, whether because of the darkness, my unfamiliarity with the corridors, or because the tower had recently shifted.

I glanced towards Melina, her rigid expression illuminated by the candle's glow. "Do you know where you're going?"

She only nodded once, but though she appeared confident, the uncertainty filling her eyes betrayed her, nor did I miss our backtracking twice before Melina paused in front of a small door near the pantry, one I'd never noticed before. It creaked ominously as she opened it. I expected the same thick darkness to enfold the stairwell, but a flickering orange glow bathed the base of the narrow steps.

Relief seeped over me at the sight of the candlelight, for it meant Quinn was in the cellar after all. I called his name... only to receive no answer. The heavy silence caused my panic

to return. I exchanged a nervous glance with Melina. Quinn likely wouldn't have remained in the cellar after the tower shook, but would have immediately come to check on us. The fact we hadn't encountered him in our journey...foreboding prickled my skin.

"Is he alright?" I asked in a shaky whisper.

Melina didn't speak as she ventured down the creaking steps, me close behind. The stairs opened into a cramped room filled with crates. My attention was immediately drawn to a narrow hole in one of the walls, one that seemed to have been created by removing several stones...a large pile of which blocked the opening.

My heart lurched at the sound of shifting stone coming from deep within the tunnel. "Quinn?"

The sound paused before Quinn peered through a gap in the rubble. "Gemma?"

Warm relief encased me as I hurried over. "Thank goodness we found you. Are you alright?"

"There was a partial tower collapse," he explained. "But I'm unharmed."

I released a whooshing breath. "Thank goodness. What were you doing down here?"

"I'll tell you in a moment." Though his voice was muffled, it was filled with excitement, which only escalated my curiosity. Normally anything unsettling with the tower put him in a temper, not to mention he was currently trapped behind a pile of rocks.

I moved to help him, but his voice came immediately, sharp and firm. "No, Princess. I don't want you hurting yourself. I've been working for several minutes and have almost broken through."

I reluctantly stepped back to anxiously wait for him to resume shifting the stones. Several long minutes passed before he succeeded in removing enough to widen the passage. Before he could protest, I squeezed myself through the narrow opening and enfolded him in my arms.

“I’m so glad you’re safe. Are you hurt?” I pulled away just enough to examine him from head to foot.

He chuckled. “Now who’s being the protector?”

I wanted to smile, but I’d just caught sight of the blood streaking his hands. My stomach lurched as I gingerly caressed his battered skin. “What happened?”

“I had a difficult time moving the rocks, and with my limited vision I couldn’t be as careful...” He didn’t say anything more, but he didn’t need to for me to know his fading sight had made the process more arduous, leading to his injury.

My heart sank. My despair from his condition threatened to overwhelm me, but I forced myself to remain calm, determined to be a strength to him, just as he was to me. Despite my acute worry, I felt it slip away as I took in Quinn’s appearance—even with the dust dirtying his clothes and face and the layer of sweat streaking his brow, he was *beaming*.

“What has you so excited?”

Without answering, he took my hand and tugged me not back into the cellar but deeper into the tunnel.

“Where are we going?” I asked breathlessly.

“I’ve found a way out.”

Melina gave an excited gasp and hurried after us, but fear squeezed my heart, causing me to slow. My apprehension grew with every step down the tunnel, making my nerves so taut it was impossible to enjoy our close proximity. He’d found a way out? *How?* Did that mean we’d actually have to... *leave?* Despite how much I’d enjoyed my time on the turret roof, that had been nothing to permanently escaping the tower; it was a possibility I wasn’t at all prepared for.

“But—” I began, but Quinn talked over me, his words breathless with excitement.

“For months I’ve been suspecting the protective spells over the tower have been fading, so I’ve been searching for a means to breach the wall. Nearly a month ago, I found this tunnel after I discovered a piece missing from the cellar wall. I



hoped it'd lead somewhere, so I carefully chipped away the mortar to form a makeshift entrance. Once I was able to enter, I discovered another wall at the end of the tunnel. After weeks of careful work, I've finally removed enough bricks for us to escape. I just finished and was heading back for you and Melina when the entrance to the tunnel collapsed, but now that you're here we can finally leave. Oh Gemma, it will be so good to be free. I can't wait for you to experience—”

His explanation faltered when we rounded the corner and the end of the tunnel came into sight. He stopped cold. For a long moment he only stared at the solid wall, which contained no sign of an opening. “No.” His disbelief came out as a whisper, but then his voice grew with his despair. “*No*. No, no, no...”

He released his hold on my arm and ran to the end of the tunnel to frantically run his hands across the stones, searching with his touch, not trusting his eyes...even though the lack of sunlight peeking through the stones made it clear even to his limited vision that there were no penetrations in the thick wall.

We were still trapped.

Beside me, Melina released a strangled sob and buried her face in her hands, a rare falter in her usual composure. I hesitantly wrapped my arm around her shaking shoulders. She stiffened at my touch but didn't pull away.

I turned to face Quinn, who was still searching for an escape. But by the hopelessness settling over his darkening expression, he was beginning to realize the effort was futile. “The opening I found...has been sealed off. There's no way out.”

That explained the tower's shaking—it had been shifting to rob us of the newly discovered exit.

As if realizing this too, Quinn released a fierce growl. What followed was a string of curses, words I hadn't even known existed. And it wasn't just obscenities passing Quinn's lips, but growls, shouts, and several whacks and kicks against the impenetrable stone, over and over.

“You blasted tower!” he shouted. “To give us false hope, only to snatch it away at the last moment...I *hate* you, you sadistic, horrible, cruel—” With every word, he continued to kick the stone over and over before he slapped his hands onto the wall with another growl, as if trying to break through from sheer force of will. “Let. Gemma. Out!”

But no matter his protests or anger, the wall remained impenetrable, the tower seeming entirely unbothered by his anger.

I stared, mouth agape. “Quinn?” I asked hesitantly.

He released another groan, more agonized than the last. “We were *so* close.” And without another sound, he collapsed against the wall in utter defeat.

I’d never seen him so unraveled, not even when he’d told me of his curse. My heart ached for him. But another worry vied for my attention. I rested my hand against the wall, trying to discern the tower’s emotions or reasons for its trick, but it remained cool, unanswering, almost as if this section of the turret wasn’t alive at all but just plain stone, considering no magic seemed to fill its walls. My heart prickled in concern. What could have caused it to be so quiet?

But these concerns were nothing to the fierce relief I felt, dispelling the uncertainty that had swelled the moment Quinn had informed me he’d found a way out. With every step towards the exit, my desires to remain within the comforting, secure hold of the tower’s walls had only grown...and now I could.

Yet despite my warm relief, I was still concerned for my companions. I turned to Melina, still sobbing silently beside me. “Are you alright?”

She gave her head a rigid shake. “How can I be? To think we were so close to freedom, only to find ourselves still trapped...it’s unbearable.”

She looked up, her face red and blotchy and her cheeks streaked with tears. I hastily tried to mask my relief before she could detect it, but it was too late.

“You don’t seem upset. Don’t you care we’re still trapped?”

I ached to lie, but I couldn’t find the words. Her eyes narrowed darkly, a look she’d never given me before.

“You’re *happy* about this, aren’t you? How can you be so unfeeling?” Her words came out biting, as if the tense emotions that had cloaked us for weeks from the shifting tower’s fading magic, the dwindling food supply, and the new uncertainties had all suddenly become too much, causing her careful composure to finally unravel.

My heart lurched at her accusation, one I ached to deny. “No, it’s not that, I—”

“But it is.” Her voice shook with emotion, even as fresh tears escaped. “It’s easy for you to be content to remain when the man you love is always with you, but unlike you, my life is outside the tower—my family, my fiancé, my future...it was all stolen from me the day we were trapped. Each day this sentence continues takes away any hope that there will ever be anything beyond this...and yet you don’t care.”

Before I could even attempt an answer, she spun around and left without another word.

I stared after her long after the echo of her angry footsteps faded. Her sharp words filled my mind along with the sight of her tears and her fierce desperation to leave. Throughout my time within these walls I’d rarely considered how much she wanted to escape, a realization which now filled me with guilt.

Because of me she was not only trapped but being denied the life she was meant to live. My curse had condemned us all, while my fears continued to trap us.

Normally Quinn was attuned to my emotions, but he didn’t immediately comfort me. Instead he remained at the end of the tunnel, his entire body slouched against the wall in defeat.

I stared at his back. Even though he hadn’t attacked me with his words as my handmaiden had, he too had a life beyond the tower. And though I knew his devotion made it so he didn’t regret his choice to remain with me, that didn’t

prevent him from missing the life our imprisonment had denied him.

Shame knotted my stomach. I hadn't meant to be selfish. My fears, insecurities, and illness had simply consumed me so that I'd scarcely thought of anything else. But now I was forced to face the painful truth, even though I wanted nothing more than to look away.

I took a wavering breath and approached my guard to rest my hand against his back. At my touch, he spun around to seize me in a tight embrace. He clutched me close in silence for several moments before sighing in defeat.

"I couldn't get you out. I'm so sorry, Gemma."

Now was not the time to admit I still wasn't entirely sure I *wanted* to be free; surely that was the last thing he wanted to hear midst his acute disappointment, especially after all the work he'd expended trying to free me.

He kept me in his arms as he pulled away enough to stare down at me. He stroked my cheek, his touch comforting. "This is only a momentary setback. I won't rest until I've thwarted this blasted tower and found a way out."

His eyes blazed with determination and my heart warmed at his sincerity, even as it twitched in fear. Even if the tower allowed him to find an exit—which seemed unlikely, for today had only proven that despite its fading magic it wouldn't be so easily foiled—I still wasn't sure I *could* leave.

Yet both Melina and Quinn desperately wanted to escape, and they deserved to. Unlike me, they each had a life beyond these walls, one they'd sacrificed on my behalf. And though I knew that Quinn at least didn't regret choosing to remain with me, his loyalty couldn't completely dispel his desires for freedom or even his fears of having no purpose beyond the tower.

Though the thought pained me, I knew what I had to do. Even if I wasn't strong enough to leave the tower, that didn't mean my companions had to remain its prisoner forever. I

wouldn't allow my paralyzing fears of remaining alone to sway me from the right course.

I took a wavering breath. "If you find a way to leave the tower, you and Melina have my permission to go, but I'm not sure I'm strong enough to accompany you."

His breath hooked, and by his stunned expression I knew he understood my unspoken words—despite the subtle progress I'd made, my fears of the unknown were what continued to trap me more than the tower's impenetrable walls.

"I could never leave without you, Gemma." His hold tightened around me, his desperation to keep me near.

I swallowed the tears threatening to escape. "But you can't live your life solely for me. Even though you struggle to see it, you're much more than my guard."

"I'll have to be more than that once we leave this tower, because my guarding days will be over. But I could never leave without you," he said firmly. "My desires to escape are not for myself but for *you*. I want more for you than this, and I won't give up until you finally want it too."

My heart swelled at his loyalty, one that extended beyond my protection considering he desired me to experience a life more wondrous than I could envision for myself.

Even if I wasn't yet strong enough to want to leave, I cared too much for him to force him to remain on my behalf. Could my love for him and my desires for him to experience a life beyond these walls be strong enough to break free of the tower that held me bound?

## CHAPTER 15

*M*y hands shook as I frantically turned the pages of the herbalist guide, while the books I'd already searched were piled in untidy stacks around me. I sensed Quinn's concerned gaze but didn't look up. Bowls of herbs in various states of preparation rested on the neighboring table, evidence of the hours of study from these past several days. I'd already thoroughly searched the books from the apothecary and had now turned my attention to the older volumes contained in the herbal garden, but so far they too yielded nothing.

"Princess?" Quinn's hesitant voice penetrated my frenzied movements enough for me to glance up. As usual he appeared concerned for me, never mind the one he should be worried for was himself. I didn't want to tell him the reason behind my frantic search for fear of giving him greater cause for concern...but by his expression he undoubtedly already knew.

I forced a smile that, from our distance, his fading sight likely caused him to miss. "I'm fine."

I returned to scouring my book, but none of the pages revealed any clues as to how to revert a curse of blindness, especially one several generations old. But the lack of information did nothing to lessen my determination, which had only escalated in the week following the tower's trick.

His hurting his hands while trying to move the stones had only been the first incident of many small ones to follow. The final straw had been two days ago when he'd collided into a sharp corner of a wall that had partially crumbled during the

night. As I'd tearfully tended to him, he'd explained the area of his accident had been part of the series of corridors he'd memorized so he wouldn't have to rely as heavily on his weakening sight...causing him to miss this sudden change in the tower. The injury had resulted in a huge gash in his leg that caused a painful limp.

Each mishap was a reminder of the darkness slowly claiming him. I felt I was watching him walk into the shadowy corridor without a candle to light the way, an unbearable thought, especially when I was still convinced there had to be a way to stop it.

But there was little I could do. The tower's fading magic had begun affecting the herbal garden, leaving most of the plants either useless or unable to grow back after I'd picked them. Not only could I not use them to help Quinn, but I was unable to explore the budding passion within me, leaving me no distraction from my suffocating helplessness.

If I couldn't work with the herbs, how would I ever become a healer? The more I imagined that future, the more I wanted it...and not just so I could help others. I desired to prove myself, to create a place in my kingdom where I could be more than a useless, sickly princess, to have a future I could claim should the tower's fading magic eventually force me to leave. The healing effects of my own elixir had given me confidence and left me wanting to learn even more in order to help others the way it was continuing to help me.

The thought only caused my desperation to escalate. I took in all the ingredients piled around me in search of the best combination...but there was nothing. My helplessness rose, and with it I felt my control slipping away. I tried to regain it through my herbs—in combining elements together to create something useful that could not only help the man I loved but create purpose for me outside the tower's confinement. So I studied, minced, bottled, and searched for the right concoction, one I hoped would not only save Quinn but would help me create a future for myself.

I froze when I glimpsed something in the nearby mirror, a splotch of red that appeared and disappeared in a single flash.

But even though it'd been brief, there was no mistaking what I'd seen. Icy dread seeped over me and I nearly dropped my knife. Was the tower trying to show me another dark vision?

“Princess?”

I ignored Quinn's concerned inquiry, my gaze riveted to the looking glass. I didn't turn away at his approach, even when the alluring warmth of his proximity seeped over me as he stood beside me. It was the closest he'd allowed himself these past several days, for despite our enjoying snippets of beautiful closeness, he still seemed determined to maintain his annoying distance, crushing our budding romance before it could fully bloom.

I forced myself to turn away from the mirror and return to chopping the rosemary, but my hand shook, making the task difficult. He rested his over mine, stilling my shaking. “What is it, Gemma?”

I debated a moment whether or not to answer before my natural need to confide in him caused the words to tumble out. “The mirror...”

His entire manner hardened as he strode towards the mirror with agitated strides, glaring at it accusingly with a look like he meant to break it if it dared try to show me anything offensive...but the glass remained blank. Unconvinced, Quinn's frown deepened as he continued to study it before turning back to me with a heavy sigh.

“Whatever it tries to show you, please don't let it.”

Though he knew as well as I did that I had no control over that, I nodded and tried to return to my herbs, but I was now far too distracted to continue working. Quinn approached and once more rested his hand over mine.

“I know what you're doing,” he murmured. “And I wish you wouldn't worry yourself.”

The emotion I'd struggled to keep back escaped with a strangled sob. “How can I not worry? I cannot accept the curse inflicting you or all it'll rob you of.” With all the curses already tainting my life, I knew firsthand the pain they brought



and couldn't bear to see this one afflict dear Quinn... especially when he stubbornly allowed it to serve as a barrier between us.

Sadness seeped over him, but he said nothing. With a sigh I tried to return to my work, but my emotions proved too much to continue. It appeared I was finished for the day, once more with nothing to show for my futile efforts.

I took a steadying breath before facing Quinn. "How's your leg?"

"It's feeling better each day." At my frown he hastily continued. "It's only a minor injury, Gemma, nothing to worry over—"

"How can I not?" My voice escalated as my despair rose, threatening to overcome me. "First your cut thumb, then your battered hands, all those bruises, and now your leg...how much longer must this go on before it becomes even more serious?"

"Nothing more will happen," he said soothingly. "The earlier injuries were because I was careless, but I'll be more cautious, especially knowing the tower will likely only continue to not only change but fall apart." His lips pinched, his worry that I was still trapped in such a place, but with apparent effort he forced the look away and gave me a strained smile. "Not to worry, the more I get used to my condition, the better I can navigate it."

I didn't want him to *navigate* it at all; I wanted him to be free of it. And because I hadn't yet mastered my study of herbs, I was still powerless to help him. "Tell me the story again."

I'd already had him share it many times even though there was never any new information in each recitation. The story had evolved with each successive generation, but what remained consistent was that his great-grandfather had angered a magic wielder—the *why* had been lost through time, but it was no longer important—and in revenge, she'd cursed his family line with blindness. But despite the curse's power, her

fledgling magic had only been strong enough to capture one member's sight each generation.

In spite of my own mother's powers, I myself knew little of magic and thus had no idea what could possibly break such a continuous curse powerful enough to remain even after the caster had died. But would Mother have a greater understanding? Despite how anxious her visits made me, I desperately wanted to see her again in order to question her.

I looked expectantly at Quinn, but he sighed. "I've told the story enough. The more I share it, the more I fear you worry, and I don't want that for you."

Though his answer didn't surprise me, I found myself frustrated all the same. I tried to remain in the herb garden, desperate for the distraction it brought, but it was impossible to concentrate when I felt so *lost*.

I eventually gave up and asked Quinn to escort me back to my room, but before he took his usual place outside the door he paused. "Would you like me to send for Melina?"

He didn't seem surprised when I shook my head. Ever since our failed escape, Melina had become withdrawn and thus not very good company. We'd spoken enough to assure me she was no longer angry with me, but the tower's trick had unleashed the heartache she'd fought to keep suppressed, and with it her longing for Corbin, both of which caused the last of her hope to fade. Her disappointment only escalated my guilt.

Quinn took his place outside the room and the door closed, separating us.

Though standing for so long while working had left me exhausted and slightly lightheaded, I was too anxious to sit. So instead I paced the room, only pausing when I saw another flash in *this* mirror, just as I had within the herb garden.

My heart lurched and I stilled. Despite the fear slowly slithering over me, I found myself drawn to the looking glass, as if some invisible force compelled me forward.

I hesitated a few feet away, close enough that with one step more I'd be able to peer inside. Despite its silent pull urging

me to look, I was too afraid to bridge the remaining distance, even though this lure felt different than the ones that usually came from the tower. But in the end, my curiosity was stronger. With a wavering breath, I stepped fully in front of the mirror.

At first the glass remained empty, much as it had within the herb garden. But then a single glimpse of red flashed within the glass, only this time I was close enough to see what it was—red lips turned up in a smirk that I hadn't seen in months.

I gasped and stumbled back. Horror cinched my chest as Mother's reflection filled the mirror. At first I wondered whether this was another memory from the tower or a vision of the outside world...but then she spoke.

"Hello, Gemma." Her tone was sickly sweet, as usual leaving me feeling insignificant.

I couldn't answer, only continued to stare, my heart beating wildly. It took me a moment to find my voice. "Mother?" I stuttered. "Is that really you?"

Her lips turned downwards. "Your shock is unsurprising. Who would have ever expected the great Queen of Malvagaria to find herself in such a predicament?" Disgust twisted her expression.

"But...how did you get inside the mirror?"

She sighed. "That is quite the tale, one I have little desire to recount in full. Suffice it to say your brother's pathetic wife, Princess Rheanna of Draceria, is to blame."

I suspected there was more to the story. Magic was uncommon in our world and I doubted Princess Rheanna possessed any. In my glimpses of her life with my brother, I'd sensed a sweetness about her, a personality unlikely to curse her mother-in-law. Either Mother was lying or she wasn't telling me the entire truth. Either way, I was certain most of the responsibility for her fate rested on her, a curse gone wrong.

“When did this happen?” My tone remained cautious, for I wasn’t entirely sure this was a subject she’d be pleased to discuss.

She considered. “Time is difficult to measure while within the mirror, but I believe it’s been nearly a year, perhaps even longer. I’m truly not sure.”

The uncertainty seemed to unsettle her, but the emotion vanished almost immediately, leaving the poised and cold woman I knew well. With her hardened manner came all the feelings that always accompanied her visits—the small, insecure way she constantly made me feel, as if I could never measure up.

As much as I’d ached for Mother’s presence only moments before, I wasn’t entirely sure I was prepared to endure this visit. My shoulders hunched as I curled in on myself, as if I was unconsciously bracing myself for a confrontation even before our conversation had begun.

Her lips curled into another smirk, as if this show of vulnerability pleased her...before it was replaced by surprise. Her eyes widened as she looked me up and down. “You’re looking...healthier.” Her tone was indifferent, leaving me unsure whether she was actually pleased by this.

There was so much I could tell her—about how my love for Quinn and my growing passion for herbs made living a joy rather than an endurance, as well as the elixir that was gradually improving my health—but as usually happened in her presence, I found it difficult to find the words. Our conversations were like playing a game of chess; each sentence had to be carefully calculated several moves ahead to see if it’d end with her checkmate.

I finally settled on what I hoped was a safe course. “You’re here.”

Her tight smile reappeared. “Of course, Gemma dear. I’d never just *abandon* you.”

Though her elusive and seemingly forced visits had given me reason to doubt, I was desperate enough to believe she

cared that her reassurances eased some of the hurt her absence had caused.

“If you’ve been in a mirror for over a year, why haven’t you come sooner?”

She sighed. “Magic is rather tricky. My cursed confinement has kept me trapped within a single mirror. It took me a lot of experimentation to eventually venture beyond my glass prison...but I was still limited to the mirrors within the Malvagarian palace. No matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t go beyond them, nor did I have enough magic to break free... at least at first. But I soon discovered I’m still connected to all the curses I’ve created, and although the others have already been broken, there is one still in place.”

My breath hooked. “The...tower?”

She nodded. “I’ve been gradually syphoning its magic bit by bit.”

So *that* was why the tower’s magic was fading? For a long moment I couldn’t speak, my shock having rendered me silent. Only at her raised eyebrows, her silent expectation for me to respond, did I find my voice.

“*You’ve* been robbing the tower of its power?”

Her triumphant look was answer enough. “Naturally. I’m the one who enchanted it, which means I can use it how I see fit.”

A range of emotions whirled within me—shock, anger, hurt, and understanding to finally have the answer to the riddle that had been plaguing us for weeks, one I now realized I should have suspected sooner.

“But...our food supply is getting low, and the draining magic from the tower is causing all sorts of problems and dangers—what will happen when the magic is completely drained?”

Mother shrugged. “I’m not sure. The effects from the tower’s magic are a rather unfortunate consequence, but not to worry, I won’t need *all* the tower’s powers, which means enough will remain that you should remain perfectly safe.”

I was too stunned by her unfeeling dismissal to even speak. Seeming unbothered by my lack of response, Mother continued.

“It’s been very tedious and draining work taking my magic back from the tower in order to slowly gather enough strength to move to another looking glass, especially one a vast distance away. I believe in the end I only managed it because my magic is still connected to this tower as well as everything in it...including the mirrors.”

It took a moment for the implications of Mother’s words to settle over me. “Are you trying to gather enough to break free?”

“Naturally. I don’t quite have enough...but I will soon. However, when that moment comes, I’ll need a bit of... assistance.”

I immediately understood her unspoken expectation: she needed my help. Though I had no reason to deny her, a wave of apprehension trickled over me at the thought, a foreboding I had no explanation for. Yet it was nothing to my urgent desires to heed her wishes, for she was the only one who could give me what I desperately needed. No one else possessed such a vast array of knowledge concerning magic and curses.

I swallowed the lump lodging my throat. “You’re my mother, so of course I’ll help you.” I hesitated, choosing my words carefully. “And because I’m your daughter, I’m also hoping...you can help me in return.”

She smiled tightly. “Why Gemma, you know Mother would do anything for you. Didn’t I put you in this enchanted tower in order to heal you? I’ve always wanted what’s best for you. We can help each other.” Her tone was sweet...almost overly so.

I wrung my hands as my mind frantically attempted to sort through each potential outcome of every sentence in this chess-like conversation of ours. I’d never asked Mother for anything before, and the last thing I wanted to do was risk losing what only she could offer me.

I took a wavering breath. “I need...magical assistance. You see, Quinn...is going blind—” I swallowed the lump in my throat, unable to finish.

Mother’s eyes widened. “He is? How?”

“A curse.” It was all I could manage, the explanation too painful to give.

Mother’s shock faded and her look became calculated. Too late I realized she couldn’t know of my attachment, for surely she’d forbid me from it and then I’d never receive her help. My mind scrambled for a possible alternative explanation for my concern.

“He’s protected me for years and has been such a faithful guard. If the curse claims him, I’ll need to get another, and you know how difficult it is for me to be around strangers. I feel safe with him.”

I held my breath and awaited her reaction. Her eyes narrowed before her expression cleared into concern almost too exaggerated to be sincere. “You poor dear. Of course I understand. Very well, because you’re my dear daughter I’ll give you what you want. Healing his sight will be an easy task with my powers. All you need to do is free me from the mirror when the time is right. Do we have an understanding?”

My heart lifted at her agreement...yet still I hesitated, almost afraid to make such a rash promise. But my desperation for Quinn’s well-being was stronger than my need for caution—even more powerful than the desires I’d felt my entire life to break free from my own condition. I’d gladly sacrifice my own health just to save him.

“I promise.”

My chest tightened the moment I spoke the words, especially when I saw the almost triumphant way Mother smirked. But I didn’t take them back. I couldn’t, for I needed to do this. I might never break free from my own prison, but if there was a way to help Quinn escape his then I’d do it, no matter the cost.

## CHAPTER 16

Worry cinched my chest as I rested my hands on the stones, cold but silent, as if the last of the tower's magic had drained away, causing it to fall asleep. The tower was growing worse with each passing day...and it was all *Mother's* doing.

I hadn't seen or spoken with her since our conversation three days prior, but I sensed her in every mirror I passed, which led me to be more distant with Quinn for fear she'd see the true nature of our relationship. I was haunted by the deal she and I had struck...as well as the knowledge that because she was gradually robbing the tower of its powers, it was slowly dying.

I constantly discovered additional signs of the tower's fading magic—rooms vanishing, as if the power that had created them had disappeared, our food supplies dwindling further, and rooms that I'd previously been able to access now being locked, as if the tower now considered it too much effort to keep them open. I wasn't entirely sure what would happen once the tower's powers were completely stolen—whether I'd be permanently trapped or be set free—but I didn't want to find out.

But even with all this evidence, I couldn't accept my tower's fate. I continued to search the walls for any sign of life, and when I didn't find any I pressed my palm against the stone floor, searching with my touch for even a glimpse the flickering magic that would assure me it was well.

Nothing.



My anxiety rose, tight and overpowering. With the tower dying, I was losing not only its protection but a good friend. Even though it had technically served as my prison, the tower and I had always been together these past three years, during which it'd been both a comfort and a constant presence even when everyone else had turned away. Now it too was leaving...and I had no idea how to stop it.

I stood from the floor and brushed my skirts off before leaving my room, taking advantage of Quinn's rare absence outside my door to walk the corridors alone. I kept my hand on the wall in search of the tower's magic, hoping to find a place where it lingered. But these stone walls were also cool to the touch, absent the flicker of life I often felt.

I spent an hour walking the corridors, pausing frequently to rest when I grew too tired, but each stone I searched was the same: it was just ordinary rock.

My desperation rose. "Please don't leave me, Tower." My earnest plea was nothing more than a whisper, too soft for the tower to hear...if it was still alive.

I paused near the hall of mirrors, my gaze riveted to the door at the end of the corridor. I hadn't ventured here since the time it'd bombarded me with a myriad of heart-wrenching visions at once, ones too painful to relive. Yet it was here as I stood with my hand pressed against the wall that I felt the first stirrings of life.

A jolt of heat filled the stone to spread across my palm. I gasped but kept my hand in place, desperate to feel it again. "Tower? Was that you?"

It took a patient moment of waiting before I felt it again, a warm flicker of life. I beamed and faced the wall to rest both my hands against the stones.

"You're still here."

The feel of the tower's magic pulsing against me brought great comfort, even as it caused my heart to ache at how weak it felt. Despite still being here, it was fading quickly, the magic

all but gone as Mother gradually stole it. What would happen when the last of it slipped away?

Tears burned my eyes at the thought. “Stay with me, Tower. Please.”

The impression was faint, but I felt the tower’s assurances...as well as a sense of urgency, its desperation to help me. My brow furrowed that the tower would desire such a thing while I was still safe within its walls, sheltered from the outside world. And yet this desire was there...along with a sense of struggle, as if it was fighting to break free.

Was it also trapped?

As if sensing my silent question, the tower suddenly stirred once more. It didn’t communicate in words or even in images, its powers too weak for even that, but an impression tickled my thoughts—one to enter the room at the end of the corridor.

My breath hooked and my gaze darted to the door, the very one that led to the room of mirrors. Panic rose. “No, not there,” I pleaded. “Whatever you want to show me...I can’t face it. Please.”

The tower’s impression came again, more urgently than before, but this time it was accompanied by another feeling: a reassurance, a silent plea to trust it.

I took a wavering breath and slowly approached the door. I wasn’t entirely sure of the tower’s purpose, but if it was using some of the last of its magic to send me a message, the least I could do was listen, no matter how painful it might be.

With every step, I kept my hand against the wall. Magic pulsed against my skin, each communicating the same message: *Don’t be afraid*. Some of my fear eased with each assurance. Despite all the terrible things the tower had done, I still trusted it.

I paused outside the door, my hand hovering over the knob. The tower pulsed again, a silent urging for me to continue forward. With another steadying breath, I pushed the door open to step into the room of mirrors.

The surrounding walls of mirrors greeted me, and though they were currently empty, I knew they wouldn't remain so for long. The magic filling the stones was stronger here, as if this room had been able to protect it. Feeling the tower so *alive* brought great comfort, though not enough to dispel my apprehension for being back in this room.

The tower's magic surrounded me, allowing me to feel its reassurances more strongly...along with a sense of nervousness, as if it were anxious, too. Before I could wonder at its cause, the mirror closest to me flickered to life. Fog swirled in the glass in preparation for another vision.

Unable to watch it unfold, I tried to turn away, but the power of the room was too strong, binding my gaze to the mirror...only the fog didn't clear. The tower's magic flared against my hand, allowing me to feel its sudden struggle, as if it were fighting against something I couldn't see.

The fog filling the mirrors shifted, no longer a dark, murky grey, but instead a cheerful golden yellow, light which was only broken by flickers of the image the tower was trying to show me. At first it was fuzzy but it quickly cleared. I stiffened—it was a vision of Drake and his wife and the tension that riddled their marriage from their struggles to conceive. It flickered, going in and out, and each time it did I saw another vision entirely: that of Drake and Rheanna *happy*.

I didn't have much time to enjoy the joy and smiles filling the couple's expression before it vanished once more... replaced by the stress and heartache from another failed pregnancy.

The tower's struggles escalated, causing the sad image to once more fade; the longer it fought, the longer it stayed away, replaced by a vision of beauty and light—Drake and Rheanna laughing as they climbed an apple tree in an orchard on the palace grounds in what appeared to be a race. As they neared the top, Drake deliberately slowed, allowing his wife to win; with the way her eyes glinted, she clearly knew it'd been rigged.

They settled in the blossom-laden branches and Drake nestled Rheanna close to brush a kiss along her cheek. She rested her hand on her stomach and he laid his on top of hers, and in that moment I realized she was pregnant again. Regardless of the outcome of this one, by their adoring looks and tender smiles, I had no doubt they were happy, something the earlier images the tower had shown me of their marriage had caused me to doubt.

This vision gradually faded from the mirror, and the one nearby sprang to life to reveal my older brother behaving cold and beastly, so unlike how I used to know him. But instead of flinching away I watched, waiting for the moment the vision would shift...and after another struggle it did, revealing a story different than the one I'd been led to believe. The kind, loving version of Briar filled the glass, his arms wrapped around the waist of his wife, more obviously with child, each look and touch given in the gentle manner I remembered from him.

Confusion filled me at the stark contrast. I looked around the room as images swirled within each mirror—the bad ones I was familiar with, each of which was gradually interrupted by a flicker that revealed something far more joyous, each change made after the tower raged its invisible battle.

“Why are they so different?” I asked. “Which is real?”

My questions tumbled out in a rush, and the tower tried to respond in flickers of words and images—the most vivid being of a book with several pages ripped out. It didn't take long for me to understand its meaning.

“Both visions are correct, but...they're incomplete. You haven't been sharing the entire story.”

The tower's magic pulsed against my palm, its affirmation. Yet I still found myself confused, my thoughts as whirling as the fog swirling within the glass.

I studied the mirror in front of me, this one showing me my sister, Reve, not only home but broken free from the curse that had stolen her memories, such a contrast to the images of her lost and wandering that the tower had exclusively shown

me up until now. Why hadn't the tower shown me she was safe earlier?

Understanding slowly dawned. "You've been forced to only show me the horrible visions."

The tower almost seemed to slump against my hand in relief that I'd finally understood. But though I did, my mind still struggled to make sense of this information. A possibility entered my mind, one that went against everything I'd assumed about the tower keeping me within its walls.

"Are you also trapped, Tower?"

Warmth pulsed against my hand, the tower's affirmation.

The revelation stunned my mind into silence, and then all at once it was alive again, frantically attempting to assemble each piece of this puzzle. The visions that had haunted me since my entrapment had been incomplete, the thorns of an otherwise beautiful rose, leading me to believe the world outside these walls was nothing more than a dark and frightening place.

But it was all an illusion. And there was only one power strong enough to create one so sinister.

I ran my hand along the stones, stroking it soothingly. "Mother cursed you, didn't she?" But for what purpose? The answer immediately came, whether from the tower or from a knowledge deep inside me: Mother had cursed the turret to create a prison and forced the tower to become its warden... making it also a prisoner. Which meant that as much as it tried to protect me, it was still *trapping* me.

This truth was a whisper against my thoughts, one that filled my mind with each of the tower's pulses against my hand. Mother wasn't just stealing the magic she'd used to curse the tower, for that wasn't enough; she needed its own powers as well...powers I hadn't known it'd possessed considering until this surprising revelation, I'd believed they'd all come from Mother's curse. But she had somehow found a tower that already possessed its own magic, and forced it to bend to her will.

For a moment I stood there, stunned into silence, before all at once the implications of this discovery became too much. Overwhelmed and exhausted, I slumped to the floor.

The stones were warm, pulsing with what was left of the tower's magic. I leaned against the wall and felt the tower embrace me, its relief that I finally understood the truth behind it as well as its apologies for having been forced to go along with such a scheme. For Mother's magic trapping it was clearly stronger than its own, meaning that everything that had occurred had been her doing.

Everything I'd previously believed shifted. I looked around the mirror room with new eyes as the visions and stories it'd shown me took on new meaning. "It's all...an illusion?" My brow furrowed. It couldn't be, not entirely, for many had been memories I remembered too vividly for them not to be real. Did that mean the others were also real?

*An incomplete story*, the tower reminded me. Which meant Drake and his wife *had* experienced moments of heartache, there had been a time when Briar had been hardened, Reve had been lost, Father had truly died...but this sadness wasn't a complete picture. It had shown me only night without a single glimpse of the day, leading me to falsely believe there wasn't any light to be found at all...fears which had made it so I never wanted to leave, even as the tower's enchantments had begun to fade.

Just as Quinn had hypothesized...and I'd been too afraid to listen. But though he'd been right about that, he was wrong that the tower had been a willing accomplice.

If Quinn had been correct about this, he was likely right that soon we'd be able to escape. Perhaps we already could, and the tower was serving as my friend by waiting for me to become brave enough to step beyond its walls.

Emotion followed this thought, but for the first time it was different than the fear that usually filled me. Instead it was one of *anticipation*. But despite experiencing it, some reservation remained, for I'd been hidden away from the world for so long I wasn't sure I'd be brave enough to venture out now.

These thoughts confirmed that the one still trapping me wasn't Mother's curse or the tower itself, but *me*. Realizing that my new warden wasn't the tower but instead my own fears didn't make them go away entirely, but it was certainly a start.

I stood to approach the window and leaned out to stare across the landscape, wondering if I'd ever be strong enough to be free. But for the first time in a long time, I felt the desire to leave stir within my heart and knew that was the first step.

## CHAPTER 17

I remained by the window in the room of mirrors for a long time, watching the morning sun rise higher in the sky to bathe the world around the turret in a sheen of dancing golden light that caressed the treetops. With the beauty of the scene came a new memory, not from the tower by my own recollections of the many hours I'd spent confined in my room sitting at my window seat to stare out across the surrounding forest—a memory of longing to explore, a feeling I'd entirely forgotten until now.

It stirred within me, feeling as if it was rousing from a deep slumber, as if it'd always been a part of me but had simply been buried by my fears. And although I still experienced reservations, I also felt...desire, not just my own but the tower's as well.

I felt its caring for me and thus its wish for me to leave, not just because it'd soon no longer be able to protect me but because it knew I needed to. Its concern only stoked my own longings, strengthening them until they burned brightly enough that I knew they'd never be quenched again.

The glimpse of my old life from within the mirrors had opened up new memories I'd chosen to suppress—the many moments when my siblings had visited me and the hours of laughter and conversation we'd shared, the love and attention of my father, the times I'd been well enough to participate in events rather than remain barred from them, the days when the weather had been pleasant enough for me to explore the



enchanted gardens...moments which had brought me great joy, ones my chosen imprisonment now denied me.

There was so much I'd forgotten and chosen to miss out on because of the fears I'd allowed myself to believe my entire life, but nothing good came from hiding.

For the first time I really felt...*trapped*. Though I could feel the thick and impenetrable turret walls surrounding me, my real prison was my fear, one which had only grown as I'd allowed others' views of me to shape my perspective.

I didn't want to remain trapped any longer. It was time to step beyond these bars and into the light. And I knew I could, because not only was the tower different, but *I* was as well. I now *wanted* to leave, and in the end that made the biggest difference. What would happen if I finally broke free?

Frantic footsteps sounded outside the room, piercing my reverie. I guiltily bit my lip. I'd used the small window of opportunity during Quinn's short break to slip away, a choice which had undoubtedly caused him unnecessary stress and worry as he searched for me.

I stepped away from the window and turned to face the door as it swung open to reveal my guard. Quinn stood in the doorway looking frantically around, his gaze sweeping over me several times before with a frustrated sigh he turned to leave.

"I'm here, Quinn."

He swiveled around, squinting in my direction. I stepped more fully into the light cast from the window, and even then he didn't appear to see me until he'd ventured a few steps closer. He released a whooshing breath.

"Gemma." In three large strides he was before me. "I didn't see...but you're here."

He rested his hands on my shoulders and looked at me, his frantic gaze scanning me to ensure I was well. It lingered on my face longer than necessary, as if not trusting his first assessment, before his tense posture sagged in relief.

His obvious worry only deepened my remorse. “I’m sorry to have worried you.”

His look immediately shifted from relieved to scolding. “Why did you slip away from me?”

“I was concerned for the tower, so I decided to investigate its fading powers.” It wasn’t the only one I was concerned for—Quinn was squinting more than usual, as if the dim light in the room was causing him great struggle. “How...is your vision?”

I hesitated to ask, simply because in the past I’d hated the constant questions concerning my own well-being. My desperate desire to know how my dear guard was faring gave me greater empathy for those who’d often inquired after me.

He released a heavy sigh. “Not doing well; everything is so shadowy.” But as usual he dismissed any further questions about himself and his condition by hastily changing the subject. “What are you doing here? Of all the rooms I searched, this was the last one I expected to find you in.” His dark gaze flickered to the mirrors with an accusatory look.

“The tower led me here.”

His anger deepened and his glare darted towards the surrounding walls. “Of course it did, and you’re so sweet and trusting that you let it.” His hands lowered to my waist, his touch both protective and intimate. “As much as I hate to upset you, I wish you’d understand that this blasted tower doesn’t have your best interests in mind.”

“That’s not true.” I ached to defend my friend, especially now that I understood it on a deeper level than I had before.

“Isn’t it?” His frown deepened as he searched my expression. “Considering the room you’re in and how it’s tormented you in the past...you don’t seem upset.”

“The mirrors showed me different things...or rather, the *tower* did.” I hastily explained what I’d learned about the curse, omitting only my conversation with Mother several days before; I hadn’t told him of it after it’d occurred and I had no desire to do so now.

Quinn listened thoughtfully and pondered my words long after I'd finished my explanation. "The tower's magic is sinister enough that I suspected it to be a result of a curse, though I'm admittedly surprised the curse is a separate entity from the tower's magic. So my hypothesis was correct: the enchantment is fading, meaning there *is* a way out." I'd never seen Quinn look so smug.

I paused, unsure how to voice my most recent epiphanies. "If that's the case...I've been thinking...of what it'd be like if I *did* leave the tower."

Quinn's breath hooked before his entire manner lit up. "You mean you finally want to?"

I hesitated before nodding. "I've been thinking of what a future beyond the tower would look like. I've spent so much of my life within walls that's it's difficult to imagine anything beyond."

He leaned on his elbows against the windowsill to stare out across the landscape. "That's the beauty of life: it can be entirely of your own making. You've already taken control of it by rising above your health to find passion and purpose. I truly believe you can accomplish anything you desire."

I allowed myself to imagine: to be free, to be healthy, to fully experience all I'd been missing...I allowed this part of me that had been dormant for far too long to grow until it filled my entire being, no longer restrained by my fears that such a future was impossible.

"I want to experience all life has to offer, and if I ever return home, I want to work in the apothecary." I bit my lip. "Is that truly a calling fit for a—" But almost as soon as my familiar doubts arrived, I disregarded them. "I shall be the first *royal* Royal Herbalist."

Quinn grinned. "You certainly will."

I peered into his sweet, handsome face, marveling at the confidence and tenderness that filled his gaze as he looked at me, which only reminded me of the other future I was fighting for: one with dear Quinn an intricate part of it.

Despite his shadowy vision, he seemed to sense my unspoken desires, and though he sighed, I could see the yearning in his own expression. “You still want a future with me.”

I nodded. “I’ve been giving it a lot of thought like you requested. My wishes haven’t changed.”

He said nothing, silence which ended the argument before it could even begin. And though I ached to pursue the subject further, I knew it wouldn’t help my cause to push him. I bit my lip to suppress my frustrated sigh and turned back to the window, where I extended my hand out, marveling at the way the sunshine lit up and warmed my skin. But I wanted more than just a taste of this feeling.

“I know the tower’s magic is fading and that soon we’ll be allowed to leave,” I said. “The tower’s dwindling reserves will likely leave us little choice. But I’ve spent far too much of my life having it dictated by others to be forced out. I want to make the choice.”

Yet though my wish was sincere, it wasn’t strong enough to completely eclipse the fears that served as the bars around my thoughts.

Quinn grew pensive. “If we *can* get out, perhaps you can begin by only exploring the area around it for now rather leaving completely. Knowing you can return to the tower after the excursion might give you the bravery you need to take the first step.”

I gratefully seized the suggestion, yet the problem remained: we still didn’t know *how* to leave. Quinn had been faithfully searching for a way, only for the sole one he’d found to seal itself before we could use it. I bit my lip. “How will we get out?”

As if the tower had been listening closely to our conversation, I felt it stir, its magic tickling my arms resting on the stone windowsill. I sensed its unspoken message, its urges for me to follow it, before the warmth darted away, as if leading me to the door.

“The tower is taking us somewhere.”

Quinn didn't have a chance to respond before I seized his hand and tugged him after me. His breath hooked at our contact, but rather than pulling away like I feared, his hold tightened around my hand, his desperation to keep me near stronger than his usual insistence on duty and distance.

I slowed once we stepped into the hallway to rest my hand on the wall, cool to the touch, no sign of the magic's warmth. I ran my hand along it, searching...and eventually felt the stirring again, much fainter in the corridor than it'd been in the mirror room.

“This way.” I tugged on Quinn's hand to lead him down the hallway.

The tower's magic slithered along the walls, leading us down several familiar corridors, making me wonder where it was taking us. It turned out to be a narrow back staircase that descended not to a door but a solid wall. I hesitated on the top step to peer uncertainly down.

Quinn squeezed my hand reassuringly, giving me the strength to descend onto the first step. I kept my hand entwined with his and the other on the wall, both to steady myself and to follow the thin trail from the tower down each twisting step until we reached the very wall that had trapped us in the tower three years before.

I stared at it, searching, but as had been the case throughout our entire imprisonment, the door remained absent.

It had been years since I'd stood in front of this wall. When we'd first become trapped I'd spent hours staring at it, even running my fingers over it in a desperate search for any sign of the door, a hidden knob, *anything* to escape. But there'd been nothing. The discouragement from my constant failure had quickly become unbearable until I'd finally given up...and had avoided this section of the tower ever since.

The memory of that defeat returned anew, as heavy as it'd been before. Looking back, I could see that that moment had been a turning point when I'd accepted my fate and begun

suppressing any desire to leave, convincing myself that a life trapped within a tower was not only the life I would live, but *deserved* to live, even *wanted* to.

Things were different now. I'd never imagined I'd face this wall again, and as before, I had no idea how to penetrate it. "There's still no door." My discouraged whisper penetrated the shadowy silence.

"It's so dark I likely wouldn't be able to see it even if there was one." Quinn stepped closer to explore the wall with his hands. "It's still impenetrable stone, just as it's been every time I've investigated each time there's been signs the tower's magic is fading."

"The tower's magic isn't the only one disappearing...the *curse's* is as well." I tilted my head to study the stones. "Perhaps the tower taking control of the mirrors proves that at this moment it's stronger than whatever enchantment is trapping us; I doubt it'd have led us here otherwise."

I rested my hand on the stones and frowned. None of the tower's magic lingered, and I knew it was the key to unlocking the door. I moved my hands along the wall, searching, but found nothing. I stepped back to study it in thought, yet no matter how long I stared, I discovered none of its secrets.

I tore my gaze away to take in the rest of the landing. Grey floor, grey walls, nothing but stone. My eyes lowered to the floor, searching...before noticing something promising. Though the rest of the room was lit by the flickering orange flame from Quinn's lantern, a sliver of sunlight ran along the crease dividing the floor and the wall.

I crouched down and ran my fingertip along this seam, feeling not only the warmth and light from the outside world peeking through but the tower's presence, which I was certain would be the key to unlocking the door.

"It's near the floor."

Quinn crouched beside me and lifted his lantern, squinting as he watched my fingertip trace all along the seam. The longer I searched, the stronger I felt the tower's magic grow.

“Please open.”

At my whispered plea, the magic stretched from the crease to rise up and encase the entire wall. I straightened and rested my hand against the stones; they pulsed with the tower’s enchantment, and soon the wall began to rumble, sliding away to reveal...

I gasped and blinked in the blinding light as, for the first time in three years, I stood facing the outside world.

## CHAPTER 18

Light filled the stairwell as the tower door slowly slid open for the first time in three years. The white light was blinding; I closed my eyes against the brightness but could still see it against my eyelids. I kept my eyes closed for a moment before opening them a slit. The light was still overwhelming, but my eyes gradually adjusted, allowing me to see the outdoors.

The view took my breath away. While the window from my tower bedroom offered me a lovely aerial view, it was vastly different seeing the world stretching before me from the ground. Transfixed, I took a tentative step forward, lingering within the doorway with my hand on the doorframe, for I wasn't quite ready to leave the tower's safety.

The turret stood erect in an open clearing surrounded by thickets of trees. From my tower window I'd only been able to see the tops of their branches, but now they towered over me, tall and majestic. Paths twisted through them, leading to unknown places, ones I yearned to explore.

Despite how much I'd tried to overcome them, at first my fears held me back. Yet my desire to experience *more* than the tower had to offer was stronger, slowly dispelling my reservations and urging me to step out of the shadows into the light in order to explore the world in all its beauty.

I glanced towards Quinn. At his encouraging smile I straightened my shoulders, took a steadying breath, and stepped out of the tower.



It was impossible to describe the freedom that enveloped me the moment I crossed the threshold. I didn't realize how heavy the burden of being trapped inside the tower was until it'd been lifted, leaving nothing keeping me from enjoying the world to its fullest.

For a moment I stood completely still as I basked in every detail—the sunlight bathing me to warm my hair and my cheeks, the vast blue sky filled with lovely wisps of white clouds, and simply how *beautiful* everything was. It wasn't just a feast for my sight; my senses were overwhelmed by all there was to see and hear—from the wind gently swaying the branches of the nearby trees, to the trilling birdsong, to the rush of a nearby stream.

I crouched down to run my hand across the grass, soft against my palm and cool to the touch from the shadow cast by the tower, such a unique texture. I balanced on one foot and tugged off my slippers, tossing them aside so that I could feel the grass against my bare feet. The feel of the blades peeking between my toes was a sensation unlike any other.

I stared at my feet before looking up at Quinn with a giddy smile. He leaned against the tower wall, watching me with a rather soft look. His grin widened at the unladylike giggle that escaped my lips.

“Have you ever seen a more unroyal sight?” I motioned to bare feet. “Princesses are expected to wear shoes outdoors.”

“There's never been a more *lovely* sight,” he corrected. “With the sunlight glistening off your hair, the way your smile lights up your eyes...it's one I'll remember forever.”

My smile faltered at the reminder that while I was seeing the world for the first time, Quinn was seeing it for one of his last.

He noticed my change in mood and approached to take my hands tenderly in his. “Please don't worry about me, Gemma; I've already seen the world, whereas you haven't. This is your time, so embrace it.”

I swallowed the lump filling my throat and nodded. Only the sincerity filling his expression gave me the strength to push away the tears burning my eyes in order to offer a wavering smile. If Quinn needed my happiness, then I'd do my best to feel it for his sake.

Quinn started to pull away but my grip tightened around his hand, keeping him with me. "I want you to be with me as I explore." I could think of no better moment to share with him than this one.

"And I will be, but there's someone else who deserves to be out here as well."

Of course: Melina would be overjoyed to finally be out of the tower.

I remained outside while Quinn retrieved her, then took great pleasure in watching her burst from the tower in front of Quinn. For a moment she stood still in awe to be beyond the tower walls, but her fierce joy quickly overwhelmed her so fully she began to cry.

She lifted her face, tear-streaked but smiling. "I'm so happy to be free. Thank you for finding the door." She gave me a quick hug before venturing off to explore, her look both wondrous and pensive; I could almost see her calculating the supplies we'd need for our journey home and hoped she'd forgive me when I confessed that I wasn't ready to permanently leave the tower.

Quinn returned to my side and allowed me to lace our hands together. He followed as I gently tugged him along through my explorations. I had no specific destination in mind, I only wanted to savor the sunlight and fresh air. It was truly magical.

We stepped into the shade cast by the tower's shadow and I paused to look up at the majestic structure towering above us, no longer enchanted to be invisible, another example of its fading magic. "It's so strange to see it from the outside." With its grey stone and rather formidable height, it almost looked like the turret of a prison.

Quinn glanced over but didn't look for long before he turned away with a frustrated shake of his head. My stomach tightened. Could he...not see it, despite it being so large and close? "Quinn—" I began, but he talked over me.

"What would you like to do first?"

I frowned at his hasty change of subject but didn't want the gloom of our previous topic to ruin our otherwise wonderful excursion. "You spent a lot of time encouraging me to leave the tower, so I trust you have the perfect adventure in mind."

He smiled, dispelling the shadows that had filled his countenance. "Being out here is an adventure in and of itself. I don't even know where to begin."

"As long as I experience the world through your eyes."

His previous gloom returned. "I'm afraid it's not a very clear view anymore."

My stomach tightened, but I did my best to keep my rising distress from my expression. "I still want to see the world through you all the same. What is your most treasured memory?"

He cast his gaze around, as if seeking inspiration. His eyes lit up as he took in the surrounding trees. "I have just the place." And keeping a secure hold of my hand, he led me away from the tower's shadow and into the forest.

My bare feet pattered against the soft grass and soon over the twisting dirt path leading to the trees. I wasn't surprised by our destination considering the beautiful memory he'd once shared of his childhood spent within the woods. My breath caught as we stepped into the trees. I stilled, allowing myself to take in the surrounding beauty and majesty—I recognized the maple, oak, and pine trees from the view from my bedroom window back home, but didn't know the names of the other varieties.

Quinn's warm breath tickled my ear. "Look up, Gemma."

I tipped my head back. Above me was a tapestry of branches laced together to form a woven canopy. Hints of blue sky and sunlight peeked through the autumn leaves. I extended

my hand and watched its golden patterns dance against my skin and across the forest floor, carpeted in a sheen of colored leaves.

“It’s beautiful,” I murmured. “And so...secure, the branches creating the perfect cocoon.”

Though his eyes strained as he struggled to look up, his manner was reverent. “I’ve told you of the hours I spent in the woods as a boy. There is no place I find more peaceful.”

It *was* peaceful, a feeling I’d never expected to feel outside my tower, proving that despite how long I’d spent believing otherwise, contentment and joy could truly be found outside the walls. For a long moment we stood still, basking in the surrounding senses—the scent of pine filling the air, the crackle of leaves, and especially the beauty surrounding us. I took a deep breath, appreciating the way my lungs filled with ease, no hint of a cough or breathlessness, even as I enjoyed the cool air against my skin without becoming chilled.

I crouched on my heels and touched the ground, marveling at the feel of dirt as I ran it through my fingers and the rough texture of the rocks. I picked up a maple leaf and twirled it by its stem. “It’s just like the leaf you carved for me.”

He gently took it from me and brushed my hair aside to tuck it behind my ear. “I hope it’s one of many treasures you’ll add to your collection.”

I smiled. “It will, for I believe the woods can become a new refuge for me...if I ever return to the palace.” It felt strange to speak of home when I still wasn’t sure whether it’d have a place in my future.

“The woods surrounding the Malvagarian palace are vast and great to explore,” Quinn said. “I would love to show you my favorite places.”

I loved the idea of exploring the woods with Quinn. I used to spend a lot of time from my bedroom window staring out across the trees, wondering what mysteries they contained. But if that forest was anything like these woods, I knew I’d love it, too.

I began exploring earnestly. I felt the textured bark of each tree, traced the shapes of the leaves, investigated hollows, found a bird's nest to study, and spent time watching the squirrels darting along the branches. I also gathered nature's treasures as I discovered them—interesting-looking leaves, clumps of berries that stained my fingertips, pinecones, and acorns with their darling caps. It was all so new and delightful, an adventure I never wanted to end.

Eventually I found a patch of wildflowers growing nearby and contented myself with picking them before settling on a log to weave them into a crown, an activity Reve had taught me when we were little. She used to bring a basket of flowers to my room and sit on my bed with me, where we'd pass the afternoons weaving crown after crown. It was such a lovely memory, one I'd forgotten in the hurt from her betrayal in helping Mother trap me in the tower. My heart ached at the remembrance of the betrayal, though not strong enough to eclipse how much I missed my sister.

After so many years since my last floral crown, my fingers had forgotten the once familiar process of weaving flowers together. Quinn settled beside me to watch with rapt attention as I struggled to connect two blossoms by their stems. His attention caused my fingers to fumble. I stole a sideways glance.

“Though the woods are still new to me, I've already been here long enough to know I'm not nearly as interesting as the surrounding beauty.”

Crimson blotted his cheeks and he hastily looked away. “Forgive me, I'm just trying to remember every detail of this moment.”

He said nothing more, but additional words weren't needed. My despair, never far, rose. It was an effort to push it away and force a smile. “Wonderful moments deserve to be remembered. I'm doing my best to do the same so that I can look back at this moment the next time I'm trapped in bed.”

His widening grin dispelled his lingering melancholy. “I doubt there will be many more moments of confinement in the

future; your health is vastly improving; I'm so grateful you were able to find a remedy that will allow you to finally come outside and enjoy all it has to offer without growing tired or ill."

It was true: already I'd been outside far longer than I ever had growing up, yet I wasn't tired or lightheaded. I could feel myself beaming at him as I again marveled at all I was finally able to do. We shared a reverent moment of quiet appreciation together before he spoke again.

"I'm also pleased you find this moment worth remembering. I knew you'd love it."

I succeeded in weaving two flower stems together and picked up another to add to my growing crown. "Then you know me better than I know myself. Considering how much I'm enjoying myself, I'm quite embarrassed I resisted the world for so long."

"You grew so accustomed to the limitations placed upon you that you didn't dare imagine anything more for yourself, but I knew that once you found your wings, you'd savor the freedom that comes from flying."

I paused to consider that word. *Freedom...* was *that* what I was experiencing? Was I truly free? I hadn't just breached the tower walls but had overcome the fears that had kept me inside. This afternoon had helped me catch a glimpse of the beauty I'd spent my entire life missing, allowing me to experience something my life of illness had previously denied me.

I slowly looked around, taking in every detail. "Being out here now makes me wonder how I could spend so much of my life afraid."

"There isn't always an explanation for our fears," Quinn said thoughtfully. "But taking the first step in overcoming them has proven you're both stronger than them and unwilling to allow them to shape you any longer. You deserve to experience all that life has to offer."

It was difficult imagining I was strong in *anything*, not when I'd spent my entire life being considered weak, both by myself and others. And although I knew I still lacked the strength to permanently leave the tower, this venture was certainly a start.

I returned to my flower crown with a much lighter heart. While I'd managed to connect two of the blossoms, I still hadn't yet penetrated the mysteries behind the art. My fingers fumbled, causing the flowers I'd woven together to come apart.

I sighed. "I used to spend hours weaving flower crowns with Reve, but it's much more difficult than I remember." I glanced at Quinn. "Have your experiences with the outdoors extended to creating a flower crown?"

He chuckled. "That would be my sister's expertise, one she mastered during the hours I spent training for my knighthood." His brow furrowed as another flower fell from my woven crown. "It does seem rather tricky."

"I confess it's much more difficult than I thought it'd be after seeing the completed ones Reve used to bring me, but I'm determined to succeed."

His warmth enfolded me as he scooted closer and rested his fingers over mine, undoubtedly to help me, but all thoughts of floral crowns fled at his touch, leaving nothing but *him*.

My breath caught and he stilled. For a beautiful moment we sat together, our breathing labored. It took me a moment to summon the courage to steal a peek up at him...and I couldn't look away, lost in the love filling his eyes as he stared at me in return.

Longing filled me as my gaze flickered to his lips, just as it'd done on the tower rooftop. I started to lean in, but before I could bridge the distance, he pulled away.

As before, his rejection stung. "Please, Quinn?"

Yearning filled his eyes, and for a moment I thought he'd say yes...before he pulled fully away with a regretful sigh. He

turned away, as if looking at me would cause him to give in to the temptation I ached to explore.

I stared at his back, yet another wall keeping me from the life I wanted to live. I was growing quite tired of walls. “Didn’t you just tell me you want me to experience all life has to offer?”

He was silent a long moment before he glanced over his shoulder, his expression pained. “You will, Gemma. You deserve to love and be loved in return. I have no doubt that’s in your future...but it can’t be with me. I’ll only take things away from you, for being with me will cause another curse to overshadow your life...but unlike your tower, it’s not one you’ll ever be able to escape.”

Couldn’t he see that having him despite his curse was far better than not having him at all? Did he really think my love was conditional and I wouldn’t accept him exactly as he was, just as he had always accepted me despite my own illness?

The unfinished flower crown tumbled from my lap as I stood and left the woods, leaving behind the treasures I’d carefully gathered, for the magic of the moment was lost. How cruel to get a taste of the world and yet know that what I most wanted remained forever out of reach.

I sensed Quinn’s anxiety as he followed me, but I didn’t slow until I came within sight of the tower. I wasn’t quite ready to return inside, but neither could I remain out here now that the beauty of the world outside had become tainted. I needed a moment alone so I could work through the pain brought by Quinn’s continued denial.

The perfect solution came when I spotted a bucket near the tower, as if the tower had provided it just for me. “I’ll retrieve water for our dwindling supply.”

Unsurprisingly, Quinn stepped forward and tried to take the bucket from my hand. “But Princess—”

His protests died in his throat as I tugged the bucket from his grip and walked towards the nearby stream, ignoring Quinn’s quiet question if he could accompany me. I hoped the



solace I desperately needed could be found on the bank of the stream so that I could work through not only Quinn's rejection but the puzzle of how to convince him of my sincerity.

For I wasn't about to give up. Now that I'd broken free of the tower, nothing would hold me back from the life I wanted to live any longer.

## CHAPTER 19

I sat on the bank of the stream with the bucket discarded beside me. The damp earth was likely soiling my dress, but I didn't care. Instead I relished the feel of the dirt against my hands, the gentle breeze blowing through my hair, and the sunlight kissing my cheeks with its warmth...so many sensations, and I was finally experiencing them for myself.

In this moment I was free from the tower I'd allowed to imprison me for far too long.

My senses were overwhelmed with all there was to see and hear. My gaze remained transfixed on the stream as it twisted and swayed through the wildflowers. The beauty of the trees growing along the bank reflected across the water's surface, their leaves dappled in shades of ruby and gold. I dipped a hesitant toe into the water. My breath hitched at the cold before I wriggled my toes, inching them in deeper.

I smiled. Princesses didn't dip their feet into the stream... and yet here I was, doing just that. How wonderful I was well enough to experience something so new and wondrous.

I sat on the bank and basked in the stillness of the autumn morning, enjoying the soothing sound of the rushing water and the dance of the sunlight across its surface, a scene more tranquil than I could have ever imagined.

I stirred at the sound of footsteps and turned to find Quinn, who had naturally followed me here, his determination to protect me unwavering.

My smile in greeting immediately faded, for although he looked at me, it was with an almost unseeing look, as if he couldn't quite see me clearly. *Could* he see me? My stomach knotted at the thought that he couldn't. While I was experiencing life through new eyes, his vision of the world was rapidly fading, soon to be completely stolen.

“Quinn?” I asked in a small voice.

He hesitated a moment before stepping closer. I held out my hand and to my relief he took it; at least he'd seen that, but how well? The sadness that had encompassed me ever since learning about his condition deepened. As if sensing my distress in the unique way only he could, he gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

“I am well. What of you?”

I'd forgotten I'd been upset when I'd come to the stream to be alone, for the beauty and wonder of my surroundings had caused my sadness to melt away. Besides, it was difficult to be upset when the man I feared was pushing me away was with me now.

“Everything is so *new*; I better understand why you encouraged me to venture from the tower.” Once more I marveled at the surrounding beauty before my gaze was naturally drawn back to Quinn.

His lips twitched into a smile as he eyed my position in the dirt. “I can't even express how grateful I am for the opportunity of seeing you experience the world in such a way.”

I motioned to the spot beside me. “Won't you sit with me?”

He hesitated, as if unsure whether it was proper for him to join me, before settling beside me close enough that I could see the golden flecks in his hazel eyes, no sign of the curse slowly robbing him of his sight.

His smile faded as he reached out to press his fingertip in the furrow between my eyes. “You're distressed.” His eyebrows drew together when his comment caused my lips to

curve upwards into a small smile. His confused pucker was adorable; if he didn't insist on maintaining distance, I'd lean up to kiss it.

"It pleases me when you're able to see even the smallest of details." A blush followed my words and I hastily looked away.

"I don't mind discussing it," he said.

I bit my lip and kept my eyes lowered. "I always hated being known as the sickly princess. I don't want you to think I only see you as..." I couldn't finish.

My heart flared at his sudden touch, which cupped my chin to lift my gaze to meet his tender one. The corner of his mouth lifted as he studied me. "I know how you see me, Gemma." He lightly caressed my cheek with the back of his hand. "I see you more clearly than anything else, yet I never tire of you. You're what I'll miss the most after—"

He swallowed the remainder of his words, but thankfully he didn't withdraw his touch. He attentively traced over my features, as if trying to memorize them with his fingertips. He even closed his eyes as he carefully caressed my face, his touch light and gentle.

He slowly smiled. "I'm certain I'll never forget what you look like."

I leaned against his hand. "I don't want you to forget."

He continued stroking my cheek until he felt my tears beneath his palm. His eyes snapped open. "Gemma—"

"I don't want you to go blind."

His expression crumpled, the first sign of his faltering bravery. "Please don't be distressed; I hate the thought I'm causing you pain."

I was frustrated that my weakness had caused my faltering emotions to escape. I wanted to be strong so that I could help Quinn bear his burdens rather than allow my distress to add to them. "I'm sorry, I'm trying to be strong." But it felt

impossible with the impending darkness slowly overcoming the man I dearly loved.

“I’ll be alright.” His tone was so gentle, so reassuring.

My strangled sob escaped. “But you won’t. How can you be?” I’d been ill long enough to know that accepting my condition hadn’t taken away the difficulties of my trial.

“Because I’ve had a long time to come to terms with it, and although losing my sight will be an adjustment, it won’t take away what truly matters to me; not all happiness and beauty is seen.”

“Yet you’re still losing far too much.” My lip trembled as my fragile hold over my composure faltered. My unraveling emotions compelled Quinn to scoot closer and enfold me in his arms.

My breath hooked, and for a moment my tears ceased as I analyzed this rather cozy position, one I’d never experienced before, not when Quinn was all about distance; this wasn’t distance at all. I released a contented sigh and snuggled closer. He stiffened, as if just registering our position.

He started to pull away, but I tightened my hold around him to keep him close. “Stay with me, Quinn.”

He hesitated before relaxing against me and gathering me back in his arms. He rested his head against mine with a heavy sigh. “We shouldn’t—”

“Don’t say that. If you care for me as I care for you, then nothing about this is wrong.” I tipped my head back to stare up at him. “You love me?”

His expression softened. “I think I’ve always been in love with you.”

“You’ve only known me since I was ill. If my illness didn’t keep you from loving me, why do you think your condition will keep me from loving you?”

Longing filled his eyes as his thumb carefully stroked my jaw with a look as if he’d never tire of seeing me. “Because I fear loving me will take from you rather than give. My

condition is a result of a curse, and you've had enough curses in your life."

"I've also spent too much time trapped by my limitations, so please don't create another prison for me."

He sobered. "That's the last last thing I want to do...hence I'm afraid what loving me will cost you. The price may not seem too high now, but what if one day it becomes too much? You deserve a wonderful life after being trapped for so long."

It seemed impossible to imagine feeling trapped with Quinn, for no future had ever seemed so wondrous. But perhaps just as I'd needed time to imagine a life beyond the tower, he needed time to realize that a life with him was one I truly wanted.

I feared he'd eventually pull away, but he only continued to hold me, his gaze slowly tracing over my face. "I'll never forget the way you look now. With everything I've seen, you're still the most beautiful." He dipped down and pressed his lips against my brow before releasing me.

I sighed. "For not having yet lost your sight you already behave as if you're blind. Can't you see how much joy your love gives me? I can still experience a beautiful life with you."

I offered my hand. He took it and allowed me to lead him along the bank until we stood beneath the shade of one of the oaks growing beside the stream.

"Close your eyes," I instructed.

He obeyed, and I gave his hand a gentle tug for him to follow me into the stream. My breath hitched as the cold water lapped at my ankles and quickly soaked the skirts. I paused beneath the tree.

"There's a canopy of branches above us, their leaves the most lovely shades of ruby, orange, and gold. They float in the water around us in a sheen of color."

I'd never been poetic, so I wasn't sure whether my descriptions were adequate, but Quinn smiled. It grew when I took his hand and pulled it down to rest on the leaves floating

beside us, allowing him to see them through touch in addition to my words.

“I can visualize it, Gemma.”

His expression grew pensive as he pulled his touch away from the leaves in order to stroke my hair before slowly lowering his hands to graze my neck and arms, exploring the position of my body with his touch before returning his hands to my face, his fingertips lingering to trace my smile.

His own reappeared. “I can visualize you.” His eyes fluttered open and brightened as his gaze caressed the features his fingers had just explored. “You’re even more beautiful than I just imagined, but I admittedly got quite close.”

Warmth swelled at his sweet words. “Close your eyes again.”

He obeyed. I tipped my head back to stare up at the sky. “Sunlight is shining through the branches to glisten across the stream in a waltz of golden light.” I took his hand again to lightly skim his touch across the water to each spot of sun.

“I can see it, Gemma.” He opened his eyes to meet mine. “This can still be beautiful for you?”

“I can’t imagine beauty without you in it.” I ran my thumb along his hand in my own explorations. “Is it better to see me through touch or not at all?”

He sighed. “I know what you’re really asking. You know the answer to that, Gemma.”

“Then you know my answer should you ask me the same thing?”

Hope filled his eyes that had been absent before. The sight of it made me brave. I was tired of being limited by my fears and uncertainties, of not living the life I wanted, and what I wanted most—even before I’d realized it—was Quinn, the first man who truly saw me, who believed in me, who helped me see myself for who I really was as well as the wonders of the world.

It was time to do the same for him.

I waded closer. To my relief he remained still, granting me the bravery to cradle his cheek. My eyes fluttered closed, and for a moment I marveled at how heightened my senses were through touch alone, of how much I could see him from beneath my fingertips. Perhaps because there was no one I knew better, not even myself, nor was there anyone more dear.

Eyes still closed, I reached up and slowly pressed my lips against his. With how insistent he'd been that a relationship between us was impossible I feared I'd need to encourage him, but to my delight, he readily returned the kiss. Passion filled his lips as he kissed me back with an eagerness like he'd wanted to kiss me for a long time...and perhaps he had.

His reaction surprised me, and I tried to return it in the shy, uncertain way of one experiencing her first kiss. The way he groaned made me hope I was doing it right. His fingers burrowed in my hair, bringing me closer, his lips fervent yet soft and gentle, treating me with the protective, adoring way he always did.

I was just melting against him when he suddenly released me, scooting back so hastily he nearly lost his balance. I stared at him, struggling to speak through my shallow breaths.

“Quinn?” I was almost afraid to ask him what was wrong; by his wide eyes, I suspected it already.

“I’m your *guard*. I’m supposed to protect you, not—” He couldn’t even finish.

My insecurity returned, a prison that was all too easy to enter whenever I was feeling embarrassed. “Did you not...like it?”

“Gemma...” He released a long breath before sloshing closer to take my hands. “I can’t tell you how long I’ve wanted to kiss you, and the experience was far better than I ever imagined it’d be.”

My heart lifted at his words. “You imagined kissing me?”

He chuckled breathlessly as he pressed his forehead against mine. “I did.”

I smiled. “How often?”



“All the time, but even so, it was inappropriate for me to —”

“I don’t care.”

“But Gemma, not only am I your guard, I’m on duty—”

“You’re always on duty,” I grumbled. “And I don’t care that you’re my guard—you’re also my best friend, the man I love. As such, certain liberties can be granted, even while you’re at your post.”

His expression remained unyielding. I frowned, trying to figure out a way to persuade him, before my mind lit with an idea. I gave him an impish smile.

“It’s quite the adjustment being outside the tower for the first time in three years, and I’m feeling rather frightened. Won’t you protect me?” I snuggled closer.

His lips twitched. “Mischievous girl.” To my relief he played along, his arms winding around me to nestle me against him. I laid my head against his chest and sighed contentedly as his hands moved to stroke up and down my back. “Are you still frightened?” he murmured against my hair.

“Extremely,” I said. “I need my guard to protect me from the dangers that are sure to come upon us.”

“Nothing can be more dangerous than the position we’re in now.” Despite his protests, to my fierce relief he didn’t pull away; if anything he clung to me more tightly. I could sense how much he cared for me in the tender way he cradled me close, and in his arms I found reason to hope for the life I longed to create with him.

“I wish you could see the future I want with you,” I murmured. “Perhaps it’s something I can show you, like you showed me the forest and I helped you see the light reflecting on the water.”

His arms tightened around me. “You don’t understand: I can already see that future.”

My brow furrowed as I tipped my head back to meet his gaze. “Then what’s holding you back?”

He sighed. “I need time, Gemma. I have to be certain the future I see is the one that will grant you the greatest happiness.”

Considering for the time being I still wanted to remain in my tower, time was something I had an abundance of, and I’d grant him as much as he needed in order to keep him forever.

## CHAPTER 20

*A*n urgent knock pierced the stillness of the night, yanking me from my restless sleep. I groggily sat up and glanced towards the door in sleepy confusion. “Who is it?” I managed around a yawn.

“Gemma!”

Quinn. Panic laced his voice, so unlike his usual calm manner. My worry flared, urging me to my feet too quickly, causing the world to sway; I clutched the bedpost to keep from stumbling. Even before I’d fully steadied, I lit the lantern at my bedside with shaking hands and tugged on my dressing gown before hurrying to open the door. My guard stood on the threshold dressed haphazardly, as if he’d yanked his clothes on in haste before coming to me.

My apprehension grew. “What is it, Quinn?”

My heart lurched as I took in his expression, lit by the orange glow of the lantern. His face was pale and his eyes were wide. He stared at me for a long moment before a sliver of relief penetrated his fear. He cradled my cheek. “I can still see you, but only just.”

My breath caught. “Did—you think you wouldn’t be able to?”

Rather than answering, he took my face in his hands and stared hungrily at me. “You’re so beautiful, Gemma. I pray my memory can do you justice...afterwards.”

My stomach lurched at his meaning, and I was forced to think about the very topic my thoughts had purposely been

avoiding. “What do you mean?” I managed when I’d found my voice, even though with the apprehension tightening my chest I had a very clear idea what he meant.

He released a heavy sigh as he stepped into the room. “My apologies for disturbing you. I know it’s late, and that being with you alone at night is vastly inappropriate—”

“It’s no trouble.” I tried to sound calm in hopes of easing the tension and anxiety cloaking him, such a contrast to his usual rigid control. “Come, let’s sit down.” I took his hand and led him to the hearth.

As we settled, he glanced towards the crackling flames. “Is the fire still lit?” His voice was hesitant, as if fearing the answer.

My heart sank as I guessed the reason for his inquiry. “Can you not see it?”

He shook his head. “I can feel its warmth and hear it crackling. That’s the only reason I knew.” His gaze returned to me, looking very lost...and frightened. For a long moment he simply stared, as if he couldn’t look away. “I always sleep with my lantern lit so that I can avoid the darkness...before that’s all I ever see. I awoke suddenly tonight, only to discover that the curse had progressed rapidly while I’d slept. It’s almost victorious; for a moment I feared it was, for despite the lantern light, I saw...nothing.”

My heart pounded in a wild, unnatural rhythm in my chest. “How about now?”

“The only thing I can see...is you. The sweetness filling your eyes, your beauty, the faint orange glow of the firelight playing across your cheek and your hair...” His hand reached out to stroke it, his gaze riveted to the dancing light. “The way it highlights your hair...it’s so lovely. I know this will be the last time I ever see it.”

Tears burned my eyes at his words, but I forced myself to keep them back. I would be strong, a pillar in his time of need, just as he’d always been for me. But the task proved far more

difficult when my heart was slowly breaking. “Are...you certain?”

He nodded. “I can feel the curse at work, taking the last of my sight. It’s as if night is settling over my senses, and once the sun sets, it won’t rise again.” He swallowed. “I know it’s going to be tonight. I don’t want to be alone. Please, Gemma, stay with me. I want you to be the very last thing I ever see.”

I’d never seen him so frightened. Despite trying desperately to be strong, my fragile emotions faltered and my tears escaped. “Oh, Quinn.” I embraced him and he held me, clinging to me like I was his life preserver midst the storm raging behind his eyes. But he didn’t hold me long before he pulled away, his gaze riveted to me.

“I must look at you...while I still can. Please, Gemma.”

I could only nod.

We remained at the hearth close to the firelight so that it could join the lantern light in illuminating the darkness for Quinn’s fading sight. I regretted it being the middle of the night, for I didn’t want it to be one of the last things he saw. I prayed the curse would hold off until the dawn to allow him to see at least one final sunrise.

The hours ticked by in silence, sand in an hourglass measuring the final moments of his sight. Not once did he look away from me. I watched the desperate way his gaze took me in, caressing every part of my face with an intensity like he was trying to memorize it.

The silence was thick and heavy, pressing around us and leaving me no distraction from my heartache. I ached to fill it, but there were no words adequate for the moment. My earlier tears had dried and I forced myself to keep the rest at bay; I could cry later when it was over and I was alone. Not only did I not want them to be one of the last things Quinn ever saw, but I wanted him to remember me as a strength, not the weak princess I often feared I was.

After two hours had slipped away, I finally spoke. “How can I help you?”

“You already are.” He still didn’t look away, his gaze riveted to me, filling with concern. “You look exhausted. I’m sorry I’m keeping you awake.”

“This is far more important than sleep.”

He still looked worried...and guilty. “But with your health...even with your elixir, I know how important your rest is—”

“Quinn,” I admonished gently. “I’m strong enough for this.”

Despite the gravity filling his expression, he managed a soft smile. “I know you are, Gemma. That’s the only reason I’m here. I knew I could ask this of you.” His fingertip gently traced over each of my features. “In this moment it’s hard to imagine I’ll ever forget you, for I know you so well. Yet I fear that the more time that passes...” He sighed but he didn’t drop his touch; he continued cradling my cheek, stroking my skin with his fingertips.

“What is your favorite thing to see?” I wasn’t sure what had compelled me to ask such a question at such a time, but as this part of his life was closing, it seemed appropriate to honor the joy his sight had brought him, a much brighter focus than the impending dread of it about to be fully taken away.

“Besides you?” He considered. “There are so many. From the moment I realized I’d inherited the curse, I’ve been paying careful attention to every detail, no matter how small—the graceful way the light dances, the gentle breeze blowing the curtains or the leaves in the trees, the cheerful way the birds hop along the windowsill. I’ve also enjoyed the views whenever the tower shifted locations, the different masterpieces nature creates in every sunrise and sunset...so many things.” His expression softened a moment before he grew pensive. “I love seeing those I care about—not only their features, but their unique mannerisms. I regret I’ll never see my family again, though of course I don’t regret the time I’ve spent here with you.”

Despite his reassurances, guilt knotted my stomach all the same. The emotion must have shown in my eyes, and in this

moment he could still see it. His smile gentled.

“I truly don’t regret it, Gemma. I’ve enjoyed my sight and am grateful for the time I’ve had it, but nothing has brought me more joy than guarding you. To witness the light in your eyes as you discover more of yourself and your passions, as well as your strength despite the difficulties you’ve endured... yes, I’ve definitely enjoyed you the most.” His look was incredibly soft.

Warmth filled me, and I knew he truly meant it. “You mentioned the sunrise...it’s almost dawn. Do you think you’ll see at least one more?”

“That is what I’m praying for.”

By the light tinging the horizon I knew it was close. We moved to sit on the balcony, where we watched as it gradually grew brighter, lighting up the sky to swallow up the stars and dispel the velvety night. But even as the sky became aglow in golden, rose light, Quinn still didn’t look away from me.

“Don’t you want to watch the sunrise?” I asked.

“Its light is haloing you. It’s so beautiful.” Reverence and joy filled his eyes. I basked in the look and the light reflected in his gaze, the look of *seeing*. And because I was watching him so attentively, I saw the moment when that look simply... disappeared.

The change was subtle, but the way his hazel eyes dimmed and clouded with despair told me all I needed to know. “Quinn?” I asked hesitantly. He blinked hastily, as if the act could dispel the fog now hovering over his vision. But of course it did nothing.

He released a shaky breath and rested his forehead against mine, saying nothing, as if he couldn’t bear to speak the words, confirming what had just happened. And I didn’t want to hear them. Even now that the curse had finally reigned victorious, I couldn’t bear to think that he was now blind.

I enfolded him in my arms. He didn’t resist, simply slumped against me, clinging to me fiercely. As I held him, I glanced towards the sky lighting the world around us,

dispelling the last of the night. How ironic that a new day was beginning the moment the sun had set on Quinn's vision. Yet how could I appreciate the surrounding beauty when Quinn would never again be able to?

He sensed my melancholy in the way only he could. He glanced up, likely out of habit considering he could no longer see me. For a moment he appeared wistful before his expression cleared. He reached up to feel my position, seeing it all with his hands.

He managed a smile. "You're facing towards the balcony. Are you admiring the sky? It must be a lovely morning."

"It's not lovely at all," I said sourly. "I do believe I hate sunrises. How can I appreciate them now?"

His brow puckered in concern. "Gemma, please don't hate them. Sunrises haven't lost their beauty simply because I can no longer appreciate them...but *you* can."

I sighed. Of course he thought that. I shouldn't have been surprised, for Quinn had always wanted me to look outside the tower to the possibilities that lay beyond. But though I'd had little patience for such sentiments before, I felt differently now.

"I want you to appreciate it. For me. Please, Gemma." His tone was desperate, pleading.

I studied him. His gaze was turned in my direction, only a few inches off from my own. And despite knowing he couldn't actually see me anymore, the tenderness that always filled his eyes whenever he used to look at me remained. Despite everything, that hadn't changed.

He truly cared for me and wanted more for me, just as I did for him now that he'd completely lost his sight. Before I'd ventured from the tower I'd been trapped by my own blindness, content with the darkness that came from remaining in the tower's security. But Quinn had never given up trying to bring light to my world...and now I wanted the same for him.

I burrowed my fingers in his hair, both needing to touch him and wanting to give him another sense to enjoy now that



one had been so cruelly stolen. He startled in surprise before melting against my touch. This new relationship of ours would take some getting used to, but I was prepared to do whatever it took to navigate it with Quinn...including granting his request now.

“You want me to watch the sunrise even without you?” I asked hesitantly, needing to be sure.

“I *am* watching it with you,” he said. “Just because I can’t see doesn’t mean we’re not doing it together.”

That was true. I scooted closer so I could lean my head against his shoulder and turned to overlook the balcony. “It’s really a pretty sunrise. The sky is lit with all manner of colors. It’s like a watercolor painting, with all the colors blending together in layers—the top is tinged with blue, below is gold, which melts into rose, and hugging the horizon and the tops of the autumn-laden trees is orange.”

My descriptions didn’t seem nearly adequate for such a breathtaking vision, something I’d need to practice, but a small smile lit his face all the same, as if they’d been just right.

“How lovely.” He looked out over the balcony, as if to take it in himself. “I can well imagine it, Gemma.”

I tipped my head back to study him closely, and though he appeared content, I knew him well enough to see it was a mask. “You don’t have to be brave for me, Quinn. Please allow me to share your burden.”

He hesitated a moment more before his composure faltered. “I’m *trying* to be brave, for I know that is the best way to navigate this new reality. I’ve imagined this moment dozens of times and yet nothing could prepare me for it. Before there was always *something*, even if it was shadowy and unclear, but now the darkness is so complete. To think it’ll never end, that *this* is all I’ll see from now on? I’m frightened, Gemma.”

I wove my hand through his. “It’s alright to allow yourself to mourn for what you’ve lost. It’s a journey I had to embark on once I realized my illness would likely be a lifelong

affliction. But just because you mourn your lost sight and have uncertainty about a future without it doesn't mean you're not brave."

His shoulders slumped with a weary sigh. "It's more difficult than I imagined, not just not seeing, but facing a future where it'll never end. But I suppose I'll get used to it, and soon I'll forget what it was like to still possess my sight."

My heart broke imagining Quinn without any memory of the time before his blindness. I hoped that no matter what else transpired, that never happened. "I hope you never forget."

He managed a weak smile. "My most precious memories are with you, and I can't imagine forgetting those. I will cherish both the old memories and any new ones we'll make together...for you'll stay with me?"

He asked the question hesitantly, as if afraid I'd change my mind now that the moment of truth had finally arrived. But how could I? His inability to see didn't change how I felt towards him, just as I knew my illness didn't influence his own feelings for me.

"I'll always be here, Quinn. I promise."

He relaxed and his arms looped back around me, holding me tightly, as if afraid I'd slip away if he let me go. "Your presence will be one light in this new darkness. Thank you, Gemma." He turned his gaze towards the view stretching beyond the balcony, his eyes unseeing, with a look that was rather lost.

He deserved so much more than to remain trapped not only in his darkness but within these tower walls. If I couldn't restore his sight, then I'd do all I could to be brave enough to show him the world that lay beyond, allowing him to experience it with his remaining senses...even if it meant leaving my tower forever, for overcoming my fears was well worth it if I could but bring him that joy.

## CHAPTER 21

I monitored Quinn closely, and even though his condition made it impossible for him to see the careful way I watched him, I kept my gaze covert. I wasn't certain why I was being so subtle; perhaps it was the part of me that still couldn't accept what had befallen the man I loved.

It had been nearly a week since the curse had claimed his sight. A day hadn't gone by when I hadn't studied him, searching for any sign of his struggle or distress, but if he felt either he hid the emotions well. I feared his apparent contentment was merely a charade for my benefit so that I wouldn't worry. I knew it was done solely because he cared, but it made me feel weak all the same. I wanted to help him bear his burdens.

But he showed no hint of discontent now. He stood in his usual guarding post whittling a piece of wood. Looking at him, one would never suspect the change that had occurred behind his eyes—he stared rigidly ahead in my direction, his hands working the wood familiarly. I'd always loved watching him work—the way he explored each groove in the wood with his touch and the expert way he handled the knife, pausing only occasionally to see it through his fingers. I was grateful that his condition hadn't also stolen this from him.

He paused, and at first I thought it was so he could check his work—something he did more frequently ever since the curses's victory—but instead he turned himself more fully in my direction.

“Are you watching me, Gemma?”

My eyebrows lifted in surprise. “How did you know?”

His lips twitched. “I can somehow sense it. Perhaps it’s a second sight.” His flicker of humor vanished. “Are you worried?”

There was no use lying; even without his sight, I was certain Quinn would detect it. He knew me far too well for me to hide anything from him, even now.

I sighed. “I’m afraid you’re pretending for my sake.”

He was quiet a moment. “It’s the best way to endure this, to make it at least somewhat bearable.”

He fell silent, and with a struggle I forced myself to return to my herbal studies and the search I hadn’t yet given up—a way to cure blindness. I just couldn’t accept that there was no way to help Quinn, especially after I’d found a remedy for my own illness. But it was impossible to concentrate—the words blurred together, and even when I managed to focus enough in order to decipher them, they offered no solutions.

My gaze was drawn back to Quinn when he ventured from his guarding post to the hearth to stoke the fire to ward off the growing chill and the shadows from the settling night...only to kneel near the supply of logs and discover that only a few remained.

He muttered a curse. “The tower has diminished our supply, yet I couldn’t see—” He cut off the frustrated thought in one breath and his expression cleared in a manner that I suspected was forced...and entirely for my benefit. “I will check the supply in the kitchen.”

He strode towards the door but paused in the doorway. I knew the reason for his hesitation—he didn’t want to leave me alone.

“I’ll be fine for a few minutes.” Now that I better understood the tower’s battle between its magic and the curse, I had less reason to fear; it would do its best to protect me.

“Perhaps I should wait until Melina finishes the preparations for lunch.” But he frowned at his own suggestion, clearly not liking the idea of me waiting in a drafty room. Though my elixir helped my condition considerably, I was still susceptible to the growing chill as autumn fully descended and winter approached.

“The kitchen isn’t far; you’ll only be gone a few minutes.”

“Unless the tower rid itself of those logs, too.” He muttered this darkly beneath his breath, as if he didn’t mean for me to hear his disparaging words against the tower. But I had, and my heart ached that he still didn’t trust it.

“The tower cares about our comfort, so I’m quite certain it didn’t diminish our entire supply of firewood. If it had, Melina would have noticed as she’s preparing lunch and informed us.”

Quinn considered this before giving a curt nod. “I’ll return in a moment.” And without another word, he disappeared into the dark corridor.

I missed him the moment he left but tried to take advantage of his absence by returning to my reading now that he wasn’t here to distract me. I hadn’t even read a single page when a loud crash suddenly echoed from the corridor, followed by an agonized cry, one that sounded like Quinn.

I sprang to my feet and staggered to the door, clinging to the frame to steady myself. “Quinn?” I cried into the thick, ominous darkness.

There was no answer, no sound...except for my rapidly beating heart. But then I heard a low, agonized groan coming from the direction of the stairwell.

“Quinn.” I whispered his name midst a breathless sob. I fumbled for the candle on the nearby ledge and stumbled into the darkness, struggling to traverse the corridor with only its faint glow. I hadn’t ventured far when Quinn cried out again.

“Gemma, don’t—”

His voice was muffled, sounding almost far away...and clearly in pain. I froze, my pulse palpitating. “Quinn?” I stuttered.

He didn't answer, which only escalated the worry squeezing my chest. I lifted the candle and carefully stepped closer, searching...and my breath caught.

The stone staircase had collapsed and down below was Quinn, crumpled in a heap and clutching a bleeding leg. He must have fallen.

I released a choked sob and hurried towards the landing—but stopped short, for the steps were gone, leaving no way to get to him. Even though he'd only fallen down one flight onto the portion of the staircase that hadn't crumbled, he was still a ways down, making it impossible for me to reach him.

The coldness of the stones seeped over me as I knelt on the floor and extended my candle further into the darkness in hopes of better seeing the extent of his injuries. But the darkness was too thick, and Quinn too far away, making it difficult to discern his well-being.

At the sound of my movement, his head snapped in my direction. "What are you doing, Gemma? I told you to stay away. The staircase—" He gritted his teeth, his expression twisted with pain, the most emotion I'd seen slip past his usual stoic mask.

"I'm not trying to come down." At least not *yet*, but I refused to remain safely on the landing when he was injured. I tried to still my shallow, frightened breaths as I used the candle's faint light to look for a way down to him...but there was nothing. "Did the stairwell collapse while you were on it?" I tried not to envision the stairs crumbling from beneath him, but my imagination paid no heed to my fervent wishes.

"No." His pained tone was hardening. "They were already collapsed, but because I *couldn't see*..." He let out an agonized cry and pounded his fist against the wall. "I can't see *anything*. The darkness is consuming. To think there will never be anything else—"

His anger shifted into a despair so acute my heart wrenched, which only escalated my desperation to reach him. But though I was worried about his injuries, I was far more concerned by the pain in his eyes, his all-consuming

devastation. Though I'd been searching for signs of this emotion all week, I was heartbroken to have finally found it.

I lifted the candle to take in my surroundings. The top three steps of the staircase were still intact, but the ones beyond it had crumbled, taking out most of the staircase until the second-floor steps where Quinn was currently crumpled and bleeding. The chasm was far too wide for me to cross, and Quinn was too far down for me to drop below. What was I to do?

The panic and helplessness crowding my mind made it impossible to think, save for my desperate need to reach him. I rested my hand against the stone wall and felt a flicker of warmth from the otherwise cold tower, a sign that its magic was still within the stones.

"Please help me," I whispered.

At first nothing happened—until the tower suddenly shook, and as it did so, several steps reformed—though not all of them, which made the way precarious, but thankfully not impossible to reach Quinn.

The tower gradually stilled. Quinn looked wildly around. "What happened? Gemma, are you alright?"

"I'm fine. The tower has provided enough steps for me to reach you."

"No, Gemma. You can't—it's too dangerous—" The remainder of his protests were swallowed up by another moan of pain. The sound of his distress increased my urgency; with my desperate need to reach his side as soon as possible, it took great effort to force myself not to move too quickly.

The crumbling steps the tower had created seemed to float in the thick darkness with nothing to support them, the spaces between each one wide. Only my trust in the tower and my love for Quinn gave me the courage to guide my steps from one stair to the next as I slowly and carefully made my way down until I finally reached Quinn.

I collapsed beside him and immediately began frantically scanning his body for injuries. My stomach lurched at how

broken he looked. His breaths were sharp and shallow, his expression twisted with pain. It took several minutes of careful examination for the tight feeling in my chest to somewhat lessen. Though he was bruised and cut in several places, and in clear pain from his fall, the worst of his injuries was a broken leg.

My panic subsided, but only just, for he was still...*broken* in a way that went deeper than physically. I saw it in his unseeing eyes as he stared gauntly ahead, eyes filled not with sight but with heartbreak.

I enfolded him in my arms and he melted into my embrace. As if he'd been holding his emotions together by a fragile thread until this moment, his remaining bravery faltered and he broke into shuddering sobs.

I'd never seen Quinn cry. He was always the steady one, the brave one. But now it was my turn to be his pillar of strength. Neither of us spoke. I held him close as he sobbed, allowing him to work through his pain and fear. He clung to me tightly, as if I were his only source of light in his never-ending darkness.

He was the first to penetrate the stillness with a whisper wrenched with emotion. "I don't want to be blind."

I held him more tightly, a futile way to offer comfort. "I know you don't."

He released another stuttering sob. "It's not fair. Why me? I have three other siblings, and yet the curse chose *me*. Why must I suffer for my great-grandfather's actions? Why must I be forced to live in darkness for an offense I didn't commit? Even though I tried to prepare myself for it, it's worse than I feared."

Tears burned my eyes and I hastily blinked them away, fighting to keep my emotions in check, but my own sense of despair at the injustice that had been dealt to dear Quinn was too acute to keep my tears from escaping. I nestled against his hair. "I would give anything for you to have your sight back." This knowledge burned in my heart, an unquenchable flame that only grew with each of his sobs.



It was a long time before we finally stirred. I helped Quinn stand and he leaned heavily against me. Together we shakily navigated our way up the makeshift stairs the tower had created, a process that was a long, arduous struggle on Quinn's broken leg.

I led him to his bedroom and eased him onto the bed before retrieving Melina from the kitchens via one of the back stairways before locking myself in the apothecary to immerse myself in herbs as I attempted to find a concoction to stave off Quinn's pain and aid his healing.

I worked quickly, numbly, but my shield faltered the moment I returned to Quinn's side and helped hold him steady as Melina did her best to set and splint Quinn's leg; each of his sharp, agonized cries pierced my heart. Nor was I numb as I helped Melina clean and bind his cuts.

The sight of his blood and injuries only caused my despair to grow. It escalated at the blind way he fumbled for my hand, the unseeing way he looked wildly around, his eyes swirling with fear.

It took an agonizingly long time to tend to him, but finally the task was finished. Melina left to prepare a soothing tea to help Quinn sleep, finally leaving us alone.

I stroked his damp brow. "How are you feeling? Have the herbs worked?"

He said nothing for a long moment, just leaned into my touch and stared gauntly up at the ceiling. "My broken leg is nothing. That will at least heal. Nothing is worse than this darkness. And this is only the beginning, one week of the rest of my life. How many more fallen staircases will I be forced to endure throughout this sentence?"

I had no answer to that question, a fact which only escalated my despair. It fueled the flames burning within me, growing so powerful it was becoming difficult to breathe.

I held his hand close. "I'm here, Quinn. I'm not going anywhere." I pressed a soft kiss to his palm.

Flickering movement in my peripheral vision drew my gaze towards the mirror. It was only a flash, but enough for me to see Mother within the glass...and with the fierce look she gave me, I knew she'd witnessed my tender moment with Quinn.

Yet that didn't matter. Only one thing did.

He felt me stiffen. "What's wrong?" Even midst his own pain, his concern for me hadn't faltered.

I gritted my teeth. "It's...nothing." I'd never spoken a more grievous lie. His sigh snapped my attention back to him. "Does it hurt much?" I soothingly ran my fingers through his hair.

"It's not that. I'm frustrated I can no longer read your expressions. It leaves me with little clue as to how you're really feeling."

He wasn't even attempting to be brave, leaving me to wonder just how much he'd kept back from me until now. The fire swelling my breast grew to a roaring blaze until I could no longer sit still doing *nothing*. Quinn's heartache, his pain...it was too much.

I would give anything to dispel it.

I rose so rapidly I nearly upended my chair at his bedside. "I'll be back in a moment." I only paused to kiss his cheek before I strode briskly from the room, determination filling every step.

It was time to visit my mother and make her live up to her promise to help Quinn.

## CHAPTER 22

I chose the mirror in my bedroom, one far enough away from where Quinn rested that he wouldn't hear the conversation. I closed the door firmly behind me and strode briskly to the glass. "I need to speak with you, Mother. Now."

She didn't come immediately, as if to taunt me, a ploy I was in no mood for when my emotions were so taut. I slapped my hands on either side of the mirror and leaned closer.

"Don't pretend you can't hear me. I know you're there. I need to speak with you."

A few more long, unendurable seconds passed before Mother appeared in a flicker, her look dark and disapproving. Her expression would have frightened the old Gemma, but no fear was stronger than the thought of Quinn remaining blind.

"That's no way to talk to your mother," she said coolly before her frown curved up into a rather forced, insincere smile. "But I can forgive you considering you appear to be under a lot of stress. What can I do for you, dear?"

"Quinn is blind." My voice choked on the words.

Her eyebrows rose. "Ah, so the curse has finished its work? How unfortunate considering your *relationship* with him...which you foolishly tried to hide from me."

Our relationship was the last thing I wanted to discuss at the moment. "We must break his curse. I don't care how, I only want him to be able to see." This wish was more than a

desire...it was an all-encompassing need, one that had only grown stronger after today's injury.

I knew my desperation was dangerous considering Mother often used such emotions to her advantage, but my panic was too acute to mask. My only thought was for Quinn and doing all in my power to free him from his darkness so he never need fear experiencing whatever other broken staircases life might threaten him with.

Mother didn't answer, as if deep in thought.

"You have magic," I pressed, my voice rising. "You can break his curse."

She heaved an exaggerated sigh. "It's true I possess the power to grant your deepest desire...but unfortunately I'm in no position to help you. As you can see, I'm still trapped within my own curse..."

"The crumbling staircase is another sign of the tower's fading magic," I said. "Surely you've almost collected enough to free yourself?"

"I have...but I can't escape on my own." She gave me a piercing look, a reminder of our bargain. And though my heart prickled with misgiving, I couldn't back down from my earlier promise, not if helping her would in turn help Quinn.

My only regret was that assisting Mother would require me to sacrifice the tower as she drained the last of its magic. I felt its reassuring pulses against my hands still framing the glass, its selfless acceptance of my decision.

I took a wavering breath. "Tell me what I must do."

Her lips curled into a smirk. "I'm pleased you're so willing to help your mother after everything I've done on your behalf. In return I will help you...though unfortunately, it will take time."

My heart flared. "How much time?" The thought of Quinn enduring his blindness for even a minute more was unbearable.

She shrugged. “Magic takes time, but with the right spell I can create the healing you desire...though I don’t see why you should waste it on your guard when you could instead use it on yourself.”

For a moment I could only stare. Had Mother possessed the power to heal me all of these years and chosen to withhold it from me? Bitterness engulfed me at the thought, but I forced myself to push away the piercing betrayal. I wouldn’t be lured by any promise to heal myself. Quinn’s well-being was the most important thing in the world to me.

“Quinn has far greater need of your magic. Will you help him?”

“Certainly, I would do that for you...but first I have certain...*conditions* which must be met, and I’m not only referring to your assistance in helping me escape the mirror. I have plans which require my immediate attention.”

Foreboding knotted my stomach. “What sort of plans?”

Her responding smile was rather sinister. “Plans to take back the lands that anciently belonged to our kingdom, plans for *power*. Malvagaria will once more rule the world, just as it did long ago.”

My heart beat wildly at her words, creating a crack in my fierce determination that had blinded me to the true nature of the deal I was striking and allowing my conscience to work on me. When I’d first made my bargain with Mother, I hadn’t allowed myself to consider the implications of freeing her beyond what she’d do for me, but now...

Mouth dry, it took a moment to find my voice. “You... want to take over the surrounding kingdoms?”

Her eyes narrowed as she detected the resistance I fought to mask. “I only want to restore what is rightfully Malvagaria’s. Surely your personal feelings on the matter are nothing compared to your need to help the man you love. Though I’ve never experienced the weak emotion myself, I understand how powerful love can be. Certainly nothing is more important to you than your guard?”

I remained silent, my heart torn between both sides of the inner battle raging within me. I loved Quinn more than anything and wanted nothing more than for him to be healed, but could I allow myself to put his well-being before that of the surrounding kingdoms? Though I'd spent years struggling with my role as a princess, in this moment I knew I possessed the heart of one—a heart that cared for her subjects as well as the people who lived beyond Malvagaria's borders.

And yet... *Quinn was blind* and would be for the rest of his life unless Mother reversed it. I had no other way of helping him.

What should I do?

It wasn't even a question. I saw the path unfolding clearly before me, and though I knew it was the correct one, the thought of walking it deepened my despair, even knowing that it was the one Quinn would want me to take. I couldn't help him at the expense of others; it was the one price that was too high.

Mother saw my resignation and her expression twisted. "It appears I was wrong. Despite how delusional love can make a person, it's not as consuming as I thought."

"There are different types of love," I said weakly. "And though I love Quinn with all my heart, I also possess a love for the people who will be affected by your thirst for power. Therefore I cannot assist you in whatever you're plotting."

I turned away, desperate not only to check on Quinn after being away from him for so long but to escape this conversation before my resolve faltered and she lured me into her plans, a cooperation I knew I could never give. I couldn't sacrifice my conscience, not even for him.

Mother called to my retreating back, her tone riddled with disgust. "Are you truly prepared to face the dire consequences that will come from your refusal to help me?"

I froze with my hand on the doorknob. Heart hammering wildly, I slowly turned around to face her. "What sort of consequences?"

Her smirk returned. “I believe the correct question is: what consequences *won't* you suffer for your lack of compliance? You're not the only one I've conversed with while within my imprisonment—I also have access to the mirrors at the Malvagarian palace and with them your brother, who just happens to be the king.”

I stiffened. Though my past illnesses had kept me from many of the goings-on of royal life, I well remembered that Briar had been in Mother's pocket. Now that he sat on the throne, Mother's manipulations over him were far more dangerous.

I swallowed. “What...would you tell Briar?”

“Not much,” she said, her tone far too innocent. “Just about your clandestine love affair with your guard.”

“But...he's done nothing untoward—” I began, but my words faltered at Mother's widening smirk.

“Oh, I'm sure he hasn't...but *Briar* doesn't know that. I could tell him all sorts of stories about what's been occurring within this tower, ones he's certain to believe considering he has no reason to trust your biased defense of the man you care for. Briar will be furious and will see to it that Quinn is banished from the kingdom.”

The thought of Quinn wandering blind and all alone twisted my stomach. “No,” I managed around a sob. “You can't—Briar won't believe you.”

Up went her eyebrow. “Are you sure about that? Briar has always been most obedient to me.”

Cold fear encased my heart. From what the mirrors had shown me, Briar had changed, a beastly state so different than the kind brother I remembered. Even if the mirror's visions weren't a complete picture, they contained a portion of truth, enough for me to doubt that Briar would listen to me over Mother.

“And that's not all,” Mother continued, and the iciness filling my chest deepened. “Doesn't your handmaiden's fiancé work at the palace?”

The only reason Mother could know such a thing was if she'd been eavesdropping on my conversations. I couldn't answer, but my silence was confirmation enough.

“How easy it'd be to weave a story about him. I could tell Briar that I've seen Footman Corbin engaged in some suspicious dealings, leading him to believe he's plotting treason...a charge which would lead to his execution. My, my, won't that be devastating for your friend.”

My horror escalated. “No, please, you can't—”

“And who's to say I'll stop there?” she continued, a dark, triumphant glint in her eye. “I could spread lies about Melina and Quinn's families, or perhaps Reve's husband...there's no limit to the lives I could destroy due to your lack of cooperation.”

Each of her threats added a bar to the cage trapping me, keeping me from doing what I knew was right. How could I hurt those closest to me, especially after their unwavering loyalty? Yet how could I allow Mother to use her magic to hurt the lives of others should I cooperate? It went against my duties as a princess, a title that was mine no matter how often I feared I didn't live up to it.

There had to be a way to protect both the kingdoms *and* my friends. Openly thwarting Mother would only cause devastating harm to befall those I was closest to, yet my conscience wouldn't allow me to give in. If I could buy some time, find a way to stop Mother...then perhaps I could protect both the surrounding kingdoms *and* those I loved.

But the fact remained I was in a crumbling tower whose magic had all but faded as Mother slowly stole it. If I didn't act soon...

I met Mother's cold stare, glaring at me from behind the glass of the mirror that contained her.

The mirror...

A glimmer of an idea lit my mind, which whirled as I frantically tried to piece it together. Mother needed my help to



escape her mirror. If I didn't cooperate, she'd likely find another way, but if there was no mirror to escape from...

My pulse palpated, both in excitement at the possibility as well as apprehension. My idea was a gamble, but if it worked...

"What would happen," I said slowly, "if your mirror broke?"

"I would lose my connection to the tower and..." Her eyes narrowed. "Gemma..." Gone was her false sweetness, her charade of motherly love and concern. Instead, warning filled her tone...as well as worry, easily detectable considering I so rarely heard it in her voice. "Why do you want to know?"

I didn't answer, my thoughts still whirling frantically. Losing her connection to the tower would change everything, for without it she wouldn't be able to steal any more magic, without which she couldn't break free on her own.

That settled my decision. Without another word I left the room, ignoring her frantic calls behind me. "Gemma? *Gemma!* Come back here. I'm not finished with you."

Her voice faded as I made my way through the darkness to the crumbled stairs where Quinn had fallen. I fumbled as I searched for a loose stone from the broken stairs. I found one and clutched it in a tight fist as I marched purposefully back to my room.

"There you are," Mother snapped impatiently when I returned. "I was wondering where you'd—" She stopped abruptly when she caught sight of the stone in my hands. Fear filled her widening eyes, which only confirmed the path I'd chosen. "Gemma," she shakily stuttered. "What are you going to—"

I slammed the stone into the mirror. The sound of breaking glass pierced the air, muffling her shriek and scattering the broken fragments at my feet. Breathing hard and fast, I strode to the vanity mirror on the other side of the room, where Mother appeared, her face hardened with fury.

“What are you doing? If you break the mirrors, I’ll never be free. Gemma, *Gemma!*”

I lifted the stone and hit the vanity mirror in several places, breaking it everywhere until there was nowhere it wasn’t cracked. With another shriek, her reflection flickered and faded. A sense of empowerment filled me even as a sense of urgency guided my movements, as strong as the emotion that had caused me to seek out Mother in the first place.

This blind desperation led me to the rest of the tower’s mirrors. I broke each one in turn, finding satisfaction in the sound of shattering glass, each which lessened Mother’s chances for escape.

“Gemma?”

Only Quinn’s voice was strong enough to pierce my focus. I paused in the corridor and turned. He’d left his room to investigate the sound of breaking glass, undoubtedly to assure himself I wasn’t in trouble. He used the candle sconces on the wall to grope his way towards me, his face pale with pain as he stood unsteadily on his non-broken leg, his unseeing gaze darting around, as if by trying hard enough, he’d be able to see me.

“Gemma?” Concern wrenched his voice.

I hurried towards him. “What are you doing on that leg?” I wrapped my arms around him, both to support him and because I couldn’t resist an opportunity to hold him. He slumped more than melted in my arms.

“I—thought you were in trouble.”

My heart swelled at his loyalty. “I’m breaking the mirrors.”

His eyes widened. “Breaking the—but why?”

Before I could explain, the mirror in the corridor flickered before Mother’s form appeared in the glass, her expression hardened with fury but her eyes wide and desperate. “Because the foolish girl is determined to ruin her last chance.”

At the sound of her voice, Quinn startled. “Your Mother is here?” He whisked his head around to search the corridors.

“She’s in the mirror.” I didn’t offer any further explanation, but he didn’t seem concerned with the *why*, only that I was safe. His arms tightened around me protectively.

Mother’s gaze took in the way Quinn clung to me. “I see how much you care for him, so let me remind you: if you destroy me, there will be no way to ever help your precious love. Can you truly live with yourself if you condemn him to a life of darkness?”

I hesitated, for it was much harder to make that choice when I was cozily encased in Quinn’s arms, a sweet reminder of my feelings for him.

He stiffened. “What does she mean, Gemma?”

Mother’s smirk curled upwards. “We’ve made a deal. If she frees me, I’ll cure your blindness...but it seems she doesn’t care for you as much as she thought, for she’s backed out.”

Brow furrowed, Quinn turned his unseeing eyes to me. “Is that true?”

I couldn’t answer, both ashamed by the bargain I’d struck and my inability to fulfill it. I lowered my eyes. “I’m sorry.”

I half-expected him to pull away at my betrayal—indeed, the dark look filling Mother’s eyes confirmed she hoped for that very thing—but instead, his arms only tightened around me.

“Knowing Her Majesty, such help would only come at a horrible price, one you mustn’t pay.” He took a steadying breath. “You must break the mirror. Don’t worry about me. Nothing from *her* is worth compromising what’s right.”

Despite his encouragement, it took a long moment for me to regather my resolve and turn back to face Mother, whose expression had become almost...wild. “He’s right. Even his sight isn’t worth the harm you’d cause if free.”

Her desperation escalated. “Then I will forgo my plans and help him without conditions. Just...don’t break the mirrors. If you do...I’ll never be free.”

I stilled, the desire to help Quinn too powerful to immediately dismiss her proposal, but he showed no hesitation. He fumbled for the stone clutched in my grip before pulling away and hobbled towards the wall. He only paused to find the mirror with his hand before he was the one to break it, causing Mother to disappear from the glass with another shriek.

Panting, he turned to face me. “How many are left?”

The sound of breaking glass shattered the spell Mother had been trying to weave over me. “Just the mirror room.” I took the stone from him. “But you’re in no state to accompany me. You stay here; I’ll be back shortly.”

I strode away before he could protest. I had no doubt he’d follow, but he wouldn’t be quick enough to join me. Because of the visions the mirror room had often shown me, I suspected it was where Mother syphoned her magic, making it the most important place to break the mirrors.

Mother was waiting for me, her image reflected in every mirror so that I was surrounded by her hardened fury. “Stop, Gemma, you can’t do this. I’m your mother.”

I broke the mirror directly beside me, then the next, ignoring her pleas that accompanied each shatter of the glass. Due to the quantity of mirrors it took some time, but eventually I broke the last one, getting one final glimpse of Mother’s red lips and wide, frightened eyes before the mirror shattered at my feet.

For a long moment I simply stood there, breathing heavily, before my adrenaline slowly faded, replaced by a sense of victory. I’d done it. I’d lived up to my title as a princess and protected the kingdoms. It was over.

I turned to leave but stilled when I saw that the door had vanished. My heart leapt to my throat, but before my panic could fully settle in, blinding light filled the chamber. It

reflected off the broken shards of glass and scattered in fragments around the room...accompanied by a cold, triumphant laugh.

The light slowly faded to reveal...the stone slipped from my fingers. Mother stood smirking midst the broken shards, free from the mirror.

## CHAPTER 23

I stared at Mother in horror, blinking rapidly, as if the act of shutting my eyes would make her disappear. But there she stood triumphantly, even as I tried to process what had just happened.

My heart pounded wildly as I watched as Mother turned victoriously towards one of the broken mirrors. She posed at various angles as she admired herself, the shattered glass multiplying her taunting smirks, each one a painful reminder of what I'd just done.

The shock was slowly fading, allowing a range of other emotions to overcome me—horror at Mother's freedom, fear for what it'd mean, and guilt for my contribution, no matter how unwilling an accomplice I'd been.

Her eyes met my horrified gaze in one of the broken shards of glass and her coy smile widened. "Thank you for your cooperation. Breaking the mirrors in this room was the very help I needed."

My stomach sank. "I...don't understand. How—"

I was still too shocked and confused to properly formulate my question. How could she be free after I'd broken her connection to the tower? I'd been certain it'd thwart her, especially with how horrified she'd been when I'd begun breaking the mirrors.

The answer quickly became clear: her horror had been a charade, tricking me into believing I was on the right path as a means to persuade me into continuing down it.

I felt furious and embarrassed I'd been so easily manipulated. My guilt sharpened, bringing with it my familiar insecurities. I'd spent my entire life believing I was a useless princess, and the moment I'd attempted to do something to help my people, I'd only made everything worse.

I took several deep breaths in an attempt to smother these unproductive feelings. What was done was done, but not all was lost. While we remained within the tower, Mother couldn't implement her plans.

"How did you escape?" If I had any hopes of thwarting Mother, I'd need more information. I was certain she'd provide it; gloating was one of her favorite hobbies.

"The magic is far too complicated to explain in detail," she said, her focus no longer on me but on her reflection in the broken mirror, as if she couldn't get enough of seeing herself finally free. "My prison was enchanted to keep me inside... unless the glass should break, and with it the curse keeping me bound. But breaking the mirrors wasn't all that was required. If it was, Drake would have been freed from his own glass prison the time it cracked. Breaking the mirror needed to be combined with magic so that I'd have the power to force myself through the broken opening. Stealing the tower's powers finally gave me enough magic to succeed where he couldn't. For that, I thank you for your cooperation; I couldn't have done it without you."

I frantically searched her words for anything that I could use to stop her but found nothing. It was clear by her sinister grin that she'd chosen her words carefully, leaving me no means of thwarting her.

I swallowed the lump lodged in my throat. "What are you going to do now?"

"You have no right to know my plans, not when you failed to cooperate and had to be tricked into helping your own *mother*."

She looked at me in disgust, similar to the way she always had when she wanted me to feel entirely useless. But whereas before her disapproval would have held great power over me,

now I was beyond its reach—I didn't need her approval to see my own worth.

“Though I was coerced into helping you, the truth remains that I'm responsible for freeing you, so it's only fair that you keep your end of the bargain.” I fought to keep my voice steady. If she could at least help Quinn...

My heart sank at her cold, unfeeling laugh. “Why should I waste my precious magic on *your guard*?”

My breath caught. “But—you said—you promised—”

“I never had any intention of helping him,” she said. “It's your own fault for being gullible enough to believe otherwise.”

I stared in disbelief. Mother had always been cold and unfeeling, but this—

She noticed my deepening hurt and rolled her eyes. “It doesn't matter whether or not he's healed. He's only a guard, far below your royal status and not worth the effort. It's far better to make an advantageous match—there are three Bytavian Princes still available, and one from Lyceria, if it comes to that. I would love a hold in either of those kingdoms, particularly the prosperous island kingdom.”

The old Gemma would have nodded demurely and accepted Mother's dictates—but I was no longer that princess. I now had a future I was willing to fight for, a purpose of my own creation rather than the one Mother wanted for my life, and nothing could take that away from me. Even if she forced a marriage between me and a Bytavian prince, she couldn't force me to become her puppet.

I lifted my chin. “You no longer have any control over me. I am not the same Gemma you locked away in this tower three years ago.”

Her look became conniving. “Perhaps not...but I *do* have a means of gaining your cooperation. I'm sure you'd be much more willing if it meant protecting the man you loved.”

Fear gripped my heart in an unyielding vise. No, not Quinn. I'd willingly offer my compliance if it meant I could



protect him. The fact Mother knew this was my greatest weakness and meant to exploit it only escalated my anger... along with my desperation to stop her.

But what could I do? I was powerless while trapped in a doorless room, with the tower as my only companion...one whose powers were all but drained. Who were we against Mother and her magic...magic that didn't even rightly belong to her?

Scarlet light glowed within Mother's palm. She cradled it for a moment, almost admiringly, before it flickered out. She frowned with a disgruntled look. "My magic is weak. Breaking free took a greater toll than I expected. I'm in need of more."

Her attention turned to the nearest wall. I stepped back and pressed myself against the stones, nearly completely lifeless despite our being in a room where the tower's powers had previously been the strongest. Only the very faint glimmer of warmth assured me the tower was still alive...but only just.

Mother reached out to stroke the wall. "The tower is weaker than I thought, yet I'm in need of more power. Is there even enough to take?"

Despite my heartache for the dying tower, relief washed over me at her words. I'd rather the tower be lost forever than unwillingly used for Mother's evil purposes.

Her frown deepened with each stroke of her hand...until an idea lit her cold, dark eyes. "Unless...it's possible that it's only the *surface* magic that is all but out," she murmured to herself. "Surely there is more trapped within the stones. A magical entity such as this tower surely has more than what I've been able to take. I sensed it possessed great power when I chose it for my curse, and with as much as I've already usurped, surely I haven't taken anywhere near all of it." Her lips curled up. "Yes, I'm certain the powers are still there... and no matter how deeply they're buried, so long as they exist, I can extract them."

I felt another pulse from my friend, firmer than the first, but rather than the tower's usual warm reassurances, this one

was distressed, as if Mother had guessed the secret it'd been fighting to hide in an effort to protect its magic from her. My panic rose; if she succeeded in stealing it...then she'd be unstoppable.

I watched in horror as Mother regathered the scarlet magic in her palm and placed her glowing hand on the wall, pressing it against the stones as she tried to penetrate the tower. I felt each of its frightened shudders against my back, but even amidst its distress, I sensed its resistance as it fought to keep its powers back...but Mother was stronger, slowly sucking them away.

I didn't consciously make the decision. My desperation to protect one of my dearest friends and stop Mother urged me forward to push her hands away, breaking her contact with the wall. "Stop!"

Her dark gaze snapped towards me before her look became condescending, as if she were putting up with a toddler's tantrum. "Stand aside. This doesn't concern you."

"You can't," I managed, my throat clogged with tears. "The tower is my friend."

She rolled her eyes. "Of course you'd make friends with a pile of stones. They're not *alive*, only a source of magic. What good is it trapped within its walls? Power is meant to be used, and I mean to do just that."

She shoved me aside so forcefully I stumbled to the hard ground with a thud, landing on some of the broken shards. They cut me in several places and my blood pooled, the pain sharp. I only spared a moment to extract the sharp pieces before I scrambled back to my feet.

Mother had already returned her hand to the wall, but the tower had barely begun quivering again when I once more pushed her draining powers away. Her expression hardened.

"Gemma." Her tone was like ice. "You will stand aside. I will not tolerate your interference."

"I refuse to stand by and allow you to steal what's not yours in order to create destruction." Despite my attempt to be

brave, my voice shook.

Her responding laugh was humorless. “I cut off my magic when you stood in my way simply because you’re my daughter, but if you don’t back down, I won’t allow such a thing to stop me should you continue to intentionally get in my way.” Her eyes narrowed. “Consider this a warning, Gemma *dear*: if you insist on thwarting my attempts to drain the tower of its magic, then I will be left with no other choice but to drain you as well. Have I made myself clear?”

My breath caught. What would happen if Mother turned her powers on me? For a moment I stood numb, paralyzed with fear. Yet my terror didn’t change the fact that I was a princess. I knew what I had to do.

I gathered my bravery close, armor for the battle ahead. “I cannot allow you to do this. It is my duty as a princess of Malvagaria to do all in my power to help my subjects and those beyond our borders...no matter the personal cost.”

For a long moment she simply stared at me in disbelief, for I’d never lived up to my full strength as a princess or possessed enough courage or strength of will to stand up to her...until now.

Eventually her shock faded and she shrugged. “Very well, if that is your choice.”

She lifted her hand, but when I remained unmoving she hesitated, as if giving me another chance to escape. I remained in front of the tower wall, my gaze level with hers. After another moment, determination eclipsed her uncertainty. She cradled her scarlet magic and rested her hand on the tower wall next to me.

I felt its power the moment she touched the stones I stood in front of like a shield—an invasive draining power that immediately left me exhausted as it robbed me of my energy. But I barely had a moment to register its effect before the tower suddenly quivered to life.

At first I thought the feeling was evidence that Mother had succeeded in bringing the tower’s buried magic to the surface

to more easily steal it, but this sensation was different, stronger. It vibrated not only through the wall I stood in front of but throughout the room. It rippled over every surface, pulsing with life and power, as if awakening from a very deep sleep. The stronger it grew, the less I felt my energy slipping away.

Suddenly a light, brighter than the sun, appeared to enfold me in an embrace before surrounding the room. Mother let out a cry as her powers deflected from this force, bouncing off the broken mirrors and scattered glass shards to hit her, drain her...and yet she didn't withdraw her magic, whether out of foolish determination or because she was unable to, I wasn't sure.

What was happening? As if being surrounded by the tower's glistening power connected me to its thoughts, I'd no sooner wondered this than I understood: Mother really had enchanted the tower to protect me...and the moment her magic had turned against me, she'd triggered this protective spell, which shielded me from her magic to deflect back onto her.

She was being defeated by her own spell.

As if finally this herself, Mother at last cut off her magic and collapsed, and the light gradually slipped away. Mother lay curled on the floor, breathing hard, before turning her disbelieving fury onto me.

I stared. Her cold beauty had faded, leaving wrinkles marring her previously youthful skin and grey streaking her black hair. Her powers had likely been sustaining her youth and beauty, and without them...she was left as she really was.

"What—how—" She could barely speak through her exhausted, frustrated breaths.

"The tower is enchanted to protect me," I said. "Surely you remember. After all, it was your own spell." One that I had no doubt had become strengthened the deeper my relationship with the tower had grown. "The moment your magic began to drain me, the protective enchantment acted as a shield to deflect the magic...onto you."

She heaved a frustrated growl, but her defeat was short-lived before her smirk returned. “The tower might have drained my reserves...but this isn’t all the power in my possession. There is more within my garden back at the palace.” She shakily stood, groping for the wall to steady herself. “I have just enough to return the tower home,” she panted, “where I’ll have access to all my plants, which will allow me to resume my plans without further hinderance.”

“I thought that secret garden was always locked,” I stuttered. “Without the key—”

Her cold laugh cut me off. “Gemma, darling, surely you realize that with my powers, nothing is locked to me. As the dowager queen, I merely have to command the gate to open. I merely kept it locked to keep it from prying eyes.”

She lifted her hands and the tower immediately shook, and with each one I sensed it moving a vast distance. The force caused me to stumble and fall to the glass-covered floor.

My fear returned, crowding out the peace that had come from the tower’s protection. I’d heard many whispers about Mother’s secret garden over the years, where all sorts of dark plants grew—it was buried deep within the palace’s enchanted grounds. If she accessed them...surely nothing would stop her.

The tower eventually stilled and Mother slumped, exhausted. Whereas before her hair and face had only been streaked with age, now it was almost entirely grey, her back hunched, and her face wrinkled, as if she were quite elderly. Moving the tower had required a steep price. But though she was clearly drained, her dark eyes held a gleam of anticipated triumph, as if she’d already won.

She stood as upright as she could and turned...only to stop short with a horrified gasp as she caught a glimpse of herself in one of the broken mirrors. She shrieked and her hands flew to her wrinkled face. “My beauty? Where has it gone?” She swiveled to face me. “*You!* You did this! But you haven’t won yet.”

She lifted her hand, now shriveled with age, and the door reappeared at her touch. She exited the room, brushing past

Quinn and Melina, who stood just outside, undoubtedly attempting to find a way into the room to rescue me.

I had no chance to follow Mother before I was swept into Quinn's tight, almost suffocating embrace. "Gemma! Are you alright? What happened?"

Now was definitely not the time to explain. "My mother —"

Quinn's unseeing gaze snapped in the direction of her receding footsteps, no longer the confident click of her heels I was used to but a much slower pace, weak yet still purposeful. He swore. "That vile, horrible—"

I ignored his steady string of colorful expletives and faced Melina. "The tower has returned to the palace. I need you to find Briar and tell him that Mother has escaped her mirror and is going to retrieve the plants growing in her secret garden. Hurry."

Pale faced, she nodded once and hurried away, taking a back staircase that would take her to the tower's exit much more quickly. I ached to follow with Quinn, but with his leg I knew that together we'd be too slow.

I glanced uncertainly at him, but even without seeing my expression he sensed my decision. "I'll only slow you down. Go. I'll meet you outside the tower."

I sensed his reluctance to let me go on my own, but the fact that he could only prove his confidence in me... confidence I needed to have in myself for what lay ahead. But it was difficult when I still faced a seemingly insurmountable obstacle. If Mother succeeded in accessing the powers growing in her garden...it was imperative I reach her before she could.

I hurried down the twisting staircase as quickly as I was able with the lingering effects of Mother's draining magic... only to find the way blocked, undoubtedly an obstacle Mother had created with the last of her powers. My detour to another staircase cost me several precious minutes before I finally

stepped into the palace garden lit with the light of sunrise, a place unfamiliar considering how little time I'd spent within it.

I barely registered the plants' surprise and eagerness at seeing me or their desperation to assist in leading me to where I needed to go, for I was entirely unfamiliar with their whispered communication, leaving me nothing to navigate the labyrinth of gardens.

Panic filled my steps as I ran and only escalated with each wrong turn through the foreign grounds. With each wrong path, my hope of finding Mother's garden dwindled. My hope and remaining energy had all but slipped away when the sound of hurried footsteps behind me caused me to turn. It was my brother, Briar.

He slowed at catching sight of me, surprise and relief filling his eyes. "Gemma..." He seemed about to embrace me, but before he could, I spoke.

"Mother is returning to her garden," I managed amidst my panting breaths. "She wants to use its magic—"

Briar's mouth thinned and he strode purposefully ahead while I struggled to keep up. "Mother broke out of the mirror?" he asked, all business.

I clutched at a sharp stitch in my side and nodded. "I—it was my fault—" I wanted to explain what had happened, but my sharp breaths and growing exhaustion from our frantic pace made speaking difficult. I expected Briar to look panicked, but instead he looked uncannily calm, almost... *amused*. "Aren't you worried?"

His lips twitched. "No."

For a moment I feared I'd been wrong to trust Briar if he was as deep in Mother's control as she'd alluded to...before his next words eased my fears.

"Mother is about to be very disappointed. This I must see for myself."

Before I could inquire further, we rounded a bend in the path and stopped before a towering hedge wall, where Mother already stood behind a tree that guarded a section, pushing

open a hidden door. Briar stopped short, gaping at Mother's altered appearance. She turned at the sound of his startled gasp and smirked.

“You're too late.” And she entered the garden.

I lurched forward with a cry, but Briar held me back with a grin. “Wait for it...”

It came a moment later—a piercing and furious shriek of defeat. It echoed throughout the garden, and at its sound the surrounding plants quivered in relief, excitement, and an air that was almost smug.

I tentatively ventured forward to peer around the tree blocking the entrance and peek inside. I'd been told Mother's evil garden was filled with black, noxious weeds...but what greeted me instead was a lovely garden of beautiful blossoms growing without any sign of dark magic

Mother had fallen to her knees. For a moment, she could only stare in disbelief before she released another anguished cry and swiveled around to glare at us. “Where are they?” she demanded. “Where are my magical plants?”

Briar smirked. “Oh, they may have disappeared when my own curse was broken.”

She let out another agonized groan, and with it I knew that the last of her magic was finally, after all these years, defeated.

My brother stepped forward with several guards that had followed us. “Escort the former queen to her quarters in the East Wing. She is no longer a threat, but I want guards posted at her door at all times. We'll deal with the matter of her punishment later.”

He gave further orders, but I was distracted by Quinn, who'd accompanied the guards using a makeshift crutch made from a broom handle, his deathly pale face twisted in pain from having followed on a broken leg.

Sharp worry eclipsed my previous relief. I hurried forward. “Quinn! Why—”



“I had to be with you,” he panted. “To help you if I could.” He spoke as if he could do nothing else.

I released a strangled sob and wrapped my arms around him. “You dear man.”

He enfolded me, holding me close. In his embrace the last of my anxieties from the trying events of the day slipped away and I finally felt peace, for not only was I home at the palace...but home with the man I loved.

## CHAPTER 24

I hovered at the edge of the garden and watched as Briar calmly directed the guards on how to handle Mother. I studied him closely. Last time I'd seen him, he'd been more serious and not quite as grown up, but now he was the embodiment of a king. It was amazing how much he'd changed in the span of our separation. Was he still the kind brother I remembered, or would his duties cause him not to give his sickly sister a second thought?

But I was no longer the sickly princess—I was *Gemma*. If my relationship with my brother had become strained, I would do all in my power to fix it.

Yet my determination did little to quell the nerves knotting my stomach, especially when my not-quite-dormant fears seemed determined to remind me of the brother I'd witnessed in the tower mirrors—a cold, beastly man who was nothing more than a shadow of who he used to be.

Quinn stood in his usual position beside me, and though he couldn't see my expression, he was attuned to my restlessness. He reached for my hand and wove his fingers through mine. Calm immediately enveloped me. I glanced up at him, a question in my look he couldn't see, but which he seemed to sense anyway.

“All will be well.” And he gave my hand a reassuring squeeze.

His words and presence helped me remain calm as we waited for Briar to complete his duties and approach us. His

gaze darted briefly to our intertwined hands, but looked neither surprised nor, to my relief, disapproving, though he did appear displeased to find me standing.

“Forgive me for keeping you waiting. You should have done so inside where it’s warmer so you wouldn’t overexert yourself.”

Though I was exhausted from the events of the long night and still hadn’t regained all the energy mother had drained from me, I still felt a twinge of annoyance that my poor health would be the topic of our first exchange in three years. “But waiting indoors would only delay our reunion. I’ve missed you.”

His expression immediately softened into the kind, brotherly look I remembered well. “As I’ve missed you.” He enfolded me in a warm embrace.

At first I stood stiffly, surprised by this rare show of affection from my rather stoic brother, before I melted into the brotherly love filling his arms. In them I felt an assurance that despite a childhood of distance, it wasn’t too late to forge a relationship with my siblings.

He pulled back and rested his hands on my shoulders to slowly take me in. I studied him just as carefully, searching for any sign of the hardened man I’d seen within the tower, but to my relief he was all gentleness.

“How are you feeling? Were you comfortable in the tower? Did you receive enough medical care?” His brow furrowed when he noticed my cuts from the broken mirrors. “You’re bleeding.”

Beside me Quinn stiffened. “You are? What happened?” He gently felt along my arms until he came to the blood staining my torn sleeve. His frantic reaction only confirmed the wisdom in keeping my injuries to myself.

“I’m fine. It’s nothing to your broken leg.”

Briar frowned at Quinn’s roughly splinted leg. “You’re in need of the medicinal garden’s magical healing herbs. I will bring some.” He helped both of us settle on a nearby bench to

wait. I did so reluctantly, wishing I could retrieve these herbs myself so that I could explore the herbs filling this garden. But it would have to wait.

My brother was absent just long enough for me to relay the story of what had happened with Mother to Quinn, but not too long to force me to endure Quinn's disapproval that I'd almost made such a dangerous deal on his behalf.

Despite my protests, Briar tended to me first. He rubbed a pasty orange substance on each of my cuts, and with each of his gentle touches the stinging pain faded. He turned his attention to Quinn's broken leg, which required a brown, almost muddy paste.

I had to bite my tongue to keep myself from asking questions about what these enchanted concoctions were made of so as not to alert my brother to my growing interest in herbs too soon; I was certain he'd disapprove and I was in no mood to endure a lecture now.

When he'd finished, my cuts had sealed and no longer hurt, and Quinn was able to put weight on his leg, though Briar said it'd be tender for several weeks. Now that our injuries had been tended, Briar studied me again, this time with less worry.

He smiled. "You've certainly grown up. I almost didn't recognize you."

"Nor I you. You've grown into your new title well."

He blinked in surprise. "Did news of my inheritance reach where you were being kept?"

"The tower showed me." Along with many other things. They crowded my mind as Briar greeted Quinn and then offered me his arm, which I accepted to allow him to escort me from the garden, keeping my other hand woven securely through Quinn's, both to guide him and because I didn't want to let him go. I needed his strength for the conversation that was sure to come.

Despite years of longing to experience the beauty of the enchanted gardens and their palpable excitement at seeing me,

I scarcely noticed my wondrous surroundings throughout our stroll through the palace grounds. The dark images from the tower cast a shadow over everything, as haunting now as they'd been when I'd first seen them.

I stole a sideways glance at Briar, searching his expression for any sign of the frightening beast...yet there was no sign of his previous indifference. But that didn't change what I'd seen in the tower, whose visions had been reflections of the outside world, and I knew they were true. Did I dare ask him about it?

He felt my stare and glanced over, a question puckering his brow. "Is something troubling you?"

The knots invading my stomach tightened. Only Quinn's reassuring squeeze of my hand gave me the courage to speak. "When did you stop looking for me?"

Briar's eyes widened in astonishment. "I've never once stopped looking for you."

I frowned. That couldn't be true, for the moment he'd given up on finding me had been seared permanently into my memory with no way to possibly forget or misconstrue. "But you *did*. I saw it, Briar."

His confusion only deepened. He slowed to fully face me. "What did you see, and how?"

I took a steadying breath. "The tower possessed the ability to show me glimpses of not only my past but of the outside world, allowing me to know what was occurring at home. I saw many things—Father's death, Drake and his wife's struggles to conceive, Reve losing her memories, and...a scene with you." I bit my lip, hesitating for only a moment. "You stood with Drake in the foyer, informing him you would no longer waste precious resources on searching for me. You were angry and so...frightening. Did the tower make the event up?"

He gaped at me for a long moment before his entire manner crumpled. "I wish I could claim that it did, but..." He released a weary sigh before laying a comforting hand over mine, resting in the crock of his elbow. "Before my curse was

broken, the gardens became poisoned, and because of my connection to them I too was tainted by the dark magic afflicting it. I'm afraid it caused me to behave in ways contrary to who I truly am. Though everything I said wasn't true to myself, I must still take responsibility. I'm deeply sorry for the way my words hurt you. Please know I didn't mean them."

His explanation brought with it a feeling of peace, dispelling the last of my hurt. Overwhelmed by the warm feelings, I could only nod.

His shoulders sagged in relief before his expression darkened. "How dare the tower show you that one moment and not the hundreds of moments of fierce worry and all the effort I expended to look for you. Do Mother's curses know no end to their cruelty?"

It was as Quinn had hypothesized and what I myself had come to discover about the tower—its own curse had forced it to show me the one moment when my brother's loyalty had faltered. Yet though I believed his explanation, my insecurity lingered, compelling me to question him.

"Were you really looking?"

"Of course, Gemma, from the moment you went missing." He enfolded my hands within his, his touch as comforting as it was reassuring. "At first I was forced to conduct my search in secret in order to keep it from Mother, but once she was trapped in her mirror, I could increase my efforts. Yet no matter how many men I sent out or where they looked, we could never find you. The puzzle of the tower's location has haunted me for years; when we get inside, you'll have to show me where you've been."

Even though the situation wasn't at all humorous, my lips still twitched. "That would be rather difficult considering its location changed every day."

Briar stared. "*Every day?*" At my confirming nod, he shook his head in disbelief. "Well, it's no wonder that no matter where we looked, we simply couldn't find you, both when we searched on our own and after Reve was able to

show us where it was...only for us to arrive and discover an empty clearing, one we searched thoroughly to no avail.”

I blinked in surprise that Reve would bother to help him find me when she'd done nothing to prevent Mother from trapping me in the first place. Could she really have experienced a change of heart?

This question and others haunted me as we exited the gardens and stepped onto the main grounds that led to the palace. I paused at the base of the stairs that ascended to the towering front doors in order to take in the grand structure, one that seemed as cold and formidable as it always had. Was I truly ready to reenter a place that had been nothing but sadness and shadows my whole life?

Quinn gave my hand another squeeze, lending me the strength I needed. I was no longer the princess I'd been when I'd left, nor was I still trapped in my tower. I had escaped. I would no longer allow my fear to keep me from the life I wanted, beginning now.

I straightened my shoulders and began ascending the steps, ignoring Briar's concerned attention as he closely monitored me to ensure I wasn't overexerting myself. It was all I could do to put one foot in front of the other, not because I was tired but because despite my resolution to be brave, each step was one closer to the dark memories that had occurred within these walls, ones returning would finally force me to face. Despite having left the tower, I felt like I was entering another—the place that had served as my childhood prison.

The guards standing at the entrance opened the doors with a bow, allowing us to step into the foyer. Inside, I found Melina in the arms of Corbin, who served as the attending footman. They clung to one another tightly, all while her fiancé murmured words of love and assurance. “I never gave up hope, never stopped looking...”

Tears filled Melina's eyes as she cradled his cheek and stared adoringly up at him before standing on tiptoe to kiss him, one he eagerly returned. I smiled at the tender reunion. Despite the length of their time apart, their relationship had

remained constant. Time could change many things and yet deepen others.

Just what would my own changes entail?

After narrating Melina's reunion with Corbin to Quinn in a whisper, I slowly took in the foyer, a room that was both familiar and vastly different than I remembered. Though my memories of it were cold and sterile, it now felt warm and contained more decorations, more light, and just a general feeling of comfort.

I felt Briar's eyes on me again, studying my reaction. "It seems a little different," I ventured.

He smiled. "My wife has been doing what she can to make the palace more homey. I've gotten married, not to Princess Rheanna of Draceria as was the arrangement when you went away, but to a merchant's daughter." When I didn't appear shocked at the news, his brow puckered. "You seem to know of my marriage already. Did the tower spoil that surprise?"

I gave him a guilty look, betraying the tower's confidence. To my relief, he chuckled.

"Mischievous tower. Now I have yet another reason to be put out with it."

I glanced around the foyer again, empty save for the servants and Melina with her fiancé, who were now tucked into a corner together conversing quietly. "Where is your wife? I very much want to meet her."

"She's resting."

I lifted an eyebrow. "Because of her pregnancy?"

He shook his head. "Blast, there goes that surprise as well." But discussing his expectant wife made him too happy for his mood to be completely soured. "She's due in only a few months and is really starting to show." He seemed on the brink of bursting with fatherly pride at the pronouncement. "You can meet her tonight before the feast I'll arrange in your honor. It's still early morning, so I'm hoping my messenger will reach Drake and Rhea in time for them to attend. Last I heard, Reve



and her husband were visiting him, which will allow her to attend as well.”

My stomach tightened at the thought of seeing Reve again so soon, the memory of her abandonment still too raw. My apprehension lingered throughout my visit with Briar as I told him about Mother and we caught up after my three years’ absence, a conversation marred by my escalating anxiety. Despite my determination to overcome my fears, the thought of seeing my sister again not only tainted my return home, but threatened to push me back into their prison I’d fought so hard to escape.



I STIFFENED at the sound of the carriage rattling through the palace gates. Beside me on the settee where we waited, Quinn rested a calming hand on my knee and I seized it, clutching it tightly. Excitement warred with anxiety, my eagerness to see my siblings again overcome by my uncertainty about the encounter...specifically with my sister.

Briar grinned over at me from where he sat in the neighboring settee with his wife, who sat curled at his side with her head on his shoulder. “Are you excited, Gemma?” His grin faltered as he took in my expression. “You appear nervous.”

His observation made me feel ridiculous, one made about the weak princess I feared in many ways I still was. One shouldn’t be anxious to meet their siblings again.

I forced myself to take a steadying breath. “I’m looking forward to seeing both Drake and Reve again.” No matter my fears, that fact wouldn’t change.

All too soon, the footman announced their arrival and I stood as the doors swung open. Drake entered first on the arm of his wife, wearing a wide and relieved grin.

“Gemma!” He immediately scooped me into an enthusiastic hug that lifted me off the ground. “Thank goodness you’re finally home safe. It’s been quite the

adventure trying to find you.” He gave me a brotherly squeeze before suddenly remembering himself and releasing me with a remorseful look. “My apologies, in my excitement I forgot—”

He said nothing more, but I immediately understood his reservations—in some of my worst sicknesses, breathing had been a struggle. I forced a smile. “I appreciate your concern, but there’s no need for it; I’m perfectly well.”

He didn’t appear convinced; if anything, he looked *protective*. I bit the inside of my lip to suppress the sigh aching to escape. Our reunion hadn’t even lasted a minute and already my illness was the central focus, causing my siblings to revert to the roles they’d always embodied: guardians of health for the fragile sister in need of constant coddling.

The only way to convince them would be to show them I was no longer the sickly girl they remembered. So I lifted my chin and greeted Drake’s wife, Rheanna, with extra energy, but it faltered when I was forced to turn to Reve, dressed not poorly but far more plainly than she used to. She’d quietly followed Drake inside and had been watching us with unmistakable wariness, no sign of the indifference that had haunted me for three years ever since her abandonment.

Now that I was seeing her again, I wasn’t quite ready to face the moment she’d let Mother trap me in the tower...or rather, the day she’d *helped* Mother trap me.

Reve stepped forward with a look like she was about to speak, but I turned to face the man she’d entered with. “Might I have an introduction?”

She blinked, startled. “Of course. Forgive me for forgetting. This is my husband, Archer.” I waited for her to give his title, and upon realizing this she hastily added, “He’s a common man.”

My eyebrows lifted in disbelief. Of all the changes that had occurred while I’d been away, this one was the most startling. “*You* married a *common man*?” It wasn’t as if I opposed the match, only that the sister I remembered never would have made such a union.

She flinched, and too late I realized my words had come out more harshly than I'd intended. I internally cringed that our first interaction in three years was already going as poorly as I'd feared. The walls around my emotions cracked, allowing the resentment I'd fought to bury to escape—that my sister had simply *abandoned me*.

She appeared nervous by my outburst but lifted her chin. “I did.” She gave me a look daring me to challenge her choice. I sensed the tension growing and ached to dispel it, even as I felt helpless on how to actually do so. As hurt as I'd been by my sister's actions, I still wanted to be friends with her.

“I'm not opposed to the match,” I said hastily, hoping to smooth things over before they escalated further. “It's just...I never would have expected *you* to approve of it. You never do anything to upset Mother, no matter the cost.” I gave her a pointed look. As much as I wanted to avoid this confrontation, years of resentment seemed to have taken control of my tongue.

She hastily looked away...only for her gaze to settle on Quinn, frowning at her in disapproval. She lowered her eyes. “I know.” Her voice was very small, and I instantly felt remorseful for my accusation.

An awkward and tense silence followed, broken up by Briar. “We have a feast prepared in honor of Gemma's homecoming.”

He started to lead us from the parlor, but Reve brushed his arm. “Before we eat...” She turned resolutely back to me. “Might I have a private word with you, Gemma?”

No one appeared confused by her request, which meant they must have known of what had transpired between us. My heart pounded wildly as Reve led me to the window alcove, tucked away from the others. Quinn turned his attention in the direction of our receding footsteps with a look like he very much wanted to follow in order to shield me from what promised to be a difficult conversation. But despite not feeling brave enough to face it, I knew this was something I needed to do on my own.

The moment we were alone she faced me. “Gemma...” She said nothing more, as if she’d already run out of words.

I remained silent. Despite knowing this conversation was necessary, I wasn’t in any hurry to have it. Reve waited an anxious moment, wringing her hands with a look like she hoped I’d supply the words she couldn’t speak. When my silence continued, she took a wavering breath.

“I’m so sorry, Gemma.” Just saying the words made her appear lighter, as if the apology had been enough to lift the burden from her shoulders and give her the courage to continue. “I can’t even convey the guilt that has haunted me all these years, ever since I—” She took another shaky breath. “I shouldn’t have gone along with Mother’s plan. I swear I had no idea what she was plotting until we were at the tower, but even then I never should have...I was just afraid to go against her wishes.”

Reve had always been Mother’s favorite, the proper princess who did everything expected of her...everything I wasn’t. In the rare moments I’d thought back to the day I’d become trapped, I’d been unsurprised my sister had sacrificed my well-being for her own.

I stared at her now, searching for a glimpse of that same unfeeling sister. She watched me anxiously, her entire body taut with tension and her eyes shiny with unshed tears. “Please say something.”

It took me a moment to find my voice. “I understand how Mother can be, but I still don’t understand why you’d do such a horrible thing to your own sister.” My voice wavered with emotion.

Tears filled her eyes. “Because the old Reve was selfish and cruel,” she said in a rush. “I wanted her approval and would pay any price to get it, and I’m absolutely disgusted with myself. I regretted helping her the moment I did so, and my decision has haunted me ever since. My desperation to do anything to forget that moment led me down a path that almost destroyed me. But through the journey, I learned I must face my mistakes and grow from them. I’m no longer the woman I

used to be. I hope that you can forgive me and give me another chance to be a better sister.”

She clenched her hands together and waited with bated breath, her eyes wide with her silent plea for me to forgive her. As if a single apology could erase all the pain her mistake had caused me.

Yet I too had recently been caught up in Mother’s schemes and made mistakes that had almost hurt those I loved. How could I condemn my sister for her choices when my own weaknesses had led me to make similar ones? How could I willingly choose to taint the future I wanted by holding on to a grudge from the past, one that had no more bearing now that I was free from the tower?

Despite many difficult moments, I cherished my time in the tower. If not for my imprisonment, I might never have overcome my fears, discovered my passion for herbology, or realized my true feelings for Quinn. I didn’t want my unforgiving heart to become a new prison that would hold me back from a future with my sister. I wanted nothing more than to be free of the past princess everyone knew, which meant I needed to extend that same mercy to my sister.

This desire allowed my heart to soften. Searching her eyes, I saw her sincerity, her desperate need for my forgiveness. I remembered all the times she’d been a good a sister. We’d shared so many happy memories together, not to mention Briar had mentioned how she’d tried to atone for her mistake by showing him the tower’s initial location. Perhaps she really had changed.

“Of course I forgive you.” I stepped forward to embrace her and she held me tightly back. Tears glistened in her eyes when she pulled away.

“Thank you, Gemma. The moment I remembered where your tower was, I told Briar and Drake, but they still couldn’t find you. I’ve been agonizing over it ever since. I’m truly relieved you’re home and alright, and I look forward to becoming reacquainted.”

I did too. The worry burdening me at the thought of this confrontation faded, leaving me light. Despite my initial fears, my time out of the tower was already proving to be freeing.

## CHAPTER 25

Moments later, as I sat stiffly at the feast prepared in my honor, I wasn't entirely certain. Since being reunited with my family, I felt as if I'd stepped back in time to before my sojourn in the tower. Every look they gave me was less welcoming and more concerned, each comment and question less about how I'd spent these past three years and more about my health.

The suffocating interrogation quickly grew wearying, made more difficult to endure without my usual steady presence beside me. Despite his upcoming release from his duties, Quinn still stood along the wall with the other guards. His lack of sight prevented him from scanning the room, so instead he faced my direction, a way to offer his support even from afar.

But I didn't want his support from a distance—I wanted him beside me, participating in my life rather than standing on the outside...to feel his hand on my knee or hear his whispered assurances in my ear. Without him I felt I was drowning.

A footman whisked away my barely touched salad and placed the next course before me, creamy mushroom soup, but even my favorite dish couldn't encourage my fading appetite.

It was strange being back at the palace I grew up in and yet not feel like I was home. In between my siblings' questions, my gaze took in the elegant room—the glistening chandelier, the tapestries lining the walls, and the refined dishes were all familiar from the many evenings I'd spent in this room. But they were also foreign, remnants of a life I'd scarcely lived

considering my condition had forced me to spend most of my time alone in my bedroom, a life so different from the one I'd grown accustomed to at the tower. To dine in the formal dining room for the first time in years was...unsettling, the array of stimuli and emotions overwhelming, especially without Quinn's presence to ground me.

The conversation lulled as my siblings noticed I wasn't eating and cast me more concerned glances. Desperate to escape the overwhelming concern I'd long since grown tired of, I tried my best to enjoy the feast. The food was far more elaborate than the simple fare I'd grown used to in the tower, and even though each course featured my old favorites, there was just so *much* of it that my stomach quickly began to ache.

With the twisting pain and my siblings' smothering attention, I found it difficult to speak, keeping me from sharing some of the things I'd been excited to with my siblings—the lovely memories from the tower, the beautiful places it'd taken me, my growing interest in herbalism, the elixir and my improved health, and especially Quinn. Instead I found myself withdrawing the way I always had around my more outgoing family, and soon fell silent altogether.

Discouragement settled over me—mere hours home and I'd already reverted back to my old self, a path so well-tread it felt far easier and safer to walk than creating a new one, as comforting as the tower's walls had been.

I soon found myself picking at my food, which was a mistake, for it drew Briar's concerned attention from his place at the head of the table. The moment there was a pause in his conversation with Drake, he turned to face me.

“Are you well, Gemma?”

His soft inquiry not only drew the attention of the entire table, but Quinn's from his place along the wall. His expression immediately twisted in worry.

I bit my lip to suppress a weary sigh. “I'm well.” I hoped that would be the end of it and I could escape everyone's prodding gazes, but they only grew more searching.



Briar frowned, clearly unconvinced. “You don’t *look* well, not to mention you’ve scarcely eaten.” Before I could respond, he approached to crouch beside me and rest the back of his hand against my forehead. “Hmm, no fever, but you look exhausted. With the trying events of the day you’ve likely overexerted yourself. My apologies, I should have held this feast another night.”

“It’s no matter—” I began, but once again I didn’t have a chance to finish before Briar rested a loving hand on my shoulder, silencing my words.

“Perhaps you should take dessert in your room so that you can rest.” Though kind, his tone was authoritative, the words less a suggestion and more a command, similar to how Mother had often spoken to me.

Unlike her, I knew Briar didn’t mean to order me about—as the king he’d undoubtedly grown used to speaking in a way befitting his sovereignty and expected his desires to be seen through...and in this moment, he wanted me to leave. Despite knowing he had nothing but my best interests in mind, his dismissal still stung.

I made no move to depart but sat rigidly, trying to keep back the tears burning my eyes. When I’d left the tower I’d been so full of hope for my future, but this wasn’t what I’d wanted when I’d left. All the fears the tower had tried to protect me from were unfolding before me with no way for me to stop them.

I attempted to gather my resolve with a wavering breath. “I’m fine.” But my nervousness to stand up for myself made the protest come out soft and weak, contradicting my assurances and making me appear more sickly than I actually felt.

But Briar was already helping me up, his movements all gentleness and kindness, making it difficult to be annoyed with him despite wanting to be. Instead my annoyance was directed towards myself that I hadn’t fully succeeded in breaking past the barriers I constantly hid behind.

“Shall I escort you back to your room?” he asked.

I shook my head, but though my protest was lost on him, somehow it wasn't on Quinn, despite being unable to see it. He strode forward in long, agitated strides, nicking the edge of the table in his haste and causing the dishes to rattle. "I shall escort the Princess."

Briar frowned, clearly not keen on the arrangement.

"Thank you, Quinn," I said hastily before my brother could intervene. I wriggled my arm from his and took Quinn's. He led me away from the table, navigating our way to the door with surprising ease.

The moment we were in the foyer, he rested a calming hand over mine where it rested in the crook of his arm. "You're shaking."

My lip trembled as I lost the fragile hold on my emotions. At my strangled sob, Quinn immediately changed directions to lead me away from the stairway and down a secluded hallway, only taking his hand off mine in order to rest it against the wall. He ran it along it as we walked, counting silently, and paused at a door.

The conservatory, a room I used to spend a lot of time in as a way to experience a portion of the outdoors even when confined to the palace. He opened the door and led me inside. The room was dark save for the moonlight tumbling through the floor-length windows to illuminate the plants filling the room with a silvery glow.

The moment the door clicked shut, my emotions unraveled. Quinn gathered me in his arms to hold me close and I burrowed myself against him. The floral perfume and scent of earth filling the conservatory mixed with his woody cologne, a smell that brought great comfort. For a long moment I simply allowed myself to be held, melting into his comfort and the pleasant heated ripples trickling over me as he rubbed my back.

"Gemma?" So many questions filled Quinn's tone, ones I wasn't certain how to answer. "It was torturous being so far from you in the dining room, sensing you were unhappy but unable to see for myself how you were faring. What's wrong?"

It took several stuttering breaths for me to gather enough composure in order to find my voice. “It’s all the same. You might not have been able to see the scene unfold, but surely you heard all my siblings’ questions? Only one day home and nothing has changed. Now that I’ve tasted freedom, I can’t go back into the cage I’ve only just escaped, I just can’t.”

“Your family has been worried for you,” Quinn said soothingly. “You’ve been gone for three years and they have yet to know the woman you’ve become, but they will if you allow them to. You must give them the chance.”

But would it truly make a difference? I clutched his shirt and burrowed myself closer, relishing his warmth and the soothing patter of his heart beating against my cheek. No matter where I was or what I experienced, Quinn’s presence was constant. With him I was home.

Within his arms I felt my strength return. The old Gemma had never been held in this tender way, for that was before she believed in a future of love, found her passion, and dreamed of a life beyond her illness. Quinn’s embrace helped me realize how far I’d come. And just because my well-meaning siblings had yet to see my growth didn’t change the fact that I *had* progressed. It wasn’t too late to show them the new Gemma.

“I’m not sickly anymore.” Despite being muffled against his shirt, my voice was firm.

“I know you’re not,” Quinn said gently.

I loosened my hold and tipped my head back to rest my chin against his chest. Warmth filled me at the tender way he looked at me, almost as if he *could* see me...and despite not having his sight, this conversation only confirmed how well he truly could.

“Their attention, no matter how well meaning, was exhausting,” I said. “Enduring it was even more difficult after this long and emotional day, but I’m not so tired I want to be dismissed to my room. I want to spend time with my family. I’ve missed them.”

Quinn's touch went to my cheek. "So what are you going to do about it?"

At his question, light penetrated the frustration clouding my mind, illuminating the darkness so I could clearly see the path I was meant to take. I straightened in determination. "I'm going to stand up for myself."

He smiled. "I believe in you, Gemma."

His faith in me only added to the strength that had always been inside me, still there despite the moments I couldn't see it. I lifted his hand to rest his fingertips against my lips so he could feel my returning smile. His expression softened as he attentively traced the shape of my lifted lips.

When his hand dropped, I wove my fingers through his and started for the door, only to pause. "I do have one condition."

"And what condition is that?" His voice was deeper in the dark, making me feel more rebellious for being alone with him while also increasing my desire to kiss him; if not for his insisted distance and my own worries about getting caught alone with him, I might have.

"I want you to join me at the table. No more standing along the wall away from me. You're part of my life, Quinn. I want you with me."

His smile grew more tender. "This is a testament that you can stand up for yourself. Very well, if you want me, I'm yours, Gemma."

This beautiful thought further renewed my strength to return to the dining room, where dessert had just begun. Everyone sat at the table except for Briar, who was pacing. At my entrance, he spun to face me and strode over, relief softening his agitation.

"There you are. I just received word from the maid I sent to your bedroom with your dessert that you weren't there. Where have you been?" His expression darkened as his gaze flickered towards Quinn at my side.

“I needed a moment to compose myself, but I’m well enough to rejoin you.” I tried to sidestep him in order to return to my seat, but he rested his hands on my shoulders, preventing me from moving.

“Are you certain? You still don’t look well. I’m worried about you.”

I took a steadying breath and firmly met his gaze. “For the first time years, I’m truly well, Briar.” He still didn’t appear convinced. I lifted my chin higher. “I’m tired of being sent upstairs, of missing experiences and living my life apart from everyone. I’ve missed my family. I know myself and my capabilities, so trust me when I assure you I’m well.”

He studied my expression before relenting with a sigh. “Forgive me for pushing my desires on you. If you feel up for it, I’d love nothing more than to have you join us for dessert.” He rested a gentle hand on my arm before returning to his place at the head of the table.

After a bit of chaos as the footman retrieved an extra place setting for Quinn and I’d staved off my brother’s protests about a guard joining us, Quinn and I settled in our seats and dessert was served. Even though it was my favorite strawberry tart, I was too giddy to fully enjoy it. I leaned towards Quinn’s ear. “I stood up for myself.”

He grinned. “I knew you could.”

Warmth seeped over me, and with a much lighter heart I turned to my dessert. Its tart sweetness danced on my tongue, but it was nowhere near as wonderful as the lightness filling my heart.

Perhaps living the life I chose was within reach after all, one I could create one step at a time, and with each one, I’d have no need to remain bound by towers any longer.

## CHAPTER 26

The gardens were truly a labyrinth, filled with countless ever-changing paths that twisted through sections of beauty and wonder I'd previously only seen from my bedroom window. I'd spent hours cooped up in my room imagining what it'd be like to explore these gardens, but my aerial view had done little to prepare me for how vast and confusing they'd be. I marveled to think that after so many years I was finally well enough to explore them. I walked slowly in order to fully appreciate the gardens, even as I searched for one in particular.

Despite having spent nearly my entire life at the Malvagarian palace, I knew little about the magical gardens that surrounded my home. During his visits throughout my childhood, Briar had told me stories of the gardens and the wonders they contained, things which seemed to be straight from a storybook.

His words had created many visions for my imagination to explore—gardens of illusion, topiary plants that moved as if they were alive, plants and gardens that transformed on a whim, and secrets even he had never discovered. But there was one in particular that hadn't excited me at the time, but which I now wanted nothing more than to visit: the medicinal garden.

I hadn't previously given it much thought, only remembering it whenever the healer used some of its magical plants to aid my treatments. But with my growing interest in herbs, I now yearned to explore this garden.

Hence my quest to find it, one I'd begun immediately after visiting the tower, which still stood erected on the outskirts of the grounds, its powers fully restored; I'd felt them surround me as if in an embrace, an affection brought about by the tower's excitement at seeing me again.

But my quest that was currently proving futile. I could have easily asked Briar, who possessed an intimate knowledge of the royal grounds, but I was still shy about my new hobby and feared his reaction. Though he'd grown to accept my word whenever I assured him I was well enough to join him and my family, I still frequently sensed his concerned attention, as if he was searching for signs of the sickly sister he'd known before.

Though I'd enjoyed their company, I was relieved when my other siblings and their spouses left, granting me a reprieve from their touching yet aggravating concern. After giving their full account of Mother's abuse against them to the official court of royal advisors, Mother had been imprisoned in the dungeon tower and they'd departed, leaving the palace quiet with plenty of hours to spend enjoying my new health and freedom.

Considering herbalism wasn't a hobby a typical princess pursued, I'd spent the first week home learning from the healer in secret. And though Briar had never given me reason to doubt he'd be supportive, he was still the king, and my position as the sister of the current sovereign made it difficult to reconcile my unroyal ambitions.

So it remained a secret. I found excuses to explain my absences, all while I spent hours within the apothecary immersed in herbs, and although I often searched for the ingredients I needed to make my own remedy as well as possible ones that would help me make it stronger, I focused my studies on cures for blindness, only to find myself disappointed.

With those efforts proving futile, I hoped to find answers in the magical medicinal garden. It had been quite the adventure escaping the palace undetected, a feat my heart still pounded wildly from. Now the adventure was continuing as I

searched the grounds. The trouble was I already found myself quite lost, and though the gardens were clearly whispering directions in their usual breezy language, unlike Briar and our father, I didn't understand a word of it.

After a lot of traipsing through the garden's confusing paths, I was beginning to grow rather tired...and cold. Despite the bright sunlight, it was still late autumn. I'd awoken to a thick layer of frost on the windowpane, and though the sun had melted it from the garden, the air was still brisk.

I was certain winter was almost here, which would make it more difficult to spend time in the medicinal garden. Though my remedy continued to improve my health and I wasn't nearly as sickly as I used to be, I didn't want to push my luck and come down with a cold, especially when I was trying to assert my independence and forge an identity outside of my past illnesses.

After several more minutes of fruitless wandering, the chill seeped deeper over me. Shivering, I paused to look around. I sensed the plants monitoring me closely, feeling their concern more than hearing it. I was both touched and frustrated that even the plants coddled me.

"If you're so worried, perhaps you could guide me to the medicinal garden; it'd be much faster."

They gave an agitated rustle, as if that's exactly what they'd been doing and I just hadn't been listening closely enough. Hurried whispered instructions followed, which were still lost to me. After a moment's consideration, the plants added gesturing to their indiscernible words, leaning towards a pathway veering right.

I took it, pausing at each intersection for the plants' additional guidance, which led me to the entrance of a rather sterile-looking garden comprised of muted colors and rigid, organized rows. Even with my minimal studies I could recognize some of the more common plants, though they appeared different, possessing an almost mystical quality.

I forgot all about my aching legs and growing exhaustion as I entered the garden. Curiosity guided my movements as I



slowly strolled the rows, transfixed as I studied the plants, while the garden's eager anticipation followed me. I paused next to a plant I'd never seen before: a daisy-like flower with purple leaves, one I wouldn't expect to find in a medicinal garden.

Sensing its continued attention, I asked my question out loud. "Which plant is this?"

The garden's excitement was palpable as it eagerly whispered the plant's name, but once more I didn't understand it. The plants drooped, but their frustration was short-lived before they perked with an idea. The daisies growing before me stirred and a swirl of light rose above them, an aura filled with an image of my flushed face.

"Does this treat...fevers?" The garden's confirmation followed my guess. They whispered an explanation, and though their words were lost to me, one penetrated my comprehension: this was a magical plant found only within this garden.

With the plant's identity, I felt as if I'd discovered a piece of a complicated puzzle and wanted more. I opened the notebook I'd brought and carefully sketched the plant, along with some accompanying notes before moving to the herb growing beside it, whose name and purpose was given to me in the same manner as the first.

My studies continued for an hour as I strolled the rows, pausing in front of each plant to learn about it. The cold and my growing exhaustion were forgotten as I immersed myself in the garden's lessons. Each instruction nourished my passion, confirming that this was the purpose I'd spent my life searching for.

The garden experimented with this new form of communication and grew creative in the auras it showed me, including images of different plants coming together to form a new picture of what they could create and instructions on the best ways to prepare them. Despite my repeated requests for one that would cure blindness, the garden never led me to such a plant, though it guided me to many others.

My fingers tingled, aching to experiment with my newfound knowledge, and with the garden's permission I began gathering a basket of herbs, one I quickly filled. I was eager to return to the palace in order to study them more closely and attempt some of the concoctions the garden had taught me, even as I didn't want to leave the medicinal garden's tutelage, especially when there was so much more it could teach me.

The sound of footsteps jolted me back to the real world. I turned towards the gated entrance, expecting Quinn, only to find my brother instead. He seemed surprised to see me outdoors, a place I'd never ventured before my time in the tower. "What are you doing here?" Briar slowly looked around the garden. "Why are you alone?"

I nibbled my lip. I was only alone because I'd managed to slip away from Quinn and the temporary guard accompanying him. He'd be quite upset when he learned of it. "I...snuck away...from my guard."

Briar blinked, as if trying to process my confession, one uncharacteristic of the obedient and cautious Gemma he'd known before. "How did you do that? Quinn's senses are sharper than most."

I shifted nervously. "I...climbed out the window."

Briar's eyes widened in astonishment. His gaze darted upwards to the third floor where my room was located; it wasn't difficult to miss with the bedsheets still hanging down. "You...climbed out the window?"

I still couldn't believe I'd done it myself, but my shock was nothing to my thrill that I could do something that required so much daring and energy—something I'd never in my wildest dreams imagined I'd be able to do. It had been rather reckless to tie the bedsheets together and tangle down. It had been one of the most terrifying experiences of my life, and one I wasn't keen on repeating anytime soon.

At Briar's continued surprise, I gave what I hoped was an offhanded shrug. "I'm not as scared of heights as I once was." Living in a tower had cured that.

He shook his head with a chuckle of disbelief. “You’re quite different than before. I always felt you were hiding, even from yourself. I look forward to getting to know you better.” His gaze darted upwards again. “Still...climbing out a window, Gemma?” His amusement had faded, leaving only disapproval.

“I had a sudden urge to come outside. Poor Quinn thinks I’m taking a nap in my room, and he’s not going to learn otherwise. He’s already feeling bad...for not being able to...” I trailed off, hesitating to say my next words, but one look at Briar and I knew my secrecy was unnecessary. “You know, don’t you?” I suspected he did, even if I hadn’t confirmed it; despite my being home a week, this was a conversation I’d done my best to avoid.

He sobered. “About your guard? Yes, I know he can no longer see.”

No matter how many times I heard the words, they were still impossible to accept. I took a shuddering breath. “I see.” Of course he knew; something of that nature would never be kept from the king.

I feared he’d wish to discuss the unpleasant topic further, but to my relief he ventured to another one instead. “I admit I’m surprised not only to find you in the medicinal garden, but that you were so desperate to venture here you concocted a scheme as drastic as climbing out the window.”

His brow puckered as he slowly took in the plants, who shifted nervously, as if debating whether to share my secret. He noticed the basket of herbs and his questioning gaze met mine once more.

“Are you in need of the gardens’ medicines?”

His question determined the victor of my inner debate. No matter his reaction to learning of my budding passion, surely it was better than for him to assume I was still sickly. “I was... studying.”

His eyebrows rose. “*Studying?*”

My explanation escaped out before I could contain it. “The garden is teaching me. I want to become an herbalist, and eventually...a healer.”

I held my breath and awaited his response. It took him a moment to find his voice. “A...*healer?*” He spoke slowly, as if doubting his words and wanting to confirm them.

“While in the tower, I developed an interest in herbs and hope to use my new passion to help people.” I anxiously wrung my hands and waited for his comment, and when he remained silent, I pushed forward, my nerves causing my words to tumble out in a rush. “I know it’s not conventional for a princess, but I’m hoping...”

I trailed off. My words were spoken from my old belief system, one I didn’t want to be a part of me any longer. I chose my next ones more carefully before lifting my chin.

“It’s a princess’s duty to care for her subjects, and what better way to accomplish that than through seeing after their health?”

My piece given, I waited anxiously for Briar’s reaction. He was too kind to treat my wishes unkindly, but though he was my brother, he was also the king with royal expectations to uphold.

But though he looked undeniably surprised, he didn’t appear disapproving. In fact, he looked almost *pleased*. “I’m so happy you’ve found something that brings you joy.”

As much as I’d wanted his approval, I was startled to actually receive it. “You’re...not disappointed? Most princesses don’t become healers.” I couldn’t think of any that had throughout our kingdom’s history.

He shrugged. “I suppose not, just as most kings aren’t amateur gardeners, nor do they defy tradition by marrying a merchant’s daughter.” He rested a gentle hand on my arm, his look brotherly. “I only want your happiness. While Drake has walked a more traditional path, Reve has chosen to be a homemaker in a cottage in the mountains, and you must chose your own. Being a healer is a wonderful ambition.”

Relief washed over me at his acceptance, making it easier to further open up to him. “It’s already served me well. While in the tower I discovered the recipe for an elixir to ease my symptoms. I’ve been taking it for several weeks and my health is better than it’s ever been.”

I told him about the remedy the tower had led me to and the wondrous effects it’d had on my health in greater detail. Both his eyes and his smile grew wider. “So that’s why you’ve been so much healthier.” His excitement became too much for his kingly composure and he scooped me into a hug. “I’m so happy for you, Gemma.” He held me a moment longer before releasing me with a smile.

I gestured to the plants surrounding us. “The garden has been giving me lessons, teaching me about the medicinal plants. There’s still so much I don’t know, but I can’t wait to learn.”

His expression softened. “I’m so glad.”

He gave my hand a gentle squeeze, only to frown in disapproval at my icy touch. It deepened as he took in my thin shawl. “Your hands are freezing and your cheeks are pink with cold. How long have you been out here? It’s far too cold for you to be—” He swallowed the remainder of his words with a weary sigh at my pointed look. “That’s right, no coddling.”

“I know my limits.” But now that I was no longer working, I was able to feel the cold more fully—it seeped into my skin, causing me to shiver. “I made a promise to you, Quinn, and myself to use my freedom to be responsible with my health, which means I should probably go inside.”

He seemed relieved by my acquiescence. “Are you going to climb up through the window?” Humor twitched his lips.

I laughed. “I’m not so reckless as *that*. It would be far more difficult to ascend than it was to climb down. I’ve had enough adventures for one day, nor do I want to give you or Quinn a heart attack.”

At the mention of my guard he sobered. “Speaking of Quinn...there’s something I’ve been meaning to discuss with

you.”

Foreboding knotted my stomach as I sensed the direction of this conversation. “What is it?”

He hesitated before extending his arm. “Let’s adjourn to my study.”

My apprehension grew as I looped my arm through his and allowed him to lead me from the garden, only pausing to cast a glance at the basket of herbs I’d left behind.

Briar noticed my backwards glance. “I shall arrange for a servant to bring those to the apothecary, but while your studies can wait, I’m afraid this conversation cannot.”

My trepidation increased, confirming this would be the conversation I’d been dreading ever since my return home. For if my brother wanted to discuss Quinn, there was only one topic I could think of that would be so pressing.

But if he approved of my becoming a healer and of Reve’s common match, surely he’d have no objections to allowing my relationship with a royal guard to continue, especially with so loyal a man who possessed enough trust to earn the position of guarding me.

*Be brave*, I silently reminded myself. I struggled to gather every ounce of courage as Briar led me from the gardens to the conversation that awaited us.

## CHAPTER 27

*M*y heart pounded with every step as I followed Briar through the corridors to his private study. I couldn't remember the last time my brother had invited me for a private conversation.

The attending footman opened the door with a deep bow. A sense of familiarity enveloped me as I stepped inside. Throughout my childhood, whenever I was well enough to venture from bed, I'd often visit Father while he worked. I could still recall my memories of him sitting behind the mahogany desk immersed in his royal duties, yet no matter how busy he might be, he always had a warm smile just for me. The surrounding shelves enfolded me in an embrace similar to the one he'd always given me whenever I crawled onto his lap to sit with him while he worked.

His absence tugged on my heart. Emotion clogged my throat as I settled in the chair across from the desk and Briar took the opposite seat. It was both strange to see him occupying Father's place and incredibly natural.

Briar folded his hands across the desk. "I know it's been several days, but I'm so glad you're home safe, Gemma." His eyes crinkled with his warm smile, just the way Father's had, and I relaxed in my seat.

"I'm happy to be home." While I'd still been within the tower, I'd never expected to say those words and actually mean them, but so much had changed.

Though his soft expression didn't change, he sighed wearily. "I have many questions for you, but with all that's transpired since your return—with Mother's hearing and punishment, as well as Drake and Reve's visit—we haven't had much time to talk. I hope to remedy that these next several days, but in the meantime there's something more pressing I'm anxious to discuss with you." He leaned over the desk, expression serious. "I wish to discuss Guard Quinn."

I shifted nervously in my seat. "Quinn? What about him?"

He frowned. "Though I know him to be an honorable man, I can't help but worry over the fact that for several years you two have been trapped together in that tower...*alone*."

Heat swallowed my cheeks. This was the last thing I wished to discuss with my brother. "You needn't worry about my reputation; Quinn is a good man and ensured that nothing untoward occurred, and Melina was the most devoted of chaperones." I purposefully omitted all the times she'd purposely left us alone.

"I'm relieved Melina faithfully saw to her duties." Briar pursed his lips and continued to eye me, as if trying to unravel my carefully guarded secrets. His expression softened. "You needn't look so terrified, Gemma. This isn't an interrogation."

I urged myself to relax, but it was difficult when he still looked so serious. "I admit I've convinced myself that an interrogation is exactly what this is."

He chuckled and reached over the desk to rest his hand over mine, a soothing gesture that helped me relax further. "I'm just trying to get all the facts straight. Would you rather I ask Quinn these prodding questions?"

I rapidly shook my head, which earned me another chuckle, one that quickly faded when he returned to studying me.

"You're in love with him."

I released a shaky breath. "I am, though admittedly it took me some time to realize that's what I felt for him."



“Which must have been torturous for him; he’s been in love with you for years.”

My eyes widened. “What do you know of it?”

His look became almost guilty. “We may have had a discussion concerning his feelings shortly before your imprisonment. He sought a meeting for a different matter, and because I was acting in Father’s stead, I’m the one who met with him, where I outlined in no indisputable terms how he was to treat you.”

I buried my face in my hands with a groan. “Did you have to do such a thing?”

“Of course. You’re my sister.”

I was both touched by his protectiveness and annoyed. I was already having a difficult enough time convincing Quinn I wanted no one but him, and no matter how well-meaning his intentions, my brother’s interference had undoubtedly not helped matters.

“What matter did Quinn want to meet with you about?”

Briar released a heavy sigh. “One I wish to discuss with you now: he asked to be released from his post.”

My breath hitched and for a moment I couldn’t speak. Despite Quinn’s repeated hints during our sojourn in the tower that he didn’t feel qualified for his position as my guard, I hadn’t realized he’d harbored the desire to leave his duties for so long.

“Why would he—” I began.

“Because of his condition,” Briar said. “He told me of the curse afflicting his family and that he’d already lost some of his sight.”

My disbelief quickly shifted to anger. “Why would he tell you but not me? You knew this entire time, yet I was kept entirely in the dark.”

“It wasn’t my secret to tell,” Briar said. “Due to your own difficulties, he knows how sensitive you are to health afflictions. How could he ask you to add to the burden you

already bore? He wished to keep it from you in order to protect you.”

It was the same explanation Quinn had given me when he'd first told me of his affliction, and like before I felt ashamed I hadn't been strong enough to bear his burdens, forcing him to carry more than his fair share, despite my wanting nothing more than to support him.

“So he's wanted to leave his post for years.” My tone was hollow.

Briar hesitated before nodding. “He only had your best interests in mind, for the worse his condition became, the less he felt he could adequately protect you. He wished to be released immediately, but I needed to find a replacement, a process that took quite some time, for I can't trust just any man with my sister's protection. I figured that despite his fading sight, you were relatively safe considering you often remained in your bedroom. Little did I know that within a week you would be trapped in an enchanted tower together, extending his time as your guard far beyond what he felt himself able to perform.”

My defense swelled. “He's more than capable. I've never had a more loyal guard.”

“I don't doubt his loyalty,” Briar said. “But it wasn't just his condition I was concerned over: during our meeting, he was candid about his feelings towards you. I admit I wasn't at all surprised; I'd begun suspecting his devotion ran deeper, and I'd been vacillating between whether his feelings would make him a better guard or provide an unnecessary distraction.” He tilted his head. “Which was it?”

“The former,” I grumbled. “Trust me, he never allowed his feelings to sway him from his blasted *duty*.” Something I still resented him for.

Briar relaxed and even had the audacity to chuckle, unfazed by my responding glare. “I know that displeases you, but I can't tell you how relieved it makes me.” His good humor quickly vanished. “But Quinn still needs to be replaced, Gemma.”

My resistance flared. “You can’t replace him. Despite what we feel for one another, he’s never wavered in fulfilling his duties.” I chose to not mention the kiss I’d managed to steal; Briar had no need to know of such things, but by his knowing glint I wondered if he suspected.

“His loyalty is not in question, Gemma. The man is now completely blind and thus cannot be charged with your protection any longer.”

No one had expressed the situation so bluntly. Hearing the words caused my suffocating despair to rise, making me feel I was trapped in my room once again, confined in a situation impossible to escape.

“Then we must heal him,” I pleaded. “We can’t leave him like this.”

The pity that filled Briar’s eyes gave the answer I didn’t want to hear long before he responded. “His curse has no cure. I’ve been studying it while you’ve been away, for I suspected your feelings matched his own and you’d desire to create a life with him. And while I don’t object to those wishes, I’m unable to help him the way I know you want him to be helped.”

*No.* My desperation rose. “Every curse has a countercurse. Please, we must cure him.” I couldn’t accept any other outcome.

“His curse is different, for it was cast several generations ago. I’m afraid *that* would have been the time to break it, but with the original caster dead and with them all knowledge of the curse...I’m afraid it cannot be broken.” His tone, while soft, did nothing to soften the cruelty of his message.

His words invaded my mind, forming unbreakable bars that kept me trapped within my hopelessness. *Quinn will stay blind.* The words haunted me, even as my heart refused to accept them.

Briar was saying something, words I didn’t hear; he seemed to be attempting to soothe me, but how could I possibly be comforted at a time like this?

Whatever composure I'd been able to maintain by a fragile thread snapped. I hurried from the room, ignoring Briar's call for me to return, my mind eclipsed by a single purpose: find a way to help the man I loved. It didn't matter that Quinn doubted a cure existed, or that Briar had already tried and failed. I wouldn't rest until I overcame the impossible and found a way to return Quinn's stolen sight.



TEARS BURNED IN MY EYES, blurring my vision as I walked blindly through the corridors. I had no set destination, I only knew that I needed to escape the study where Briar had presented Quinn's horrible fate with far too much calmness, resigning himself that nothing could be done.

Resistance swelled. Every curse had a countercurse, thus I wouldn't rest until I'd discovered one for Quinn. I simply couldn't accept that he'd remain forever trapped in a world of darkness, a far more cruel prison than those I'd ever endured. Whether I'd been confined to my bed or within the tower's walls, at least I'd been able to see, whereas all Quinn knew now was a world of constant...nothing.

The exertion from the emotions of the day coupled with the physical exertion quickly became too much, forcing me to slow. I slumped against the wall, where I fought to steady my sharp breaths and regather my strength. Gradually, my breathing slowed and my tears faded enough for me to take in the familiar corridor my frantic wanderings had led me to. The apothecary I'd been spending several hours in each day sat at the end of the hallway, beckoning me.

Some of the anxiety cinching my heart eased. Herbs were not only familiar, but when properly used they could work wonders, create miracles, *heal*, all of which I desperately needed. It didn't matter my earlier attempts had failed, I was determined to succeed now.

My mind seized hold of this purpose. The familiar scent of earth and herbs assailed my senses as I stepped inside. I took

in the familiar shelves laden with jars, the dried herbs hanging from the rafters, the mortar and pestle resting on the table, and especially the shelves of worn books containing knowledge and promises of healing.

I wasn't sure where to start, but I couldn't bear to do nothing a moment longer. I set to work, mincing and mixing herbs until my fingers were stained green and I'd read so many pages of various remedies I became cross-eyed.

Outside, the sun drifted across the sky, measuring the hours as they melted away. I worked through both lunch and dinner, driven by a need deeper than I'd ever before experienced. My arms ached from all the chopping, pounding, and stirring, but I pressed on. My exhaustion gradually overcame me, yet I couldn't stop, driven by my love for Quinn and my need to somehow find a way to help him.

My hands shook as I minced rosemary, ginger, marigold, and kava together, but I quickly lost my precarious hold on the bowl; it slipped from my hand and shattered. I stared at the broken clay and the herbs scattered across the stone floor before I released a choked sob and knelt on the ground to frantically pick up the broken pieces, somehow feeling that if I could but repair the bowl, I could also repair Quinn.

My tears made it difficult to see what I was doing, so I didn't notice Quinn's silent approach. I should have known he was near; he'd likely faithfully stood outside the door the entire afternoon the moment he'd discovered where I was after he'd realized I was missing from my room.

He crouched in front of me to rest his calloused hand over mine trying to pick up the broken pieces, causing the ones I held to slip from my fingers. My gaze snapped up. Despite not being able to see me, he somehow looked directly at me. "Gemma." Concern puckered his brow at the sound of my snuffle. "Are you crying?"

It only took him two tries to reach out his gentle touch and stroke my tear-streaked face, his worry for me stronger than his reliance on his sight. His concern deepened as his thumb ran over my wet cheek, catching my tears.

“Why are you crying?”

I couldn't answer, but with the way his brows drew together, he likely didn't need a response. His hand remained on my cheek even as his other felt along the floor, taking in the broken pieces of the bowl.

My breath hitched. “Careful, I don't want you to cut yourself. Let me clean it—”

“No,” he responded gently. “I'll take care of it.”

“But—”

My protests were useless, for he was already picking up the broken bowl, his movements careful as he felt along the floor to pick it up piece by piece. I watched with a mixture of worry and awe as he managed to gather all the pieces and stood to dispose of them, finding his way with surprising ease.

“How did you know where to go?” I asked.

“I know you're going to spend a lot of time here, so I've already familiarized myself with this room.”

A simple answer, but one that caused my heart to swell. Obviously he wouldn't spend such time with me as my guard, giving me hope that he was still open to the possibility of *us*.

He wiped his hands on a cloth as he turned around and cast his gaze across the stone floor that he couldn't see. “Did I get all the pieces?”

I carefully searched through the flickering lantern light. “The bowl is cleaned up, leaving the mess of the spilled herbs.” I stood to retrieve a cloth.

“If you guide me, I can—”

But I'd already retrieved a rag and was cleaning up. He heard my movements and released a heavy sigh. “You're a princess performing duties not meant for you. I'm so useless.”

My heart wrenched at his defeated posture and I glared at him, never mind he couldn't see it. “You're not useless, so don't believe otherwise.” The words were familiar, an echo of

an assurance he'd given me many times during my own moments of doubt.

The corner of his mouth lifted, though it did little to dispel his defeated expression. But as usual, his focus quickly shifted away from himself to me. "Why were you crying, Gemma?"

I debated on whether to tell him what had me so distressed, for it would only trouble him to know that he was causing me pain, but once again words weren't needed.

"You're still trying to find a cure?"

I released a heavy sigh. "No matter what herbs I mix together, nothing seems powerful enough to return stolen sight."

He crouched in front of where I knelt surrounded by the green herbs splattered against the grey stones, a mess that only taunted me with the reminder of another failure. "Though I know little of curses, I do know they can only be cured by magic; no combination of herbs will ever be strong enough."

"But these are from a *magical* garden," I said. "I'm sure I can find the right combination if I continue trying—"

"I'm not sure you can," he said with far too much resignation. "This is the fourth generation the curse has manifested itself. My ancestors have already scoured the five kingdoms for a cure, tried every herbal remedy, sought every spell...to no avail. From the beginning I've known there is no cure."

"But there *has* to be." My despair was rising, an unrelinquishing weight pressing against my chest.

"No, Gemma," he said gently. "Sometimes in life, things remain broken."

As much as I ached to deny it, I knew firsthand the truth of his words. Despite my elixir, I would likely always suffer from poor health and shortness of breath when I overexerted myself; I couldn't make Mother care for me the way a mother should; and I could never bring back Father. Sometimes there was no cure.

I searched dear Quinn's expression and noticed the heartache my inability to accept his fate was causing him. He didn't deserve the curse afflicting him, and yet he was doing all within his power to endure it as best he could. If I was to support him, I needed to as well.

Only this knowledge gave me the strength I needed to give up the fight. I crawled towards him and fell into his arms with a strangled sob. He hadn't seen me approach and gasped in surprise before his arms enfolded me, holding me tightly. Grateful he wasn't pushing me away like he had the habit of doing, I relaxed against him and burrowed against his chest, a position which allowed him to notice the tears still streaking my cheeks.

He moaned as he nestled against my hair. "Please don't cry, dear Gemma. I want to protect you, especially from heartache."

"And I want to protect you in return," I stuttered.

"You *are*. But there is nothing you need to shield me from. I've had years to come to terms with this, and despite brief moments where the difficulty becomes too much, overall I'm at peace."

"But *how*? You can't see, Quinn." My voice choked on the words and I burrowed myself back against him.

He rubbed my back, as if the gesture could soothe my heartache, and though I felt as if *nothing* ever could, his attentive touch certainly helped.

I couldn't help but snuggle closer. "You can't see," I murmured again.

"I can see enough," he said. "The world is not entirely black, or even filled with nothing. Amidst the darkness shrouding my eyes is the occasional swirl of color and light playing across my senses, my own unique aurora borealis."

I tipped my head back so my chin rested over his heart. "I feared you saw nothing. Is what you see beautiful?"

He smiled. "It is, and there are other ways I can see, in a sense, for the curse hasn't robbed me of the memories of my



sight or of you. I can just envision the way you're staring up at me, your brow puckered in that bewildered way you often look when you're confused." His smile grew as his fingertip felt the crease in my forehead. "Yes, this feels exactly how I remember it. Despite my blindness, I know you too well to ever *not* be able to see you."

I wasn't fully appeased, but with his calm countenance and reassuring words I found myself relaxing. He felt the change in his hold around me and peace softened his expression.

"I'm content, Gemma. I promise."

I desperately wanted to believe him. "I don't want you to be merely *content*. I want you to experience all that life has to offer. I would give anything to take it all away...I would, Quinn." It was again an echo of the very words Quinn had spoken to me many times.

"I wouldn't want you to. Nothing is worth you giving up just for me to regain my sight." His hand returned to my cheek. "I truly don't need it, not when every look, gesture, and memory is etched on my heart forever. And while I'll miss my sight and am sad that I've lost my purpose in protecting you as your guard, I'm still blessed with the opportunity to protect your heart. I don't want you to cry for me anymore. Please, Gemma."

And while I didn't want to give up my quest, I knew Quinn needed me to respect his wishes. If I could provide him peace by trying to be happy despite his blindness, then I would do my best to give him that.

## CHAPTER 28

It was impossible to sleep when all around me was night. The silvery moonlight shining through the sliver between my drapes did nothing to dispel the suffocating darkness pressing against my senses and making me feel as if I were trapped, similar to the endless days, weeks, months, and eventually years I'd remained bedridden.

The darkness took on a new, more sinister meaning now that I knew this was all Quinn could see. His assurances of the glimpses of swirling light and color he occasionally experienced did little to reassure me now that I was enveloped in the darkness's thick tentacles. It quickly grew unbearable, forcing me to light the lantern at my bedside, but even its flickering light did little to soothe me. Instead it created long, dancing shadows that slithered around my room in creepy patterns, making the night almost haunting.

I moaned and pressed one of my pillows against my eyes to block out the sight until all I could see was the faint golden glow from the lantern against my eyelids, something far more preferable than the taunting shadows. But blocking out the darkness did little to lessen my worries concerning Quinn, the true source of my restless night: did his blindness prevent him from even seeing something as simple as light against his eyelids, or had that too been stolen from him?

The question only caused my guilt to return, reminding me I'd broken my earlier promise to Quinn that I wouldn't allow his condition to deprive me of joy. He'd be deeply distressed if he knew my worries concerning him were depriving me of

sleep, but a restful night seemed both impossible and entirely inconsequential when, come morning, Quinn would never see another sunrise, the beauty of the day, *anything*. The thought was unbearable, no matter how much I'd tried to grow accustomed to it.

These thoughts haunted me throughout the night, only fading as I studied the surrounding darkness's waltz with the lantern light. Quinn often feared his world of darkness and mine of light could never touch, and yet they wove seamlessly together with each dancing sway of the light.

While Quinn cared too much to take me from the light, it was impossible for me to leave him alone in the shadows that had overtaken his world, especially after having been forced to endure such a world for so long myself. Although he claimed he was content, I wanted *more* for him, just as he'd never ceased desiring more for me while I'd been trapped within the tower.

A new idea illuminated my mind, daybreak in this endless night, and with it many of the fears and shadows faded away. I looked around my room with new eyes—at the way the moonlight and shadows touched one another, the stars shone against the velvety sky, and the darkness and light mingled, day and night existing side by side.

Quinn had helped me see past my own darkness to a new world. Now I would help him in return. If I couldn't heal his eyes, then I would bring light to him. This new purpose brought with it the first sense of peace since learning of Quinn's condition, and with this calm I finally managed to drift into a dreamless sleep.



DESPITE MY LINGERING EXHAUSTION, I awoke at dawn, too eager to begin my new quest to sleep a moment longer. I quickly dressed with the help of Melina. Even discussing her upcoming wedding and the wedding trip did little to dispel my eagerness to see Quinn. When she finished, I ate a hurried

breakfast before going in search of him. I hoped to find him standing in his usual guarding post outside my door...only to discover a new and unfamiliar guard in his place.

My heart sank. So my brother had already replaced him, seeing no reason to delay after informing me of the situation. I sighed. As much as I wanted to fight the new arrangement, I knew that complaints were useless, especially when I'd seen for myself only the day before how much Quinn had struggled just to pick up a fallen bowl. Defending me should the need arise would be far more difficult, and would undoubtedly hurt him in the attempt, which was the last thing I wanted.

Reminding myself that the unwanted change in Quinn's position was as much for his protection as my own helped dispel some of the disappointment. I forced myself to push the rest of it aside and search for Quinn, unsure where to even begin looking considering he was usually riveted to my side.

It took nearly an hour of wandering the corridors and asking the servants I encountered before I found him at one of the balconies overlooking the garden. I paused in the doorway to watch him. He stared across the palace grounds with such a concentrated look that for a fleeting moment my heart lifted with foolish hope that perhaps he could see the gardens...but then his expression faltered, revealing the raw emotions that since we'd arrived at the palace he'd kept securely tucked behind his mask.

So many twisted his expression at once—devastation, uncertainty, vulnerability, fear. No matter what he pretended for my benefit, he missed too much from his sight to ever fully be content in his world of darkness. I set my jaw. I would show the gardens to him so that he need never miss out on any sight he wanted to experience ever again.

I pushed through my sudden flare of nerves and stepped onto the balcony. He tilted his head towards the sound of my approach before hastily tucking his melancholy away and swiveling to face me with a wide grin.

“Good morning, Gemma.”

“Good morning.” I paused at his side and gave him my hand when he reached for it, knowing that touching me would help compensate for his inability to see me. “How did you know it was me?”

He chuckled. “I’ve long since had your footsteps memorized...not to mention you smell of peonies, which happen to now be my favorite flower.”

My lips twitched into a smile. He was so good at making me happy. Now I wanted to do the same for him.

Instead, his smile faltered as his worried gaze flickered behind me. “I don’t hear additional footsteps. Is a guard accompanying you?”

I glanced back. My new guard had been following me faithfully the entire morning and now stood a discreet distance away. “He’s here.” It felt strange to be referring to a guard who wasn’t him, especially when Quinn had been at the post for so long. I swallowed the lump in my throat. “I was surprised to wake up and find that the change had already taken place. I’d hoped...”

I didn’t need to finish my thought. Remorse clouded his expression.

“I’m sorry it was so sudden. His Majesty informed me yesterday that he’d found a trustworthy man capable of the position, so I relinquished it immediately. It was long overdue.”

“It’s my understanding you tried to give it up before we became trapped in that tower.”

He sighed. “I see His Majesty has already informed you of that conversation. I regret having to give it up at all.”

“You didn’t have to.” My voice sounded small. I knew I was being childish, complaining about things that couldn’t be changed, but it had only been hours since losing Quinn and I already missed him.

He laced our fingers together, a gesture which soothed some of my heartache. “You know I did. I was losing my sight, Gemma. I’m only grateful the tower was enchanted to

protect you else I would have worried endlessly these past several years.” He glanced towards the guard before leaning close and lowering his voice. “I interviewed him extensively, for I wouldn’t give you up to just anyone. I believe he’s a man who can be trusted.”

I had no doubt he was, but that didn’t change the fact that I didn’t trust anyone as much as I trusted Quinn. My melancholy returned, threatening to overcome me, but I forced myself to push it away. I wasn’t here for myself but for *him*.

I pressed my hands to my hips. “You’re in trouble. Now that you’re no longer my guard, it appears I’m expected to spend the entire morning searching for you.”

He blinked, actually seeming surprised. “You were looking for me?”

Even though he couldn’t see it, I couldn’t resist rolling my eyes, a gesture that was now much less satisfying. “You’ve spoiled me too long with your company for me to give you up so easily. I’m rather miffed you’d think otherwise.”

“Are you?” He reached up to run his hand along my arm, taking in the angles of my position before pausing where my hand pressed against my hip. His lips twitched. “You appear rather displeased. I have no doubt you’re glaring as well.” His touch lingered a moment over my hand before he yanked it away. “Forgive me, I shouldn’t touch you so familiarly—”

I rolled my eyes again. “There’s nothing untoward. Your hands are now your eyes, and you have my permission to use them to see as best as you can.”

“But—” he began.

“I trust you, Quinn. I always have.”

He still seemed uncertain, but it didn’t stop him from reaching towards my face. I tipped my head back so he could more easily explore my expression from his position. I kept myself still as he traced my features, seeing my determination through his fingertips.

He sighed. “Very well, I believe you. I admittedly did even before I verified your expression, for I trust you, too.”

Mischief tugged on his mouth. “Perhaps part of me likes having an excuse to touch you.”

I grinned, a gesture he felt considering his touch lingered along my jaw. His thumb traced over my lips and his own smile slowly grew.

“I take it you’re pleased? You shouldn’t be. I’m still not convinced I’m the best man for you.”

“Deep down you must believe yourself to be, else you wouldn’t be so forward—I recall you holding me in your arms only yesterday.” I giggled as crimson enveloped his cheeks and took his hand to tug him to his feet. “Come, I spent the entire morning looking for you, and now that I’ve finally found you I’m eager to finally spend time with you.”

“I’m admittedly curious as to what compelled you to seek me out...though I’m fiercely relieved you have. I can’t even convey how difficult it’s been being away from my usual post—I’ve been going crazy all morning wondering how you are before finally seeking a much-needed distraction on the balcony.”

His fingers wove through mine to hold my hand securely, a gesture that spoke louder than words that perhaps he believed in a future between us after all.

“Now it’s my turn to distract you. There’s something I want to show you...or rather, many things.” I turned us towards the balcony overlooking the vast enchanted grounds. “Dawn has almost faded, but a hint of pink and orange still tinges the sky in rather wispy patterns. Otherwise it’s a vivid blue without a cloud in sight. From here we can see the woods in the distance, where the leaves are dotted with all shades of orange and gold, and below, the flowers are just as vibrant.”

I noticed movement in my peripheral vision and turned to see a robin perched on the railing, watching us in a rather inquisitive way.

“There’s a robin just to your right. Its feathers are the loveliest crimson, and it’s tilting its head as if curious about something.”

Quinn turned in its direction. “I find myself relating to it, for I can’t help but wonder what you’re up to.”

“Haven’t you guessed? I’m your new eyes.”

I leaned over the railing to stare out across the grounds, a patchwork of vibrant colors and unique patterns, searching for something of interest to bring to life for him. This vantage point stretched across all the surrounding gardens, giving me many wonders to choose from, but I wanted to find the perfect one to make him smile.

“The enchanted swan topiaries are floating down the streams in the water garden, while a rabbit topiary has escaped its garden on the other side of the grounds, undoubtedly to create mischief...and it is! It’s exploring the flowerbeds, whose occupants seem rather put out.”

Quinn grinned. “I can just imagine it. What types of flowers are they?”

I silently scolded myself for my vagueness and described every flower whose name I knew and their colors, forcing myself to come up with new and creative language each time until Quinn rested his hand over mine, causing me to pause.

“Don’t stress yourself searching for just the right word; it’s amazing how vivid even the most simple descriptions can be.”

I relaxed in relief. “What else would you like to see?”

He immediately swiveled to face me. “You. What color gown are you wearing?”

“My orange silk, and I’m wearing my hair down because I was in too much of a hurry to have it styled.”

“And what had you so impatient?” A smile filled his voice, as if he already knew the answer and it pleased him.

“I wanted to see you.”

His lips quirked up. “So you resorted to unstyled hair? So improper.” His hand moved to stroke my hair, his touch lingering on the way it hung messily about my shoulders, and although the gesture was innocent, his touch caused me to shiver.



He was close enough to feel it and frowned in concern. “Are you chilled? Should we go inside?”

“My shiver has nothing to do with the weather, Quinn.”

He blushed but seemed pleased by my answer. “I’m beginning to suspect you left your hair down on purpose. If my condition allows me to get away with such familiarity, then perhaps it’s not so bad after all.” His grin grew as his thumb went to my warm cheek. “I can just imagine your darling blush...as well as the way the sunlight is dancing against your hair.” His gaze flicked upwards, and though he was several inches off, I was touched by how eager he was to see it.

I wanted to show Quinn more of the gardens, so our explorations took us down the balcony steps to the grounds below, where we spent the remainder of the morning. As we strolled along the paths, I pointed out every detail, doing my best to find the most precise and beautiful way to describe things. We often paused so he could explore the other senses enveloping the garden—the birdsong filling the air, the swaying of the plants in the gentle breeze, the perfume of the autumn blossoms, and the feel of their velvety petals when he explored them with his touch.

It was fascinating watching him. There was no sadness, only joy as he learned to see life in a new way. His contentment eased the last of my heartache, allowing me to experience only happiness in this moment with him. If he could be content, then I would be as well, especially since that had been his greatest wish for me back when I was still trapped in the tower. After all I’d done to break free, the last thing I wanted was to create a new prison for myself.

Quinn paused in exploring the plants growing along the surface of the stream in the water garden to blink towards the sky. “The day is really bright; I can faintly see the sun against my eyelids.”

My heart lifted. “Really?”

“Really.” But though his smile remained, the light filling his eyes dimmed. “I still wish I could see you.”

I took his hands and rested them on my face. “You can see me as much as you need. I *want* to be seen by you.”

He hesitated at first before his touch cautiously explored, transporting me to the day he’d first done so when we’d waded through the stream. His touch was just as tantalizing now as it’d been then, leaving me breathless.

I held perfectly still as he traced my face, keeping his eyes closed like he’d done the last time, his look incredibly concentrated. He smiled. “I can still see you, as I promised I would. I always will, and thus I’ll be alright.”

“So you’ll stay with me?” I needed to hear his promise, one far more important than the oaths of protection he’d sworn to me when he’d become my guard.

“Always, Gemma, if you truly want me.”

“Always.” It was my own promise, one I knew I’d never break.

He started to lower his touch, but I wasn’t quite ready for him to stop. I rested my hands over his, keeping his hands cradled around my face. His expression instantly grew serious. “Gemma...”

“I’ve made my choice, Quinn,” I said firmly. “If you love me as I love you—”

“I do,” he assured me. “So much. But—”

“—then nothing will keep us from being together. You’ve given me time to consider a future with you, and my wishes have not changed. I will not leave you in the dark. Allow me to be your light, just as you’ve always been mine. Without you, I too will be left in the night, and you care too much for me to force me to experience that again.”

He was still for a long moment before he released a whooshing breath and rested his forehead against mine. “I can’t tell you how much I want you. If you’re in earnest that I’m what is best for you...I don’t think I’m strong enough to resist you a moment longer.”

The corners of my mouth touched his palms as I smiled, allowing him to feel its presence. “The only choice has always been you. Just as your feelings and devotion never wavered throughout my illness, now it’s my turn to stay loyally by your side. I will always be here, Quinn, and I will help you see the world for what it is, just as you helped me.”

I stood on tiptoe to kiss him, sealing the promise. I’d waited a long time to experience a second kiss, and as with our first, his response was instantaneous and fierce, as if I was his sole source of the light he’d been missing since his curse had robbed him of his sight. He clung to me, kissing me without the restraints he’d previously kept between us for far too long, confirming that he’d finally given up the fight and could no longer be held back now that he was certain he was the one I chose.

I kissed him back just as eagerly, relishing his touch, the love that filled each caress, *him*. The kiss was heated yet gentle, passionate yet adoring, and in it I knew that nothing would keep us apart ever again.

I whimpered in protest when he broke away, but thankfully he didn’t release his hold on me, keeping his arms securely around me as if protecting me from the outside world in order to allow us to more fully enjoy our own private one in this moment. His heart beat rapidly against mine and his heated, adoring hold made me feel alive and incredibly cherished.

It took him a moment to catch his breath in order to find his voice. “Your new guard is terrible. I expected to be locked away for daring to touch the princess in such a way.”

“We had a good talk on expectations while I was searching for you,” I said. “He knows that you’re the exception to royal protocol.”

He grinned and dipped down to steal another searing kiss before withdrawing to stare at me, his gaze so tender that part of me wondered if he really could see me. And perhaps he could, for sight was more than just seeing with one’s eyes. In the years we’d known one another, he’d already looked

beyond how I'd appeared in order to see deeper to the princess within, even when I'd been blind to her myself.

Perhaps this was what true love was. And with such sight, I knew that we both saw enough to create the most beautiful of futures no matter what came...together.

## CHAPTER 29

Purpose filled me as I minced rosemary, butterbur root, and ginger for a simple headache tonic for Briar, who'd been trapped in meetings with his advisors most of the day and often emerged from them weary.

Over the past several weeks I'd spent hours with the master herbalist learning the skills necessary for an apprentice. Hours melted away within this room, but unlike the years I'd spent trapped in bed, this wasn't a prison. I found great satisfaction in my studies, familiarizing myself with the herbs, and using my new knowledge to help others. Though I was sometimes forced to spend time in bed on days my healing elixir wasn't as effective, it wasn't nearly as often as it used to be, and my time in the apothecary and with my family made it easier to endure.

My time home had been far happier than I ever could have imagined, made even more so because of my courtship with Quinn. I looked towards where he stood in front of the shelf laden with bottled herbs. He'd received his official release from his knighthood several weeks before and despite no longer serving as my guard had spent much of his time with me in my herbalist room. Though he clearly enjoyed my company, I knew he was searching for a new purpose that he could fulfill even without his sight.

Briar's headache remedy was quickly forgotten as I watched Quinn lift several jars to his nose with a look of intense concentration. Curiosity furrowed my brow. "What are you doing?"

He grinned over his shoulder. “Studying. I’ve wanted to surprise you, so I normally do it when you’re absent, but I’m so close to reaching my goal that I couldn’t resist finishing now so that I might offer you my proposal.”

My heart lifted. “Your proposal?”

A blush enveloped his cheeks. “A different one.”

Disappointment pressed against me. “Oh.”

Though my expression was lost to him, he heard the melancholy in my voice. He bit his lip. “I’m hoping you’ll like this one nearly as well. But first a test: is there an ingredient you need to finish your tonic?”

His boyish enthusiasm—so different from his usual reserved manner—was the perfect balm for my disappointment. “I still need willow bark.”

He immediately moved to the shelf and ran his hand along the columns until the fourth row down, then moved three to the left, counting silently. He plucked a jar off the shelf and opened it to smell it before handing it over with a wide grin. Sure enough, it was willow bark.

I stared first at it, then at him, taking in his uncharacteristically smug look. “However did you know where it was?”

“Simple: I memorized its location.”

I continued to stare. “When have you been practicing such a thing?”

“With the master herbalist. I’ve been coming in every day after he finishes working with you; he’s been showing me where every herb is and teaching me their functions. I memorized both their location and how to recognize them by scent. I’m hoping it’s enough to qualify me to be your own assistant once you become the healer you desire.”

For a moment I couldn’t speak, at a loss for words. I shakily set the jar he’d handed me on the counter, certain my overwhelming emotions would cause me to drop it.

At my silence, apprehension replaced his earlier elation. “What’s wrong? Do you...not approve having me—”

“That’s not it.” I felt bad I’d give him the wrong impression; it would take quite a bit of time to get used to him no longer being able to easily discern my moods from my expressions. “I’m *overcome*. To think you’d render so much work on *my* behalf...” I couldn’t finish. Even without his sight, Quinn’s devotion was unwavering. How blessed I was to have this man in my life.

His expression softened as he reached for my hands, his brow furrowing when he felt them shaking. He tenderly enfolded them within his before taking in my expression with a look as if he could still really see me. “I want to give *everything* to you. You are my life and purpose, Gemma.”

I stared at him in disbelief. “But...what am I to your knighthood, or your sight, or—” My words faltered at his gentle smile.

“There’s something I must tell you. Might we converse in the gardens when you’ve finished here?” He glanced unseeing around the room.

“I’m nearly done with Briar’s tonic.”

It was an effort not to allow my curiosity over what Quinn wished to discuss to cause my concentration to falter and rush Briar’s medicine. The process went more quickly with Quinn’s assistance in mincing the willow bark with careful yet thorough movements, ones too precise to have been learned without considerable practice. My heart swelled further at the effort he’d rendered on my behalf as well as the thought that my future time spent as a healer would include many more moments of him remaining devotedly at my side.

When we finished, I handed Briar’s tonic to a servant and Quinn escorted me through the palace towards the gardens, finding the way easily, a benefit of years of familiarity working in the palace. As if sensing my astonishment, he cast me a shy smile.

“I’ve spent a long time practicing for this moment. Even when I knew I’d lose my post as your guard, I was determined to find a new role that would keep me in the palace so that I could remain close to you.”

I laid my head on his shoulder. “There’s one role I’m eager for you to fill that will allow you to remain with me forever.”

He blushed, but unlike the many times I’d brought up this subject before, this time he finally didn’t insist we were impossible, which nourished my hope.

“Is there a profession within the palace you had in mind?” As much as I welcomed the thought of him assisting me, surely he had another way he wished to spend his time.

“Actually...I’ve spoken to the Master Carpenter, and after seeing some of my work, he offered me a position, beginning next week.”

I snuggled his arm. “Oh Quinn, that will be perfect for you.” I could not only imagine his beautiful work adorning the homes of nobility but the joy that would come from hours of creating his carved masterpieces.

He seemed touched by my excitement. “Thankfully, my skills can rely more on touch than sight, allowing me to keep another of my passions.”

“Which is your first?” I asked, and with the sly grin he gave, I knew the answer he didn’t speak out loud: *me*. The thought warmed me through.

We exited the palace and entered the vast gardens, strolling the paths slowly so Quinn could experience the surrounding beauty in his own way. I searched his expression for any sign of discontent, but he seemed perfectly at ease, which dispelled my own lingering worries.

“You brought me here to share a secret?” I asked after several comfortable minutes of strolling when my curiosity couldn’t be contained a moment longer.

He led me to the fountain, another feature of the garden he spent a lot of time near considering he could enjoy it fully through his sense of hearing. For a moment he simply listened



to the gentle rush of the water with a soft smile before taking my hands gently in his.

“You’ve been concerned about me losing my position as a knight, but in truth I only became a knight because of you. While knighthood is a common profession for younger noble sons, I entered it not for my family but with the hope that one day I’d be able to serve you. I worked hard to rise in the ranks not for myself or even for the sake of honor, but to one day qualify to become a *royal* knight, all for the sake of one princess.”

I gaped at him. “But...why?”

His expression softened. “I’ve always admired you—the strong princess who persevered even through adversity, the kindness you showed me before you became bedridden when I was still a squire. Each smile, each moment of kindness, and witnessing your bravery as you faced the trials dealt to you left a lasting impression on me. I wanted nothing more than to serve you and protect you—to not only act as a shelter from the storms you continuously faced but come to know the princess who possessed such admirable resiliency no matter her trials. So I worked long and hard to be worthy of the position as your protector.”

For a moment I was at a loss for words, too touched to speak. “How can I be the only reason? I know you love being a knight.”

His look was soft. “I’ve found joy in the profession, but much of my happiness comes from serving you. Even though I’ve lost it, so long as I have you...have I truly lost anything? There is nothing I want more than to be with you forever, Gemma.”

My heart stirred, aching to lift in hope at our conversation’s sudden change in direction, but fear of disappointment kept it grounded. “But I thought you feared being with you would make me unhappy?”

“That was before I’d seen the strength you’ve exhibited these past several weeks and had time to fully consider what my denying you would mean. It’s not fair for me to allow my

fears to take away your choice in the future you desire. You've spent your entire life being trapped by how others see you, and I could never force you to endure that again, nor could I ever be the one to dictate how you should live: only *you* can determine that."

My heart swelled at his words...and the possibilities they promised. "Do you finally believe me when I tell you that my only choice is *you*, no matter what?"

He took a shaky breath, his smile almost shy. "I will strive to see myself as you see me and believe that somehow I could ever possibly be enough."

I took his hands and held them close. "I see the most remarkable man, one who is kind and fiercely loyal, who possesses a beautiful love for life, and who has always been there for me, my best friend and the man I love. I want to spend the rest of my life with you by my side. Please, Quinn."

He took another steadying breath. "That's what I hoped you'd want." Still holding my hands, he knelt down and tilted his face towards mine. "I love you, Gemma, and am yours forever if you want me. Will you do me the greatest honor and be my wife?"

For a moment I couldn't speak, too overcome to find my voice. But words weren't necessary. I knelt on the ground and embraced him. For a beautiful moment, I simply basked in the feel of his warm and adoring hold enfolding me, the same arms that had always been there to protect, comfort, and love me.

I reached up to stroke his cheek. "Yes. I want you forever."

I leaned up to softly kiss him, a kiss he readily returned. Even when our kiss ended we didn't pull away, the moment too special to end just yet. He only stirred when he felt my tears from my cozy position against his shoulder. He reached out to trace my tear-streaked cheek, his brows drawn in concern.

"What is it, Gemma?"

I guided his fingers to my lips so he could feel my smile. “I’m just so...*happy*. Are you happy?” I needed to be sure, needed to assure myself that the contentment I’d seen from him these past several weeks wasn’t a charade performed solely to keep me from worrying.

But the light filling his eyes gave me reason to believe that despite my fears and his own heartaches, he truly was. “I am happy, Gemma. I promise.”

And I finally believed him—that it was truly possible to find joy even in the midst of affliction. And with this knowledge I was no longer afraid of the uncertainties still filling our future from Quinn’s blindness or my own lingering illness, for I knew that no matter what came, I’d be at peace.

My warm, beautiful feelings swelled, causing another tear to trickle down my cheek and fall to the ground. The spot where it’d fallen began to glow the moment it touched the earth.

Quinn startled at my gasp of surprise. “What is it?”

It took me a moment to speak, my gaze transfixed to the golden light shining from the soil. “My tear...it’s *glowing*.”

By his furrowed brow he clearly remained perplexed, but it was impossible to find words adequate to describe something I myself didn’t understand.

The bulb of golden light shone around us before it quivered and began to move, creating a trail that paused some yards away, as if waiting for us to follow.

I tugged Quinn after me as I scrambled to my feet and hurried after it. Even though he had no idea what we were following, he obediently accompanied me without question. I wanted to explain, but the speed I exerted to follow the light left me breathless and words impossible.

With every twist and turn we wove through the enchanted palace grounds, passing many of the garden’s endless wonders that I ached to explore after years of experiencing them secondhand through Briar’s stories. But the light seemed intent on a particular destination as it created a golden trail through

the flowerbeds, leading us somewhere I couldn't even begin to imagine.

The golden trail continued to wander alongside the flora and hedgerows, venturing deeper into the garden...before stopping within a clump of trees where a single gate stood between two elms. My breath caught and I froze, for I recognized where we were despite never having been here myself.

Briar had once told me of a place within the grounds that could only be discovered if the garden led you to it, a place he knew of even if he'd never entered it himself. From his stories, I knew that the garden beyond the gate nestled between two trees was a wishing garden, which contained a rare but precious plant.

For a moment I stood transfixed before lifting a hesitant hand to graze the gate's handle. I knew it would be locked—the wishing garden guarded its plants fiercely, even from their sovereign—so I was astonished when at my touch the lock clicked and the gate opened soundlessly.

“Where are we?” Quinn asked in a reverent whisper, somehow sensing, even without sight, that where we stood was special. “By the shade and scent of pine I know we're within a grove of trees. Are we in the woods?”

“We're in a secret area of the garden,” I murmured. “Within a clump of trees which act as sentries for a special place the garden keeps very protected, but the gate...” I was too awed to finish, but with the way his eyes widened he clearly understood.

He followed as I took a few hesitant steps and peered over the gate's threshold. I wasn't entirely sure what I expected to find within a garden special enough to be kept under constant lock and key, though it was definitely something extraordinary. But instead all that greeted me was a small clearing completely enclosed by trees surrounding one growing in the center, which contained golden bulbs of light hanging from the branches.

“It’s a tree,” I whispered, desperate to share this extraordinary vision with Quinn. “Golden light grows from it like fairy fruit. It’s breathtaking...but what *is* it?”

*A wishing tree.*

I startled at the soft, gentle voice that flowed through the surrounding branches, as if part of the wind itself. The garden. Though I’d never been one to understand it, somehow within this place I *could*; its whispered words wove through the trees to caress my hearing.

*This is a special place, the garden continued. One we rarely allow anyone to enter. But because of the peace and joy filling your heart despite your trials, we offer you a gift, a wish.*

At its words, the golden trail reappeared, creating a path that led to the tree. “A wish...” I murmured as I stepped closer, my gaze riveted to the magical fruit dangling from the branches, which despite the autumn season were shrouded in emerald leaves. With every step closer, the light emanating from the fruit grew brighter, beckoning me to pluck them.

*You can only take one.*

I lowered my hand and turned towards Quinn, the only one meant to accept such a precious gift. Sensing my desires, he immediately shook his head. “No Gemma, you should be the one to accept the wish.”

My brows lifted in surprise. “You understood the garden?”

“I did, and I could never accept something so precious in your place. Imagine, Gemma: you could be healthy forever.”

I glanced towards the tree, seeking confirmation from the garden. *The condition that ails you can easily be healed through the garden’s magic.*

For a moment I was too startled to even breathe. It was a desire I’d spent a lifetime wishing for. For a moment I allowed myself to envision a future free from the illness that had plagued my entire life. My heart swelled with yearning...but there was an emotion far stronger than even my greatest desire.

Love.

If a wish from the garden was powerful enough to heal, then I knew exactly how I wanted to use such a gift. “And what of Quinn’s sight? Is the wish’s magic strong enough to restore it?”

Beside me, Quinn stiffened with shock. “No, Gemma, I could never—”

*The wish cannot undo his curse, the garden said, an answer that caused my heart to sink. But it can offer something else, a small...exception to the curse, one area where it cannot have power.*

Quinn’s breath hooked and hope lit his eyes...before it once more dimmed. “But I couldn’t. Gemma...what is my sight to your health?”

“And what is my health to your sight?” I demanded. “Quinn, surely you realize the wish can only be given to you. There is nothing that will bring me greater happiness than for you to see something. Please, Quinn.”

He stared at me for a long moment before he cradled my face to stroke my cheeks with his thumbs. “Oh, Gemma. Dear, dear, Gemma.” He pressed the softest kiss to my brow before glancing towards the wishing tree. “Can I choose the one thing I’ll always be able to see?”

The garden whispered amongst itself as if consulting on the matter, its speech too soft and quick to be understood. *The wish’s power is strong enough to be specific in the way it alters your curse.*

He didn’t even hesitate. “Gemma.” He turned back towards me, his look adoring. “If I can but see her...then it doesn’t matter that I won’t be able to see anything else.”

I sensed the garden’s approval at his request. *The wish’s power is strong enough to allow you to see the woman you love...and one more. Is there another thing you wish to always be able to see?*

“Our children...when we have them.” He blushed and gave me a shy look, which I returned with a joyous smile, my

heart swelling at the thought of such a future with Quinn... should my health allow it.

I felt the garden's consent and started to reach to pluck the fruit for Quinn, only pausing when a fierce wind blew around us, the garden's sudden flare of resistance.

*It must be given.*

The breeze blew again, this time more gently, and snapped a piece of golden fruit from the tree to hand to Quinn. He kept one hand wound securely through mine as he reverently accepted it with his other. For a moment he simply cradled it in his palm, tracing his fingers along its surface with a look of wonder, as if he could really see it.

He started to raise it to his lips but paused, hesitant.

"It's yours, Quinn," I said. "I truly want you to have it, to be granted at least a small portion of sight."

He smiled gently. "The most precious portion." And he took a bite.

My gaze remained riveted to him as he chewed, not wanting to miss the moment the magic worked. And just like losing the last of his sight had been like the setting of the sun, this time it was like witnessing the arrival of a new day. The fruit's golden glow seemed to rise up like a sunrise to fill his eyes, and when it faded...

His breath hitched and his eyes widened, filled not with the blank look that had previously been there but one of recognition, and with it I knew he could see me. He reached out to trace my wide smile with his calloused fingertip.

"Gemma..."

His touch moved to cradle my face, where he caressed my features in the way that had grown familiar, as if he were still looking at me through them...even as his eyes hungrily caressed my face with a look like he'd been granted food after an endless famine.

"Gemma..." His voice was thick with emotion.

My smile widened even as my heart swelled. “You can see me?”

“Yes, and even a little bit of the world around you. You’re even more beautiful than I remember; my memories didn’t do you justice. How I’ve missed you.” His touch lowered, just for a moment, and he gasped sharply. “And you’re gone again, swallowed by the darkness. It’d be too cruel if such magic only lasted long enough to give me a glimpse of you before robbing me of you once more.”

*The magic will last forever, the garden assured him. But it can only do so much against such a powerful curse; you must be touching her in order to see her.*

A mischievous glint entered Quinn’s eyes even as his lips quirked up. “Excellent, another excuse to touch you, Gemma.”

I wrapped my arms around his waist and tipped my head back so that I could witness the moment when he could see me again; the joy that lit his expression as he took me in made it impossible to miss.

“I’ll never tire of it,” he murmured.

“Nor me.” I snuggled closer. “What a beautiful gift from the garden. What shall you do with it?”

His tender expression became serious. “As wondrous as this is, it changes nothing...while also changing everything. To be blessed with the opportunity of seeing you everyday...” His hand stroked my cheek and I leaned against his touch “With this new sight, I now have everything I need. I lack for nothing, Gemma, for you and our future family are my life now. Truly. I will happily serve as your husband and apprentice, as the Royal Carpenter, and soon as the father to your children, all with the honor of making you happy throughout our life together. What more could I want?”

My own happiness grew at his sincerity. “And I’ll continue to be your eyes as we create new dreams throughout our wonderful life together.”

In this moment, it was impossible to focus on anything but the blessings in my life: my freedom, my new role as a healer,



being Quinn's eyes, and creating a future full of purpose with him. Life was even more beautiful than I could have ever imagined back when I was trapped in my tower. I was infinitely grateful for the man who'd not only shown me the possibility of more, but who had helped me discover the inner strength to create a life of my choosing.

Nothing would hold me back from the life I wanted to live ever again.

## EPILOGUE

*G*ently dabbed the damp cloth along my sister-in-law's brow. "Deep breaths, Rhea. You're doing wonderfully."

She bit her lip and nodded, squeezing Drake's hand even more tightly, but he made no complaint. His worried gaze remained riveted to hers before he glanced uncertainly at me. I nodded my assurance.

The calm that always enveloped me when nursing guided my movements as I left her side to retrieve the bowl of herbs I'd prepared, a remedy of my own creation, complete with a touch of the enchanted garden's magic. Rhea eyed the bowl as I returned and managed a weak smile as she caught a familiar scent.

"Lavender?"

Among other things, but there was no need to bore her with the details of my herbal concoction. "To relax you."

She gave a breathless laugh. "How can I relax at a moment like this?"

"You must. Relaxing will help you bring your baby into the world."

Her expression settled into determination. She'd fought long and hard for years for this baby, endured so many losses, and experienced a very long and difficult pregnancy, one the physician advised to be her only one. But she only needed one to give her what she most wanted. And finally, after all her heartache and struggle, that long-anticipated moment was now.

Though she seemed to be in a lot of pain, I couldn't deny the wonder of the experience as I watched her fight for her precious child. As I tended her, my hand lowered to my stomach, where my own secret resided. I still marveled at the miracle of being pregnant, something I'd spent most of my life fearing my health would prevent. Part of me still didn't believe it, so I'd waited to tell anyone, including Quinn, wanting to be sure of my condition before I shared it. Somehow in this moment of watching the miracle of life Rhea was experiencing, I knew. In several months, this would be me.

But it wasn't yet. I focused on Rhea, comforting her through each painful contraction while Drake sat at her other side stroking her hair and the midwife assisted with the labor. I'd had many experiences in the sick room this past year, a place I found great solace in; I felt great joy in helping others, filled with an empathy that had only come from the years I'd battled my own illnesses, something I now wouldn't trade for anything. But of all the experiences I'd had as a healer, this one was by far the most special.

The labor didn't last much longer, and soon the cry of a baby filled the air. Rhea slumped, exhausted, against the pillows, where she craned her neck with the desperation of a mother eager to see her baby for the first time, especially after years of waiting for that child.

I smiled at her. "It's a boy."

Rhea lit up and extended her arms. The midwife wrapped her baby up and gently handed him to her. The look that came across both Rhea's and Drake's expressions was unlike anything I'd ever seen. I tried to memorize it so I could describe it to Quinn later; it was a look of pure love and happiness, one I was certain I'd never forget.

Peace filled me as well as a sense of accomplishment for the help I'd been able to render, not only during Rhea's labor but throughout her long and difficult pregnancy. But the effort was worth it just to see her quiet joy now. I'd found my place.

Drake reached out to reverently stroke their son's dark hair. "He's beautiful, darling."

“He is.” Tears fell down Rhea’s cheeks and she dipped down to press her lips to their son’s brow. “Our son.”

As I watched the tender scene, my hand again lowered back to my stomach as I imagined the tenderness and love in my brother’s eyes filling Quinn’s as he met our child. I couldn’t wait for that day.

I wanted to linger in the joy filling the room, but now that my help was no longer needed, I didn’t want to disrupt this special moment between a mother and father meeting their child for the first time. I tiptoed from the room to search for Quinn.

I found him in the rose garden near the tower. I rested my hand against the stones and smiled up at it in greeting. Ever since our marriage it’d been where Quinn and I made our home, allowing me to remain in easy access for my duties as the Royal Healer while also granting both my family and Briar’s with his wife and new son privacy.

Quinn often spent his time amongst the roses near the tower, for their strong perfume helped him better visualize their beauty. A smile lit his face when he heard my approach and he tipped his head in my direction, wordlessly holding his hand out for me to rest mine in his. As always, I adored witnessing the light that filled his eyes when I knew he could see me.

For a moment he simply stared at me. “I never tire of seeing you. Nothing brings me greater joy than you being the first thing I see when I touch you.”

He tugged on my hand, encouraging me to join him, and I happily curled against his side. His arm looped around my waist to draw me closer and I rested my head on his shoulder.

He kissed the top of my head. “Your presence must mean that Rhea had her baby?”

“She did. It’s a boy. I wish you could have seen the look on her and Drake’s faces when they met him for the first time.”

“Describe it.”

I wrinkled my brow. After a moment's consideration I sighed. "I don't think there's any word adequate to describe such happiness."

He was pensive as his touch lightly stroked up and down my arm. "With that description, I can well imagine it."

"You'll see it for yourself one day on my face." I took his hand and rested it on my stomach. "In about seven months."

His breath caught and for a moment his shock rendered him silent. I peeked up at him and was not disappointed in the surprise and wonder lighting his expression. "Really, Gemma?"

"Really," I said. "Nothing brings me greater joy, especially the knowledge that you shall see our child, both this one and the others that will follow."

Awe filled his eyes as he reverently stroked my stomach. "We're going to have a baby." He dipped down and pressed a soft kiss over where our child was growing. I was certain there was nothing more wonderful than witnessing Quinn's joy now, one of many moments that lay ahead.

He peered up to take in my face and his own expression grew tender. I didn't need to ask what he was seeing, for if it was anything like I felt, nothing had ever been so beautiful, and we had a lifetime of such visions ahead of us.

ALSO BY CAMILLE PETERS

Pathways

Inspired by “The Princess and the Pea” and “Rumpelstiltskin”

Spelled

Inspired by “The Frog Prince”

Identity

Inspired by “The Goose Girl”

Reflection

Inspired by “Snow White”

Enchantment

Inspired by “Beauty and the Beast”

Voyage

Inspired by “King Thrusbeard”

Awaken

Inspired by “Sleeping Beauty”

\*~\*

The Dream World Chronicles:

Dreamer

Nightmare

Insomnia

Daybreak

\*~\*

Standalones:

\* The Beast and the Enchantress

## THANK YOU

Thank you for allowing me to share one of my beloved stories with you! If you'd like to be informed of new releases, please visit me at my website [www.camillepeters.com](http://www.camillepeters.com) to [sign up for my newsletter](#), [see my release plans](#), and [read deleted scenes](#)—as well as a scene written from [Quinn's POV](#).

I love to connect with readers! You can find me on [Goodreads](#), [Instagram](#), and on my [Facebook Page](#), or write me at [authorcamillepeters@icloud.com](mailto:authorcamillepeters@icloud.com).

If you loved my story, I'd be honored if you'd share your thoughts with me and others by leaving a review on [Amazon](#) or [Goodreads](#). Your support is invaluable. Thank you.

*Coming Soon:* Prince Nolan's story, inspired by *Swan Lake*.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Camille Peters was born and raised in Salt Lake City, Utah where she grew up surrounded by books. As a child, she spent every spare moment reading and writing her own stories on every scrap of paper she could find. Becoming an author was always more than a childhood dream; it was a certainty.

Her love of writing grew alongside her as she took local writing classes in her teens, spent a year studying Creative Writing at the English University of Northampton, and graduated from the University of Utah with a degree in English and History. She's now blessed to be a full-time author.

When she's not writing she's thinking about writing, and when's she's not thinking about writing she's...alright, she's always thinking about writing, but she can also be found reading, at the piano, playing board games with her family and friends, or taking long, bare-foot walks as she lives inside her imagination and brainstorms more tales.