

ETERNAL VOWS

CHRISSY PEEBLES

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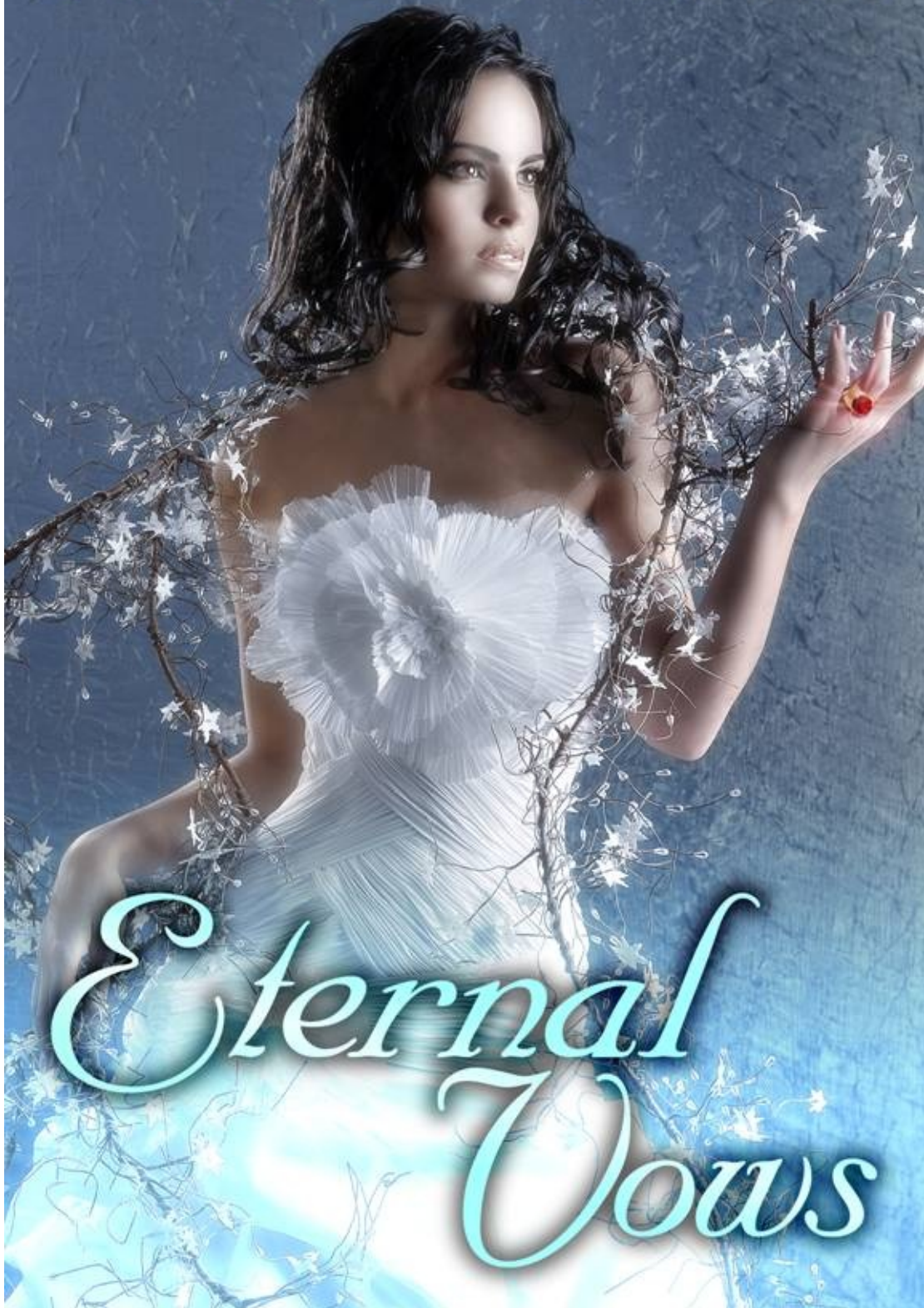


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CHRISSEY PEEBLES



Eternal Vows

(Book 1 in The Ruby Ring Saga)

By

Chrissy Peebles

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Chapter 1

A soft growl echoed in the darkness. Sarah snatched the thermal imaging camera from the row of equipment by the fire. Turning in a slow circle, she scanned the dark trees beyond. Nothing moved. Just as she was taking a few tentative steps through the ferns and thick brush, a branch snapped, making her jump. Another growl pierced the silence. She clutched her chest, as if that might calm her racing heart. Five years as a Bigfoot researcher, and she was still not used to the occasional howl. Then again, no animal she had ever encountered before had made such an ominous and menacing sound.

She stopped for a moment and listened, her heart thumping hard in her eardrums. "Show yourself!" Her voice echoed from the trees with a courage she

couldn't feel. A shiver slid down her spine as she pulled her radio off her belt. "Base camp to Adam. Computer screen's flashing like crazy. Something broke the perimeter line."

The radio crackled and a voice answered. "Adam to base camp. What zone?"

"Zone 3. All cameras up and running, but I don't see anything out of the ordinary. I'm getting sounds over here—some movement too. I'm gonna check it out. Over."

"Wait...all by yourself?" Adam's snort carried through the static. "No way. Just because you're running this operation, that doesn't give you permission to break protocol. Stay by the fire. We're coming."

"Sure, bring in the cavalry." Sarah rolled her eyes as she picked up her infrared camera. "Listen, in the meantime, I'll just walk around the perimeter, that's all. Maybe I'll see something."

"Roger that. Just be careful." The radio transmission ended.

She straightened and peered around in the darkness. A branch snapped behind her, followed by another. *How many creatures are there?* She switched on the walkie-talkie and moved her fingers over the buttons; she could barely see what she was doing. "Base camp to Adam. Something's coming down the hill."

Sarah pointed the FLIR camera straight ahead, then took a few more steps into the foliage. A red amoebic-looking blob on the scanner screen began to morph, growing larger as it took on a humanoid shape. She gasped. *Oh, this time they'll see. This time, I'm gonna have more tangible evidence than mosquito bites and a bad case of poison ivy in places where I didn't even know I had places.* She spoke into the radio, "Get over here NOW! I'm getting a heat signature on the thermal. Something's moving closer...something really freaking huge!"

"We're on our way!" said a voice over the radio. "Stay put and be careful!"

She shouted into the walkie-talkie. "Is every team still in place? Nobody was supposed to return to base camp without my permission. Do you hear me, Adam?"

Her radio crackled as Adam answered. "All teams accounted for. Nobody near base camp. Wait for a team. I repeat, wait for a team."

Her heart rate spiked. *Could this really be that elusive creature I've been stalking?* "Are you kidding? This is what I came here for. It's what we came for. I'll stay within the perimeter and proceed with caution. Trust me, I'm not leaving in a Medivac."

The red blurb disappeared from Sarah's monitor. She held her breath, her head whipping from left to the right, ears and eyes straining to take in any tiny noise she could make out. Moonlight flooded through the trees, and a cool breeze blew across her face. Crickets sang, and mosquitoes buzzed. She held down the lever on her radio. "I'm not seeing anything. Whatever it is, it's gone now." *Is my mind playing tricks on me? No way. The thermal definitely picked up something. A bear? Possibly, and if it was, I probably spooked it off.* She spun in a slow circle, extending the thermal image camera; suddenly, there was a snap of another twig.

Strong arms gripped her from behind. She screamed, flailing wildly, sending her camera flying into the woodlands.

“Calm down,” a voice said, laughing. “It’s only me. Might want to warn your team that I set off some tripwires on the way here.”

“YOU!? Those growling sounds weren’t funny, you idiot! And look...you made me drop an expensive piece of equipment. Hard to believe you’re a professional, Frank.” Sarah took a slow, deep breath to calm her nerves.

He slipped off his leather jacket. “Oh, come on. I even bought a proper Indiana Jones fedora for the occasion.”

Her cheeks grew hot as she stared at the safari shirt stretching across his broad shoulders and strong chest, his sleeves rolled up at the elbow. Khaki-colored pants finished his adventurer ensemble. His brown hair hung in shaggy waves from underneath his hat. He looked really hot, but there was no way she was going to admit it. If he’d had a bullwhip, she would have wanted to strangle him with it. “You hate hats.”

“What? No I don’t. Now we match—his and hers Indy hats.” The flames leapt greedily at the logs, reflecting in his hazel eyes as he scanned her up and down with a crooked smile. “Did anybody ever tell you how sexy you look in camouflage? And boy, you have the part of big-game hunter nailed.”

“I’m not here to hunt any game and certainly not to kill anything. I just want to prove its existence.” Sarah let out a long sigh. “This is *my* expedition anyway, so what’re you doing here?” She reached down and picked up her equipment.

“I’m on assignment. Nobody wanted to write this article, but I jumped on it.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close. “One of the perks of the job is seeing you.”

“Even if you got lost trying to find me in this forest?”

“I could more easily get lost in those big brown eyes of yours.”

She flung his arm off. “You scared the crap out of me!”

“Hey, you’re lucky I didn’t show up in an ape suit.”

“You know I have a tranquilizer gun, right?”

He glanced down at her waist. “Yeah, and I love the holster. It’s so Old West.”

Sarah met his gaze. “I’d aim straight for your—”

“Cute butt?” he finished, grinning.

She shook her head. “Not quite what I had in mind.”

“Don’t you dare say heart, ‘cause you’ve already shattered mine.”

“I’m sorry, Frank.”

“Why don’t you answer my phone calls or e-mails?”

She huffed. “Don’t you have some ridiculous ghost story or urban legend you could be out debunking? Shouldn’t you be killing off the Tooth Fairy for little kids or something?”

“Why do you waste your time playing head researcher in *Planet of the Apes*?”

Glaring, she picked up the radio. “Guys, false alarm! It’s only Frank Hedford.”

Adam’s voice crackled in the speaker. “Huh? That guy from the *Daily News*?”

She glared at Frank as she spoke into the walkie-talkie. “Yeah, that’s our animal. I’ll get rid of him. Everyone back to your positions.”

“So you caught the smaller, smellier version of Bigfoot, huh?” he asked over the radio.

“Yeah, I suppose I did. We’ll be in tomorrow’s headlines—‘Bigfoot: A No Show’.”

She recognized Steven’s voice when he said, “Throw that guy out on his big furry—”

Sarah turned off the radio.

Frank smiled. “Man, it feels good to be loved. Must be that article I wrote about those guys mistaking a freaking elk for a Sasquatch. You know, I bet they could still get their story published. The supermarket tabloids would jump on a juicy tidbit like that.”

Sarah’s cheeks burned with anger. “Listen, we had two reliable eyewitnesses on that case, and—”

“And a blurry picture that didn’t add up to squat.”

“Why is it so hard to believe that a reclusive primate that hasn’t yet been documented and studied could be out there? Are you really so shallow that you can only believe in things you’ve seen with your own eyes?”

He groaned. “Sarah, it’s a myth. You know what that is, right? Bigfoot stories have scared Boy Scouts around campfires for decades. Oh, and speaking of campfires, I’m assuming this is base camp.” He tossed his backpack next to a few logs.

“You’re not invited to this slumber party,” Sarah said.

His eyes widened. “What? No stargazing and snuggling?”

She pointed away from her camp. “You can take your sleeping bag and tent somewhere else. How did you find me and my team anyway?”

He smirked. “Your organization tried to keep this location top secret, but I’m a journalist, doll, an *investigative* reporter. Took Lois Lane a while to figure out the correlation between Clark Kent and Superman, but I’m a hundred times sharper than her.”

“Fine. So spill it. How did you find us?”

Frank peeked up at the night sky that was dotted with millions of sparkling stars. “Well, for starters, I went back and read all the newspaper reports. Isn’t this the place where your sister disappeared when she was fifteen? What was that, about ten years ago? Sabrino Cave? I knew you’d hold the expedition here because you think these alleged creatures had something to do with your sister’s disappearance. When I saw your Jeep in that caravan of vehicles over there, I knew my hunch had panned out.”

He stretched his legs and made himself comfortable on the naked ground. She sensed he wasn’t going anywhere, so she decided to join the party and dropped down next to him.

“This is a great place for an investigation. Bluff Creek is where Patterson took his famous Bigfoot video.”

“Is that what you told your team?” He snorted. “You can’t fool me. Why didn’t you elaborate on the *real* reason you picked this location? This has Liz written all over it.”

She tried to fight the quiver in her voice. “Look, I don’t care how ‘investigative’ of a reporter you think you are, mister, but my sister’s off limits.

You got that? You print one word about her, and I'll sue the living—"

His tone softened. "Now, now. Calm down. I'm sorry. Clearly, I was out of line."

"It's fine," she muttered. "Just get out of here, okay?"

"You sure about that? What, are you still sore we didn't work out?"

"Work out? Hmm."

"You know it really hurt that you didn't invite me to your twenty-fourth birthday party last week. Yeah, I saw the pics on Facebook before you unfriended me."

Sarah shrugged.

"Don't worry," he said. "I forgive you. I have to admit, I saw fireworks the second I laid eyes on you. It was so adorable how your face lit up like a Christmas tree."

She slapped his arm. "I'm afraid you mistook that reaction. It was fright."

He smiled at her as he snaked his arms around her. "More like awe."

Oh, he has some nerve, this one. "Listen, I don't need you breathing down my neck, okay? This isn't a joke. I take my research very seriously," Sarah said, breaking herself free from his smothering embrace. She sat down by the fire and scanned all eight cameras. "If you don't mind, I have work to do."

He kicked off his leather boots and grinned. "Mind if I kick back for a while? I had to hike miles and miles through the forest to find you."

She shot him a glare. "There are some twenty-five to thirty other researchers and scientists you can bother. Take your pick of them or go out there and try your dumb luck in the woods, but just leave me alone."

He winked. "Yeah, but those other campers aren't as cute as you."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh brother. What are you up to anyway? Dreaming up articles on how to discredit my work even more?"

"I only give my honest, professional opinion. I thought that's what you loved about me. Anyway, listen, Sarah; let's not dwell on the past. We've both made mistakes. I should've taken your research more seriously."

Her eyes stayed focused on the screen, and she saw a mysterious shadow flit across it. "Whoa! Did you see that? Something just moved on Camera 2!" She leaned in, not believing what she was seeing. "Right there, left of the boulders. See it?" *Maybe this is the real deal. Hunters claimed to see this beast only yesterday, right here in this vicinity.*

"Where?" Frank asked.

She pointed to the left side of the monitor. "Look! It's right there." Her voice grew in intensity. "Something just moved on Camera 3. There...right over there. Do you see it?"

"Yes, but need I remind you that we're in the middle of the wilderness? In case you might have forgotten, plenty of squirrels, rabbits, bears, and deer live out here."

Sarah turned the knob to give more clarity to the screen. "This is me ignoring you."

"You know, I think you'd be more into me if I stunk, had long hair, and gave off pheromones like a gorilla."

“Who said you don’t?” She picked up the radio, her voice urgent. “Base camp to Adam. I got a shadow on the south side of the forest, Camera 3. I need Team 7 to check it out pronto. Over.”

“Roger that. What was that creepy howl?”

The radio crackled. “Amy to base camp.”

“Go ahead,” Sarah said.

“Bait’s gone by Cameras 1 and 2.”

“Any other teams experiencing anything unusual?” questioned Sarah into the radio.

“Team 6, by the river. Nothing unusual to report here.”

Static crackled. “Team 3 reporting. We heard some rustling in the bushes. It stopped, but something’s definitely out there. Could just be local wildlife, but we’re not sure.”

Another voice crackled over the walkie-talkie. “Team 9 reporting. We got some rock- and log-throwing, but it’s too dark to make anything out. Thermal’s not picking up anything.”

“Got a visual?” Sarah asked into the mouthpiece, ignoring her uninvited guest who didn’t believe it was anything more than a bear.

“No. We’re moving forward.”

She wasn’t comfortable with their plan. For a moment, she hesitated, considering other options, even though she knew there were none. “Okay. Get a visual, but stay safe.”

“This is Team 4. FLIR’s lighting up like fire,” Beth said. “We got a huge biped crawling low in the brush. Get over here NOW!”

“I’m on my way.” Sarah’s heart pounded as she put on a pair of night-vision goggles and began adjusting the straps. They weren’t as helpful as actual daylight, but even with that fluorescent green hue, they sure beat tripping. Everything sharpened into focus as she blinked, her view illuminated in neon from the high-tech gadget. She grabbed her 35mm, the FLIR, and clipped her radio on her belt. Without another look at Frank, she darted through the giant trees, swatting away at the brush and ferns as she went.

“Wait! I’m coming!” Frank yelled.

Sarah rolled her eyes and didn’t even bother looking back at him. She raced through the trees and thickets of brush, trying not to slip on the wet leaves. Finally, she made her way into a clearing and ran in the direction of Sabrina Cave.

Out of the darkness, a voice called out her name, and a beam of light shone in her direction. “Sarah? Is that you?” Adam called out.

“Yeah.”

Adam waved a flashlight around. “Is that...why is Frank still here? I thought you got rid of that joker.”

Frank took a step forward, but Sarah jerked his arm. “Listen, buddy, we don’t have time for any nonsense. Capiisce?”

“But *he* started it,” he whined, pointing at Adam.

“What are you, like five?” She then shot a glance at Adam. “Look, just don’t

start your crap, okay? I didn't invite him, but he's here, and we don't have time for any drama."

"Fine," Adam said.

"Where're the others?" she asked between breaths.

"Rob, Beth, and the camera dude, uh, Steven, are around here somewhere," Adam said glancing around.

Just then, a figure burst through the towering ferns. "I'm so glad you're here! Oh, man, you should've seen it," Beth shouted. "I swear I almost pissed my pants."

"No way! You *saw* it? With your own eyes?" Sarah met her gaze, gasping for air, her mind unable to comprehend just yet. "Where?"

"Over there!" Beth pointed behind her. "It took off to the north, and we chased it into the cave."

A cold shudder ran down Sarah's spine as she realized someone had actually *seen* the object of her obsession. *We're so close! We can't afford any mistakes now.* "This is Sarah calling all members." She cleared her throat before she continued into her radio, her voice gaining urgency with every word. "Be on alert. We've got a visual on something huge walking around. We believe the creature is hiding in Sabrino Cave. Keep your eyes and ears open, people. Proceed with extreme caution."

"What's your position?" a voice crackled back.

"I'm a half-mile north of base camp, on my way to Sabrino Cave now. All teams report to Sabrino immediately." She tapped Adam's arm. "Let's go." Sarah jumped over the logs, ferns, and rocks scattered along the forest floor, her heartbeat thudding in her ears. Just ahead, she squinted at a large black mass of rock; the cave entrance came into view. Sarah stopped and peered into the dark hole. She pinched her nose shut, trying to prevent the pungent smell from penetrating her nostrils. "Pee-yew! I think somebody forgot to take out the garbage...like all week."

"I saw this thing on the FLIR," Beth said. "It's at least eight feet tall. Man, it's huge! I wonder if it's still in the cave."

"Well, let's track it!" Sarah ordered, inching closer to the jagged opening.

"Or we can just follow the stench," Beth said. "I say we get out our tranquilizer guns, just in case it charges us."

Sarah nodded. "Good thinking." She glanced at her cameraman, Steven, the bright camera light blinding her eyes in the blackness. "Are you getting this? Everything?"

"Yeah, man, but do you think cornering Crypto Guy is such a great idea?"

Sarah shoved her goggles to the top of her head. Glancing around, she took a few steps forward. "Look, you were hired to film this. If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen, and we'll find someone who can. Who knows when we'll ever get another chance to be this close again? Surely you want to be part of this."

"Yeah, sorry," Steven uttered.

Sarah turned to Adam. "Now, did we get those shrieking calls on audio?"

"Sure did," Adam said.

"Good."

Frank shook her shoulder. "Are you crazy? Messing around with the local wildlife is beyond dangerous. I'm sure it's just a bear or a big cat or—"

She brushed his hand off. "Look, Frank, you've done nothing but shoot down all my research on television, in your newspaper and magazine articles, and in your new book. If you're so sure this is fake, some kind of staged crap, or that it's just some nature show, why don't you go in and see for yourself?"

Frank took a step back. "All you've got here is a trapped wild animal. Sure, I was hoping to get my shirt ripped off when I came looking for you, but not by a bear."

Sarah ignored him and grabbed a tuft of coarse, dark hair from the cavern entrance. She squinted to get a good look at it in the darkness. "This isn't from a bear, and whatever it is, I'm going to capture the thing on film. Adam, please bag this."

"You got it, boss."

Sarah opened up the lens on her camera and adjusted the settings. "People, we're about to solve one of the biggest unsolved mysteries of the twenty-first century."

Beth kneeled, her eyes wide. "Look, Sarah. We got prints."

Large humanoid footprints were clear in the mud, and the sight of them sent a shiver down Sarah's spine. It wasn't human, ape, gorilla or chimpanzee unless they came in XXL. "Get measurements of these. Steven, swing that camera over here and get them on film."

Beth stretched out a tape measure next to one of the fresh tracks indented in the mud.

"Some tracks in the mud? C'mon, Sarah. You know as well as I do that this doesn't mean anything," Frank muttered.

Sarah shook her head. "Anyone here wear a Size 20 shoe?" The footprints appeared to be roughly nineteen inches long and eight inches wide with a long stride and five discernible toes. *Who'd go running around barefoot in ice-cold mud?* "No one step on these prints. They're the evidence we need. I'll cast them in a minute." She focused and snapped her camera. "Frank, myths don't leave tracks," she spat at him. "Wish me luck, people," she said, turning her gaze toward the cave entrance. "I'm going in."

"You're really gonna risk your life just to prove me wrong?" Frank asked.

"Well, skeptics do tend to piss me off," Sarah said. "For all these years, you've claimed my work is worthless, and that there's nothing scientific about what we're doing out here. You said that science needed to validate the existence of Bigfoot with a live or dead specimen. You said I'd need bones, teeth, or blood. But really, this has nothing to do with you. I am willing to risk my life to prove me right, and this is the perfect opportunity to get all the proof I need. I'm not waiting another second."

Frank laughed. "Do you really think tomorrow's headlines are gonna read, 'I Just Found Bigfoot'? No way! If anything, the papers are gonna say, 'Bigfoot

Researchers Torn to Shreds by Bear’.”

She shrugged. “Well, you can think whatever you want, but at this point, I’ll take whatever fate throws at me. I have to see for myself, one way or the other.”

“All fate’s going to deliver is a million stitches and a trip to the emergency room,” Frank said. “These things don’t exist. I’ve told you that how many times?”

“I don’t care what you told me. Those tracks are real, that fur is real, and that’s solid enough evidence for me to take a closer look.”

Frank cleared his throat. “Evidence? Sure. Everything but the creature itself.”

“Well, Mr. Skeptic, then go in there and prove me wrong.”

He took off his hat and ran a hand through his unruly hair. “If I do this and I’m right, you owe me dinner—even if I’m in a full-body cast when that grizzly in there mauls me half to death.”

“Dinner? Sure. So man up.” She whipped out her tranquilizer gun and handed it to him.

He smiled, pointed the weapon with both hands, and walked through the entrance.

Sarah followed, her smile vanishing. A scream pierced the air, and it took her only a moment to realize it was her own.

Chapter 2

Sarah scrambled to her feet, staring straight ahead. Harsh and unexpected light blared through the cavern entrance, forcing her to instinctively cover her eyes. Squinting, she raced outside and looked up: no stars, no moon, no darkness. Instead, the sun shone brightly through the trees, saturating the green leaves with its golden glow. The last time she’d checked, it had been midnight. All she could assume was that she’d hit her head in the fall and passed out for a good eight hours. *Why hasn’t my team come to help me?* She couldn’t help but wonder. *Sure, they’d leave Frank to his own fate, but surely they’d come looking for me.* “What the heck is going on? Where is everybody?” she asked aloud to no one in particular.

Groaning, Frank approached and rubbed his head. “What happened? Did I black out or something?”

Sarah hesitated for a moment, unsure. “I think we both did. It looks like morning.” She nervously fingered the black strap from her hanging 35mm Nikon. Reaching into her pocket, she let out a sigh of relief; the FLIR hadn’t fallen out in whatever skirmish had happened in the dark.

“Are you okay, babe?” He put a hand on her shoulder. “You hurt?”

She swatted his hand away. “Don’t call me ‘babe’! I could use some Motrin, but I needed that the second you showed up. You look like crap, by the way.”

“Thanks for the concern, but I’m fine. I just can’t figure out how we got here and managed to miss a few hours. How’s it daylight already?”

“I have absolutely no idea.”

His eyes darted about nervously. “Well, in any case, let’s get the heck out of

here.”

“Yeah, okay. Let me see if I can get a hold of my team first.” She grabbed her radio from her belt and talked into the mouthpiece. “Sarah to base camp.”

The device crackled, but then...nothing.

Sarah shot Frank an inquiring look, then took a deep breath. She spoke louder this time into the mouthpiece, “This is Sarah. If anybody’s around, please respond.”

More static was her only reply.

“Maybe they’re out of range,” Frank speculated.

Letting out a sigh, she attached the radio to her belt. “Probably. Let’s start heading back, and my team better have one heck of an excuse for deserting us like that.”

Frank started walking, crunching dry leaves under his feet. “I’m sure they do. How about some bacon and eggs? My treat.” He smiled over his shoulder.

“Today is your lucky day, mister, ‘cause I’m ready to eat a dozen eggs and an entire pig.” She cocked an eyebrow. “Where’s the closest diner?”

“Hmm. Not sure, but it’s probably a three-hour walk back to our cars. We better make that lunch.”

Startled, Sarah jumped as a shrill cry echoed nearby.

“Tell me that was some kind of bird.” Frank’s gaze settled on her, his eyes wide.

“I could, but I’d be lying. No bird I’ve ever met has made that kind of sound.” She laughed at his expression. “Come on. Please tell me your backyard’s not the only square of nature you’ve ever visited besides this one, city boy.”

Frank opened his mouth to reply when a growl cut through the silence. “You sure that’s not a bird? Some kind of eagle or vulture or something?”

She shook her head as a shiver ran down her spine. “When’s the last time you heard a bird howl like that?” The cry sounded like the Bigfoot calls she’d captured on audio six months earlier. She could have kept quiet about that so as not to worry her ill-equipped Tarzan companion, but she knew there’d be no fun in that. “Nothing like seeing your research up close and personal. On the bright side, it’ll be worth watching you crap your pants.”

A twig snapped in the trees, and Frank instinctively reached for her hand like a lost little boy wanting his mother. “We need to find cover. A bear stalking us isn’t good.”

She scanned the trees and vegetation as she whispered, “How many times do I have to tell you it’s not a freaking bear, Frank?”

“How can you know that?” He shook his head. “Never mind. Let’s just get outta here.”

“No.” She planted her feet into the ground, just in case he decided to drag her away. “You can go wherever you want, but I’m staying right here. I’m not out here for some nature hike. I want proof, and I’m going to get it.”

He glared at her. “Can’t you forget about your research for one minute? I’d prefer to live.”

No way, she thought. I’ve waited years for this moment, this one confrontation,

this proof that I'm not crazy. If only my team was here to back me up, but I need to do this with or without them—for me. "I have to see this for myself."

A dark, hairy outline rustled in the tall bushes.

Chills rushed over Sarah. "Whoa! That thing is less than 200 feet away. You still have the tranquilizer gun?"

Frank pulled it from the back of his hip and cocked it. "Yep, right here, but if we get arrested by Ranger Smith for giving Yogi a death sentence, don't be surprised when I say I told you so."

"I'm not gonna *kill* anything. Maybe you should Google 'tranquilizer' sometime, Mr. Investigator."

Suddenly, an ape-like creature emerged from the foliage. It stood eight feet tall and was covered from head to toe with long brown hair, matted in places. Its powerful build, broad shoulders, and thick chest cast a shadow on the grass, making Sarah shudder. For years, she'd studied the elusive monster, and finally, she was getting her first real encounter since that fateful day when she'd lost her sister.

"No! It just...it can't be," Frank whispered. "No way! Should I admit myself into the psyche ward now or later?"

"It exists! I knew it all along," she said. "One picture, that's all I need." With shaking hands, she brought the camera into focus.

The creature simply stared at her.

She zoomed in on its face, still wondering if her eyes were playing tricks on her. It looked like an ape with a flat, wide nose, deep-set green eyes, and a full set of lips. The lips and chin protruded into somewhat of a snout, but nothing like a bear. She snapped the photo, knowing the proof on that film would change the way the world looked at Bigfoot—and at her. *I'll never be a laughingstock again.* Zooming out, she took another photo.

"You got your picture. Now let's go!"

"Frank! Calm down. Don't make any sudden movements, or it might—" Sarah tried to warn, but the creature had already become uneasy.

Taking slow, measured steps, the primate moved in their direction.

"Crap!" Frank aimed the tranquilizer gun and fired, striking his target.

The creature jumped back and let out a long, pained howl, then lurched forward.

Sarah gasped as Frank tugged her hand. "Move it!"

Without waiting for him, she sprinted, her heart thumping like a jackhammer. *If Frank knows what's best for him, he'll freaking follow me.* As they darted between trees and splashed through a tiny stream, the air behind them filled with blood-chilling howls. She glanced over her shoulder and screamed when she realized they were being pursued by not one beast, but multiple hairy figures gathering in the distance, darting behind them.

Suddenly, Sarah's hiking boot caught on a fallen log, and she tripped and fell with a solid thud on the forest floor. Crawling through the ferns, she peeked out. She didn't see Frank anywhere. "Frank! Frank?" she whispered. "Where are you?"

She yanked off her camera and threw it next to her, then lay flat on the ground as the howls grew closer. Loud neighs and the sound of hooves echoed in the air, growing louder by the second. She took a deep breath and peeked through the ferns.

The ground thundered as scores of men on horses galloped toward her. *Whew, rescue!* Wherever they'd gotten the horses from, she only hoped they were fast enough to rescue Frank, outrun those things, and get her the heck out of the Bigfoot-infested forest. The curious, scientific part of her yearned to stay there and discover more, but without the assistance and backup of her team, she knew it just wasn't safe. *We'll just regroup and come back tomorrow*, she reasoned. *Besides, I've already got two good shots of a Sasquatch. There's no way Frank can debunk this one, especially since he's an eyewitness himself. Where the heck is he anyway?*

"Princess, I command you to come out," a man's voice said in a most demanding and condescending tone. Not only was he dressed strangely, but he had the pronunciation skills of a bad B movie actor trying to act in a Broadway play.

Princess? A nickname of some sort? They must have me mistaken for somebody else.

"We know you're here. We heard you scream," called out the same man. "I'm not going to hurt you. I am here to save your life. There were six of them closing in on you. If you don't cooperate with us and we leave, you're as good as dead, and I guarantee you'll never find your way out of these dreaded woods on your own."

Right, she thought. *I found my way in here, and I can find my way out. Do they take me for some kind of idiot?* Still, she knew hiking back to her vehicle by herself, unarmed, might not be so smart with those huge creatures running around. She raised her head a notch and noticed a pair of dirty black leather boots with very unfashionable black bottoms; no member of her team would be caught dead in such an atrocious ensemble. The man, whoever he was, stood less than twenty feet away. She needed to call for help immediately. Something might've happened to Frank, and she thought maybe the poorly dressed cavalry could help her.

"Those beasts will tear you limb from limb the second we depart," continued the man. "You know how territorial the Guardians are, and you know they have the power to destroy our kind. One bite from those ferocious teeth, and that will be it for you." He paused and then continued. "It was quite the shock to see your brother alive and breathing. Your family did a fantastic job of staging his death. If you want me to keep his secret, then it's best you come out now. We both know what will happen to him if I were to speak the truth."

What was he talking about? Sarah rose from her hiding place and gazed up at the man on the dressed horse. His appearance was odd, nothing like any park ranger she'd ever seen. From his royal-blue tunic top, to the emblem of a crowned lion in the center, to his chainmail sleeves, he looked as if he'd been zapped right out of medieval Europe, or maybe that she'd accidentally stepped

through some magical wardrobe. *Black satin knickers with boots up to his knees?* she wondered. *This guy is in need of some serious fashion intervention.* She scanned the rest of the group, and it came to her attention that they actually did look like knights in shining armor. For a moment, she wondered if she'd ventured onto a film set, albeit a poorly funded film, considering the D-list acting and the awful costuming. *Maybe there's some kind of Renaissance Fair nearby.*

"You must come with us, Princess," the man said. "There is no escape!"

No escape? She decided it might be a safer option to sneak back into the vegetation instead of running off with the crazy eighteenth-century cast party. Just as she was considering it, a twig snapped under her feet. The horse neighed, and the man jerked his head in Sarah's direction. *Crap! There goes that plan.*

She met his gaze and realized he had the bluest eyes and whitest smile she'd ever seen. His black hair was wavy and long, but it was worn in a masculine style. In spite of his ridiculous clothing, she'd be happy to be rescued by him anytime. *Hmm. I wonder what he's doing after work.*

"That's it, Princess. So glad you've decided to come out of hiding, as it's nice to officially meet you. Now where's your brother?" he demanded.

Princess? Brother? The handsome man had it wrong. "You must be mistaking me for somebody else. I don't have a brother. Listen, I don't know what that script of yours says, but we have to call 911! I lost my friend. We were being chased by these hairy creatures, and we somehow got separated."

"Who do you think scared them off, Your Highness?" a knight with long red hair asked.

Your Highness? Would it kill one of them to slip out of character for a second and tell me what the heck's really going on? "So you saw them?"

"Of course."

Witnesses galore! The press is gonna have a field day with this. Nobody is ever gonna call me an idiot again, she thought. *Especially Frank. Speaking of him...* "Later, I'm going to have to get a statement from every one of you, but in the meantime, could you please make that phone call? Really, this is serious. Get rescue out here right now! My friend could be hurt."

"Flushing you out was easier than I expected," the leader said.

"Well, you woulda been hiding, too, if those things were after you. Long story short, I was hunting...er, uh, not real hunting like shooting a buck or anything. I'm a researcher for The Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization, the BFRO. Ever heard of us?" she asked, feeling like a fool for mentioning it to the gorgeous guy in front of her. She was rather sure there was no hope of getting his phone number, if there ever was in the first place, because guys usually ran the other direction when they heard what she did for a living.

A knight looked at the leader, cocking his brow. "Victor, we need to make haste. She must consult with the healer."

Yep, that's it. Either I'm nuts or they are. Victor, huh? Hmm. In Latin, that means "conqueror". Sexy. "Listen, I don't need a doctor—just a little help finding my friend."

Victor swung lithely from his horse onto the ground.

She gasped at his towering height and muscular build. *Talk about tall, dark, and handsome! Who'd of thought I'd meet this medieval hottie in the middle of some forest on a Bigfoot hunt?* She scanned the stranger and then the horsemen standing behind him. "Any of you got a cell?"

They mumbled amongst themselves, shaking their heads.

Their character acting was beginning to get on her nerves. "Fine, but can one of you give me a ride back to my Jeep? I can call for help there. I think we're parked about six miles north, near the main road."

"A cell? A Jeep? What are these strange things she speaks of?" a confused knight asked. "She is delusional, milord. She must be taken to the healer for her head wounds."

"Delusional or bewitched," said a knight with a white mustache and matching white hair tied into a ponytail.

"Yes! She is spewing out these lies to mislead us!" called out another.

"Lies? I'm not lying," Sarah said. "I know it's a long way back to my vehicle and a big favor to ask, but we'll get there in no time on one of your horses. Look, I'll even pay you to make up for your time off the set, but if you're not going to help me, then please at least get your men to start searching the area. We can cover more ground if we split up into groups and look for Frank. You three can go over that way, and I will go with Victor here to—"

A dangerous glint flickered in Victor's eyes. "How dare you command us, princess or not?"

She hesitated, taken aback by his rudeness. He looked like Prince Charming, but he sounded more like that caveman from those old dinosaur movies. "Listen, mister. I love movies and all, and if you save me some tickets, I'll be sure to come watch this little performance of yours." She tipped her hat. "I promise I'll even wear something nicer for your big opening weekend and all, but right now, we need to get moving. A man's life is at stake."

"Bark out another order like that, miss, and you'll feel the sting of a whip on your back," Victor said.

Sarah cringed. *Testy, ain't he? Pssh! Forget the phone number and the show then, buddy. How about some anger management classes? Or...* A new thought popped in her head, and she glanced around. "A-ha! I got it! I know what you're up to. Where's the hidden cameras? You almost had me fooled. Frank's in on this little *Candid Camera* act, isn't he? Ooh, I'm gonna kill him. Where have you got him stashed away?"

"You should've thought twice before you stepped onto enemy territory," he said.

"You're good," Sarah said, pointing at him. "Stepping on enemy territory is a nice touch. Did your producers put you up to this?"

Victor's face hardened into grim lines. "You're now a prisoner of war, Princess Gloria."

She stared at his stern face and stiffened. "Look...this medieval game you're playing is kind of cool and all. Love the costumes and the attitude, but I really need a phone. If you're not playing some kind of joke, then this really is an

emergency.”

Victor’s menacing gaze ran over her inch by inch. Stepping closer, he traced a finger down the side of her cheek.

She shoved him back. “Don’t you touch me!”

“How dare you?” he roared. “Are you not aware of who I am?”

Of course she had no idea, nor did she really care. “No. Who *are* you?” The situation was getting out of control. The hot guy was clearly a nutcase, and she’d come to realize that Ashton Kutcher wasn’t going to be jumping out of the bushes anytime soon, announcing that she’d been punk’d by Frank. It was time to run and let them get back to their jousting, or whatever it was they did to earn their pay from the Renaissance Fair payroll office. Especially when she saw one of the knights scanning her up and down, lingering a little too long on the skin exposed where the two upper buttons had been ripped from her shirt by a rather intrusive thorny vine. *Why the heck did I let Frank have our only weapon?* She scolded herself. *What if these medieval jerks decide to take advantage of me out here?* The thought alone sent shivers through her body. *If I scream out here, who’ll even hear me?* She was suddenly sickeningly reminded of every horror film she’d ever seen where stupid teenage girls wandered off alone in the wilderness, and she was none too happy to be that stupid girl. As the knights fanned out and surrounded her, her heart raced.

“Stubborn woman! You know who I am,” Victor said. “Your brother might’ve gotten away, but I’m afraid you are in our possession, whether you like it or not. It is my duty to make you pay for warning Charles and his knights about my trap.”

Mistaken identity was putting it lightly. “I don’t even have a brother,” Sarah said, “and I’m no rat.”

“More lies!” he hissed, his blue eyes blazing. “Did you really think I would fail to find you just because they dressed you up like a man in clothes that blend with the trees? Foolish, foolish girl.”

She huffed. In her line of work, she’d been called plenty of names, but she’d never been mistaken for a male. “A man? Why, because I’m wearing camouflage pants? I’m hunting a creature, not going to the opera. What’d you expect, some strapless mini-dress and stilettos?”

“Milord, with all due respect, the disguise is a rather ingenious idea, perhaps one we should replicate in the future,” the blond guy behind the knight said. “Had the princess not surrendered, we would not have seen her.”

“Surrender? Listen, you’re making a big mistake.” She suddenly remembered she’d left her pepper spray behind, and she regretted that. “I’m not a princess. I don’t know what freaky game you’re playing, but my friend’s going to call the police. And trust me when I say he has lots of connections with the FBI. They’ll be swarming the place any minute!”

Victor smiled. “Is that what you call your knights? I’m afraid we dispatched this FBI hours ago, Highness. That was how we knew they abandoned you somewhere in this forest.” He knocked the fedora off her head and hastily jerked her bunned hair to a disheveled mess. Tousles of long brown hair tumbled down

the middle of her back.

“I told you not to touch me!” she yelled, drawing her hand up to slap him.

He caught her wrist. “Do not ever threaten to attack me, Princess, and you must cease with giving orders to those who have you in custody.” A fiery blue flame burned behind his eyes.

Loosening his grip, she yanked her hand away. She realized that smacking him wasn't going to help her one tiny bit; all things considered, running sounded like a much better option. She glanced around for the best escape route, but it was no use, for she was completely surrounded. Her mind raced, terrified to think about what they might try to do to her.

Victor tugged at her holster and pulled out her radio to examine it. “What kind of magic device is this?”

“Idiot,” Sarah whispered under her breath, rolling her eyes. “It's a radio. I know it's not the newest Sony type, all slick and thin and whatnot, but give me a break. Pretending you don't know what it is, is just...lame.”

Victor raised an eyebrow. “A radio, you say? Is that a weapon of some sort?”

“No. It’s for communication.” Boy, was she getting tired of this role-playing. “You know, you talk into it, and someone else’s voice comes out.”

“Witchery,” mumbled one of the knights.

Victor held up his hand to hush the murmurs of his men and then gestured for one of his men to take it. “Take this back with us.”

A tall, muscular knight walked over to her, dangling her 35mm camera. “And what is this?” He snapped the button, and a flash of light made the knights erupt in a choir of gasps and shocked whispers.

“A weapon to blind her opponent!” one knight asked, blinking as if hundreds of white spots filled his vision, like something he’d never experienced before. “Tis surely evil magic, sir!”

Sarah sighed and pointed to the digital view screen. “Magic? Seriously? Look. There are your fine knights in all their glory. I think I’ll call this shot, *Deer in the Headlights*.”

The man gasped. “She paints a picture of us in the blink of an eye, yet she has no paint or brushes! Surely she is of an evil ilk, milord!”

“Oh please. Give me back my camera,” Sarah hissed.

Victor’s gaze narrowed. “You are brave, captured yet still forcing demands upon those who would have you in chains.”

“Fine. You can have the dang thing. But that film belongs to me!” After all she’d been through, there was no way she was going to let her evidence go, medieval army or not.

“Film? What is this you speak of?” a knight asked. He looked at Victor, who only shook his head and shrugged.

Victor ran his hands down her pant leg; she bit her lip to keep herself from kicking him hard, knowing any kind of physical assault would only make things worse. It was one girl against a platoon of nuts, and the odds didn’t look good. She was just glad he hadn’t held a knife or a sword to her throat...yet.

“What other weapons are you hiding in your man-clothes?” Searching her pocket, the man pulled out the thermal camera and dangled it. “Your knights left you with weapons we’ve never seen. Too bad you didn’t put them to good use, Princess Gloria.”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t believe how dangerous a radio and a thermal camera are. And stop calling me ‘Princess Gloria’! My name’s Sarah.” She shook her head and raised her hands in mock defense. “Tell you what. Just keep them both. I’ve no idea what game you’re playing, and I really don’t care either. All I want is to go home—with my film.” Her heart pounded, and her palms dampened. She took a few long steps backward. “But if you won’t give me the film, I still want to get out of here. So, I wish you gentlemen all the best, and I’ll just be on my merry way now, if you don’t mind.”

“I would advise you to halt,” a knight said behind her.

Crap. Her breath caught in her throat, and the same thought played in her mind. *What are these guys planning to do with me—or to me?*

Victor turned to his knights. “You captured her this morning, here, in the Forest of the Guardians. Is this the same woman who escaped from you?”

“Yes, milord,” a knight said, looking slightly embarrassed. “Without a doubt, this is the same one who escaped us.”

The others nodded in agreement, some looking at the ground in shame.

A case of mistaken identity was the last thing she needed. “They’re wrong! I can assure you they’ve never seen me before.” She laughed. “How could they? I wasn’t even here.”

Victor scoffed. “Are you suggesting that my knights are liars, Princess?”

“No, but maybe this healer of yours should get them all some bifocals. I’m a researcher leading a major expedition. I study these creatures, uh, these Guardians, as you call them, that are running around this forest. I have been trying to prove their existence for a long time, and—”

“Prove their existence? You know full well they exist! That is exactly why you entered this forbidden place. You thought we wouldn’t follow you in, but I’d risk my life to get my hands on you. After all, you are all the leverage we need to make your stubborn father see the light.” Victor climbed up on his horse and stared down at her, casting periwinkle daggers through her. “Would you like to ride with me or one of them?” He pointed to his men. “I must warn you that my men are not as capable of keeping their hands to themselves. Has been many weeks since they have seen someone the likes of you, and men can get very lonely.”

The men exchanged glances and guffawed.

Sarah glared at them, wanting to be sick. “Well, it’s a good thing I’m wearing a chastity belt. Never leave home without it,” she said.

“I’m not here to defile you.”

She hoped he wasn’t messing with her. “That’s great to hear.”

“You shall come with me. I give you my word that your virginity, your chastity, will remain intact, milady. I cannot make the same guarantee for your life, however, for that shall depend on your father’s cooperation.”

Sarah’s heart quivered, and goose-bumps traveled to the surface of her skin. “I’m not going anywhere with any of you. You’ll have to kill me first.” She swallowed hard, wondering if she’d made a mistake of offering him that option right then and there. It might not have been her brightest idea. Shifting her legs to ease the stiffness only set off her internal alarms, and with some burst of ridiculously unfounded courage, she lurched toward the forest.

A knight locked his arms around her waist and left her feet kicking above the ground. “I believe we have a wild one here, milord,” he mumbled as he handed her up to her captor.

“I heard she was quite the feisty one,” Victor said.

“Let me go!” Sarah said.

“Listen. If you cooperate, I will keep your secret.”

“What secret?”

“That your brother is alive and well. I know you’ve never met me before, but I used to know your mother. And because of that, I will keep your secret.”

Sarah flailed, trying to escape, but Victor pulled her into his strong embrace and wrapped one arm around her waist as he turned his horse. He hauled her off

as if she was merely a possession, some spoil of war, in spite of her futile attempts to squirm out of his embrace. "Calm down, Princess," he said. "You will come with me now, and if your father values your life as a father should, he shall graciously withdraw his forces from the Tastian border. If he does not, he is a fool and will be a father no longer."

"Frank!" Sarah yelled. "Frank, if you can hear me, call the police! I'm being kidnapped by a bunch of lunatics. I know that's what you think I am, but I've found somebody even crazier than me."

"Nobody's going to save you now." His long dark hair tickled her cheek as he bent to whisper in her ear. "If you know what's good for you, you will listen and obey. This is not a game, Princess. Do you understand?"

"Milord, we must be going," said a man with a black beard. "It is not safe out here among the Guardians."

She nodded. "It's not a game for you either. First-degree kidnapping is a Class A-1 felony. You'll be thrown in a hole for twenty years, and I'm sure Bubba will love this little costume of yours!" she shouted. "You let me go right now, or you'll be the one somebody calls 'Princess'!"

"Enough of this nonsense." Victor's voice turned sharp.

Nonsense? You got that right, buddy. She wondered at what point she'd fallen head-first into the Twilight Zone. "Who *are* you anyway?"

"Don't play the fool. You know exactly who I am."

"Well, I'm afraid my memory's a little fuzzy on that." She scratched her temple. "I think I hit my head and blacked out." It wasn't a lie, and she wondered for a minute if she was dreaming up the whole thing. She could think of nothing better than waking up in her bed to the aroma of a piping hot cup of coffee—or those bacon and eggs Frank had promised before he took off to God-knew-where.

"Perhaps that explains all the strange babbling," Victor said, pulling on the reins. "But no matter. We shall take you to the healer for a look. Now, tell me, is '911' some secret code, a way to beckon your armies against us?"

"Something like that," she said, sighing again. "Anyway, please refresh my memory. Who are you?"

Victor straightened in his saddle and raised his chin a notch, the slightest glint of a smile playing in his blue eyes. "I'm King Victor Fesque II. Your father, King William Jarod, is currently my chief adversary. And now, thanks to you, I have all the leverage I need."

Sarah was sure no one was going to believe any of it. She already got enough guff for chasing eight-foot humanoids around the woods. There was no way anyone was going to find out about this little fairytale, or she'd be labeled a crackpot for life. "Please, I'm begging you to trust me. If you let me go now, I won't say a word to anyone—not even a peep. My reputation is at stake, and that means a lot to me as a scientist."

"Scientist?"

"Listen, uh, Your Highness, you're making a huge mistake. You have absolutely no leverage with me, because I'm not this person you think I am! My name's Sarah Larker. This King Gerald or whoever you're talking about won't even know

me.”

“In spite of your lies and your demands, Highness, it is a pleasure to finally meet you in person, Princess Gloria Jarod.”

Chapter 3

Sarah jumped when something resembling a cockroach—only much bigger and grosser—scurried over her foot. Water dripped onto the dirt floor from the craggy ceiling in an annoying and never-ending rhythm. Dark, rusty, ominous chains hung from the wall; she was glad the knights had spared her from being bound by them. A pile of bloodied, filthy rags were clumped together in the corner. She cringed, wondering if they used to be someone’s clothes. A putrid stench hung thickly in the air, but even that paled in comparison to the layers of muck covering the walls. In the opposite corner, were piles of excrement. She had to get out of this place, preferably before her next trip to the bathroom.

A breeze whipped around her shoulders. As she shivered, her skin rippled into another fit of goose-bumps. Sarah would have killed for her leather coat, but it was locked in the trunk of her Jeep, along with all the other stuff that would have been useful, like her Swiss army knife and jack. She sighed and rubbed her arms with her palms, hoping the friction would infuse some warmth into her flesh. In the dim light, a giant cobweb dangled in one corner. *Haven’t these people ever heard of dusting, deodorizer, or bug spray? Who in the world uses a dungeon anymore?* She’d never even had a traffic ticket before, but now she was thrown into some ancient hell hole. She leaned against the stone wall and jumped when the cool, wet slime soaked through her shirt. An escape wouldn’t be happening anytime soon. Wherever she was, she doubted even Google Maps could find her. She wiped her hands across her pants and shouted, “Listen, you medieval nutcases, you’re all going to fry in the electric chair. I’ll personally invent the thing myself. The least you could do is to leave me a can of Raid.”

The pocked steel of the bars chilled her already cold hands as she wrapped her grimy fingers around the bars. *How did a Bigfoot expedition with thirty researchers turn into a kidnapping? I’ve been thrown down here by some kind of King Arthur wannabe! It’s not possible...is it?* She had no idea, but she was sure it all had something to do with Sabrina Cave, the same place her older sister had disappeared from ten years earlier while on a camping trip.

Sarah and her sister had decided to go on a hike that morning. Liz had entered the cave first. Since she was a whole year older, she thought she’d take responsibility if things went wrong. As Sarah began to follow, a towering, fur-covered figure jumped out and grabbed for her.

Sarah shook her head, sucking in a deep breath as the scene played out, those yellow eyes seared forever in her mind. She couldn’t help but wrinkle her nose at

the memory of the skunk-like stench emanating from its matted brown fur. The thing chased her into the woods, but she somehow made it back to her parents. Her sister was not so lucky and had not been seen since. Nobody believed Sarah's story, but since that fateful day on, Sarah had made it her mission to find her sister and prove to the world that what she saw that day was real.

She rubbed her temples. *Is that cave some kind of mysterious portal?* Her heart raced, and she couldn't stop the flood of hope that ran through her veins, even though the whole thing sounded absurd. The thought that her sister might still be alive spurred her on, and she wished she could find a few sticks of dynamite to bust herself out of that joint.

Suddenly, a door squeaked far off to the left, followed by the sound of footsteps echoing through the corridor.

Craning her neck to catch a glimpse, she squinted through the shadows flickering from the torches hanging on the wall. A figure approached, its face obscured by the partial darkness. *A guard? No...something more sinister. My captor.* King Victor's blue eyes met hers, and her breath caught in her throat. He wore the same Knights of the Round Table garb as before, with two differences: a red velvet cape trimmed with black and white fur hung close to the ground, and he topped off the ensemble with a gold crown adorned with jewels. The facets of the gems reflected the light of the torches. *Showing off, is he?* Sarah could have sworn he'd been out costume shopping on eBay.

"Where the heck are we?" she hissed, glaring at him.

He flashed her a charming smile. "Still playing the fool, Highness? We're in Tastia, as I am sure you already know."

"Tastia? What map would I find that on?" She snorted as she squeezed her fingers around the rusted bars.

He picked at his perfectly manicured nails. "Acting stupid is not becoming, milady."

"Stupid? I'm not the one walking around in that ridiculous Halloween costume at this time of the year," she seethed. Finally, she managed a calming breath, "I'm not in California anymore, am I?"

"California? I know not of such a place, and your stories will get you nowhere, Princess Gloria. No one has ever heard of this place you speak of."

Sarah was suddenly painfully aware of how real her situation was. There was no way even dedicated actors would risk kidnapping charges to stay in character. By the look on the king's face earlier, he really didn't know what a radio or image thermal camera was. It was no wonder he thought she was crazy when she'd mentioned a cell phone and 911. Everything was adding up, and she didn't like what it was adding up to. She took a step back, clutching her chest as the realization hit: *Yeah, we definitely had to have entered through some portal, probably in that stupid cave! The same one the Bigfoot creatures—the Guardians—use to come through into our world, our time!* It was a small wonder to her that no shred of evidence had ever been found. As she realized what was happening, she thought she might barf on the king's fancy leather boots.

"Why is your brother alive? We thought he died years ago." When Sarah didn't

answer, he let out a long sigh. "I will keep your secret...for now."

"I have no clue what you're talking about."

"Your family staged his death. I'm wondering why."

"I don't know. This is something you should ask the real princess."

King Victor cocked his head. "Surely you thought twice before crossing the Tastian border."

She glared at him, saying nothing.

He continued, "We've been at war for ages, Highness. Why would you risk your life to come here?"

"I followed Bigfoot...er, one of the Guardians into the cave. How could I've known it'd take me here?" She jumped at the sound of squeaking as two humongous rats fought over a crust of moldy bread.

King Victor shook his head as though he didn't have a clue what she meant. "Just admit the truth. You came to warn your brother about the trap I set. Was it worth it? Charles is back home in the comfort of his warm castle, and here you are in a cold, musty dungeon facing a rather questionable fate." He stepped back and extended his hands in an all-encompassing gesture. "I take it everything is up to your standards." He touched her hand that was wrapped around the bar in a death-grip.

"Oh yeah, sure. All the comforts of a five-star hotel." She pulled her hand back as she fought against the instant attraction she felt. He might have been the hottest thing she'd ever lain eyes on, but he was the enemy—and he was a sarcastic jerk too. "You think it's funny to kidnap me and then throw me in a dungeon?"

He curled his lips into a smile. "Why, milady, you should be thanking me. I could've put you in with the general population, but I feared you may not fare so well among those miscreants. The screams are just horrendous."

"Well, in that case, I appreciate the VIP accommodations." She rolled her eyes. "The rats and cockroaches are a nice touch," she seethed. Regardless of what he thought, that stone coffin was not her idea of a comfy stay.

"I've received word from your father." King Victor locked his hands behind his back and rocked back on his heels. He cocked a brow, waiting for her reaction as though that news should mean something to her.

"Really? Well, how is dear old Dad? I'm trying to picture his face in my head. Funny, I can't. Maybe that's because I've never even met the dude!"

"I would think you might be curious to know what he said, as your fate relies on his cooperation."

"Let me think about that. Hmm. Not really." A shiver slid down Sarah's spine. She looked away quickly lest he notice her sudden realization. Whoever this Princess Gloria was, she hoped her father loved her deeply. Sarah's life depended on it.

He turned to the guard who had just approached. "Guard, open this door!"

The guard snapped to attention. "Yes, milord."

"That's not necessary, Vic," Sarah said, taking a few steps back as the metallic clank of the lock echoed. "I can hear through the bars just fine." She blinked,

hoping the message had reached him loud and clear. The truth was, he'd clamped his arm around her waist a little too close for comfort on the ride to that horrible place, and he'd threatened her life more than once.

The heavy door opened, and King Victor reached her in two strides. His gaze connected with hers as his blue eyes narrowed dangerously. "Your father refused to meet my demands. I'm afraid there's only one thing left to do to show him how dire this situation truly is."

Whatever it was, it didn't sound good. Sarah sucked in a quick breath, her heart hammering. *Why didn't I just stay hidden in the trees?* She thought perhaps she could do some fast-talking and flip the coin in her favor. *They always say the truth will set you free*, she reasoned. "Look, like I told you, I'm not Gloria. My name's Sarah." She could tell by the look in his eyes that he didn't believe a single word passing from her lips.

He leaned in closer, his warm breath caressing her cheek as he said, "Princess, I'm sorry, but I'm left with no other choice."

Her heart sank. It wasn't rocket science. He planned on killing her to get revenge on his rival. He'd said so himself. She tried to control the quiver in her voice. "Of course you have other choices. If you're the king, you get to make the rules—or aren't you that powerful?"

"Your father must pay for his sins and transgressions, and he will one way or another—soon and very soon." He stroked a stray hair from her eyes, but she averted her gaze. His hot breath hit her cheek as he continued, "I think I'll extend an invitation to him. There will be some tears shed. That we can count on."

"You're all crazy and in dire need of meds."

King Victor whispered in her ear. "Don't act so sad. You just might enjoy it."

What kind of sick freak is this guy? Enjoy having my head cut off by some guy with a giant hatchet and a black hood? Some king this guy is. The only royal thing about him is that he's a royal pain in the—

"I can't wait to see your father's face." He smirked.

She pushed him back, her stomach fluttering from the thought of her own execution. *Will it be quick or long and painful?* "You're nuts! How can you order the execution of an innocent woman? No wonder this Gloria's father is after you."

"Execution? Princess, I'm not going to kill you."

"Said the spider to the fly."

"Spider? Fly? Pardon me, but I do not understand what insects have to do with any of this." Victor shook his head. "I have much more...pleasurable things planned." He squeezed her tight against him.

Her breath caught in her throat as she realized the meaning of his words. *He couldn't possibly want...* She pushed him hard. "Let me go!"

"Do you know what would make your father's blood boil even more than seeing your pretty little head roll?"

She didn't need to hear the words, as the grin on his face said it all. She squirmed in his grip, struggling to keep her wits and silence the screaming voice in her head. "Haven't the slightest clue."

"Me, his most hated enemy, taking his only daughter as my mate."

Sarah gasped, even though it was exactly what she'd expected. "What?"

"Marriage or execution. Either one will break your father, and I'm leaning toward the former."

"I think you've fallen off your horse and hit your head one time too many. This has to be the worst proposal of all time. But out of curiosity, when's the big day? I need some time to gather up something borrowed and something blue."

"When the sun sets."

"Tonight? What happened to courtship? Chivalry? I don't even know your bad habits, like if you leave the toilet seat up or..." She scanned the room, at a loss for words. "What if you snore like a chainsaw or have some psychological disorder that prevents you from refilling the ice cube tray?"

His eyebrows raised. "Toilet seat? Ice? Forgive me, but I believe you have fallen off your horse. Maybe we should take you to the healer after all."

Throwing my own insults back at me. Wow. How creative. She regarded him intently, but his expression remained confused. "Maybe we should have you evaluated and put on some psych meds."

"I was thinking of discussing wine selections later today." King Victor tucked a piece of stray hair behind her ear again, and it felt just as ridiculous as before. "Or maybe floral arrangements. What do you think, my love?"

"I'm thinking if I ever get my hands on that Gloria chick, she's dead meat."

"Meat? If that is your desire, I shall send my cooks to the fowl cages. Yes! We shall enjoy a feast of roasted quail, turtle dove, partridge, and braised peacock. And, of course, the butcher can supply ample calves' heads and fish if you so wish."

"I'm going to throw up." She swallowed the bile in her throat. "I want no part of your delusional world."

"Surely your knights taught you how to maintain this unpalatable guise," King Victor said. "I'm impressed—I really am—but you'll eventually break. For the time being, enough of these games. Let us address the question that has longed to escape my lips. Will you, Princess Gloria, be my bride?"

She shoved him. "Ain't happening. Back off, man."

He grinned, revealing two strings of white teeth. "I can see you need some time to consider your decision. Perhaps spending a little time down here will make you see things in a different light."

"You're crazy!" she yelled, taking a step back and balling her fists as if she had any chance of fighting him.

In one swift move, he pinned her against the cold concrete wall, her arms outstretched, his hands wrapped tightly around her wrists. "I would advise you to hold your tongue," he hissed in her ear. "I have put up with more than my fair share from you. Nobody talks to me that way—nobody—and if you cannot control that lashing snake of yours, I shall have it removed."

Her heart pounded hard, and she took a deep breath. "Right back at ya, buddy! Nobody talks to me the way *you* do."

He lowered his head, and his eyes narrowed. "You are disrespectful, obviously the spawn of your father."

She had no idea who he was talking about, but she couldn't resist the jab. "Guess I'm a chip off the old block."

"Maybe this is the reason why he doesn't want you back."

Her temper flared even higher, for he'd hit a soft spot. *How dare he poke around in my business like that?* "My real father would never abandon me, you nutcase."

"You might want to consider being cordial toward me. Do you have any understanding of the power I hold over you?" The dangerous undertone in his voice didn't go unnoticed. "I control whether you'll get one ounce of food or a drop of water, whether you'll see the light of day or if you'll live to see tomorrow."

No man, royalty or not, had ever treated Sarah in such a way. She clenched her hands into fists, yet again, and pressed her back against the wall to put another inch of space between her and King Victor. "Yeah, I got it. Life and death rest in your hands." Her gaze wandered to the open cell door the same moment when the king loosened his grip. She held her breath, sensing her chance to escape. Without another thought, she spun around and darted for freedom, but before she could take another breath, she felt his stern grip on her upper arm. "Let go of me!" she snarled.

King Victor swung her around to face him.

Her hands balled into fists, and she pounded his chest. "Get your hands off me, you brute!" she yelled, her voice echoing.

"Where do you think you're going? I suggest you save your energy for our wedding night." He pulled her close. "I can see I need to make an appointment with my blacksmith."

Well, well, isn't he funny, remembering my chastity belt comment? The jerk! "In your dreams."

"I know you're looking forward to it, but calm down, Princess. We have our entire lives to spend together."

Sarah struggled in his arms as he chuckled. She could tell he was loving every minute of it. "This Gloria's father wouldn't meet your demands. He doesn't even care if his daughter dies. Therefore, if you kill me, what's it going to prove?"

"You're right. It's best we stick with option one. Your father might not care if you're dead, but he will fume with rage knowing I have fathered his grandchildren, tainting his precious bloodline. Shall we have six, eight, or ten children, Princess? There shall be no revenge better than the pitter-patter of my sons' feet flowing with your father's blood."

"If you use me like that—and remember I'm not who you think I am—your gene pool is going to need a ton of chlorine. I'm not any kind of royalty."

"Chlorine?"

"Never mind." She shook her head. "How many kids did you just say you want? What do I look like, some kind of breeding machine?"

"Let's just hope they don't inherit your smart mouth. I've let it slide until now, but once we have exchanged vows, you shall control your tongue—or I will control it for you."

She cocked an eyebrow. "And what if I don't? What if I say whatever I want,

whether you want to hear it or not?"

"Trust me, you do not want to find out," he said.

She glared at him, throwing daggers with her eyes. "What're you going to do, lock me in a dungeon and throw away the key?"

"Let me know when I can call for the priest," King Victor said. "We will need to inform him whether he will be performing a wedding ceremony or last rites. That, my love, is your choice."

Sarah's head shot back in defiance. "I'll never marry you. It'll never happen—not even if a million stars fell from the sky."

"No?" He ran a finger down her cheekbone.

Her breath caught in her throat as she pushed him away. "No." She put as much conviction into her voice as she could muster, but somehow, it barely made its way out of her throat.

"We'll see about that," King Victor said with a smirk. "Enjoy your stay. If you get too cold, just remember my bed's nice and warm and waiting for you." With one last glance over his shoulder, he slammed the cell door with his boot, trapping her in the confined space.

Chapter 4

Sarah had plenty to think about in the drippy silence. *Will he really kill me if I refuse to go through with the wedding?* She shivered as a cool breeze blew across her face. *How long does that idiot plan to keep me down here anyway?* He'd only left minutes ago, but the distress of being alone with her thoughts crept up on her, putting her in an emotional chokehold. *Where the heck is Frank anyway? I wonder if he made it out safely or if those Sasquatches attacked him.* She hoped that since he had the tranquilizer gun on him, he'd managed to escape. *If not, I'm afraid he's seriously hurt or...* She shook her head, eager to get rid of the images rolling before her eyes. Booted footsteps echoed down the corridor, jolting her back to reality. She held her breath and clenched her hands just in case she got the chance to attack and get the hell out of here.

A knight held up a large ring of metal dungeon keys and unlocked the door. After it creaked open, he took a step inside. Obviously tired of waiting, Mr. Whack Job had sent his messenger boy.

Can't a girl have time to think about spending the rest of her life in some medieval nightmare? What, is Kingy Poo that desperate for an answer? She jumped to her feet and put her hands firmly on her hips. "Tell your idiot King my mind's made up. The answer is a big fat no. I'm not going anywhere with him, now or ever."

The knight's voice came out muffled from behind his visor. "What? I slayed a dragon, swam a moat full of crocodiles, and this is all the thanks I get for coming here to rescue you?"

Sarah clasped a hand over her mouth as a spark of recognition hit her full force.

"Did I mention the getaway vehicle is parked right outside the gate?" The knight held up the tranquilizer gun. "And what kind of knight would I be without this?"

"Frank!" Relief flooded every fiber in her body.

He lifted his visor and smiled. "At your service, madam."

She threw her arms around him, her heart racing. "I never thought I'd be so happy to see you, of all people. How the heck did you get in here?"

"You mean past the big, hairy gorillas out there?" He lifted a brow. "Meh, they were nothin'."

"I'd usually be sick of your cockiness by now, but all things considered, I'm just glad you're here." She smiled as she took a step back, regarding his steel attire.

"Wow," Frank said. "Maybe you should get kidnapped more often. See what happens when you let go of all that anger?"

"That's a combination of gratitude and stress, not forgiveness. Don't go getting excited."

"Ouch." He pretended to grab his heart.

"Anyway, get me out of here." She peered at the open door, her eyes scanning the empty space to the left and right as her brain considered the best possible way out.

"Wait...it's gonna be a minute. I'm with this rebel dude who hates the king. His name is Jules. We have to wait for him to signal that the coast is clear, and then I'll escort you out as a prisoner. Armed knights are swarming the place."

"I thought you took care of them."

Frank shrugged. "I did...sort of."

"Hmm. So what you really mean is that you sneaked in here." Sarah threw her hands in the air. "Well, that's fantastic. Let's sneak back out then. You said the vehicle's parked outside. How's that possible?"

"Well, about that..." Frank laughed. "Technically, it snorts, but at least it doesn't create a smog problem. I'm your knight in shining armor, right? It would only be proper that I ride you off into the sunset on a white steed."

"A knight on a white horse?" *Gosh, could this day get any weirder?*

Frank winced. "Well, technically, the horse isn't white, but you get the idea."

"This isn't some romance novel or fairytale, so can you just drop me off at the nearest bus station?"

"Well, well, aren't you quite the little comedian? Do you know how much work I put into this rescue mission?"

"Yes, Frank, and thank you. How'd you know where I was?" Shaking her head, she waved her hand. "Never mind. This isn't the time. Let's just say I appreciate it." She eyed him up and down, knocking on his decorative etched breastplate. "You look like a walking tank, or maybe some kind of ancient Terminator."

"Careful now. This is just a loaner from a friend I just met."

"And he trusted you? I mean, you did crash my car into a pole a few months ago."

Frank peered out the door. She caught the nervous flick of his tongue as he licked his upper lip. It was a telltale sign, even when he didn't want to show his nerves. "If I remember correctly, you couldn't drive because you were tipsy from too much champagne. You locked lips with me while—"

"No, I don't remember it that way at all," she lied. He'd looked so handsome in that tux that she couldn't help it. "Anyway, you can rehash your misguided fantasies later. For now, what's up with all of this? What the heck happened to us?"

"You tell me, 'cause I never gave up on our whirlwind affair."

She inhaled sharply. "I'm not talking about the relationship we so don't have. I'm talking about this place. What is it? What happened? Where the heck are we?"

"Well, I wasn't given a handbook, but I've been doing a lot of research. Uh, it seems we...uh..."

She smiled, knowing all too well that they'd entered some kind of portal, but she couldn't pass on hearing Frank admit it. "I'm all ears."

He averted his gaze as though the mere thought of what he was about to say embarrassed him. "Against all logical explanation and my better judgment, I must admit that we've somehow slipped into another dimension."

"What?" she asked with her hands on her hips again. Those words could put a serious dent in your reputation, not to mention book sales. How can the greatest skeptic of all time admit to something so ridiculous?"

His face twitched, and he shuffled his feet, trying to avoid her gaze. "Trust me when I say it isn't easy."

"I'm not too floored. After all, I wrote a long article on how these beings use an intra-dimensional portal to gain access to our world. Don't you remember asking me in front of hundreds of people at a conference if Chewy could use warp speed to get back to his world? And don't forget all the cracks you made on my colleagues."

Frank's cheeks turned red. "Uh, the details of that are a little fuzzy, I'm afraid."

She knocked on his metal chest. "You remember. Just admit it."

"Sorry about that. When we get back, I'll apologize to your team."

"You'll buy them dinner too. Flowers would be a nice touch, and chocolates with a nice card attached admitting that you're an idiot."

His jaw dropped. "Dinner, flowers, and candy? Are you kidding? There are thirty people on that team of yours."

Sarah shrugged. "Sucks to be you then. Speaking of my team, where are they?" A shadow crossed his face, and her heart fell. "Did they come through the portal or are they back in California? If they came in after us, we should find them and make sure they're okay."

Frank smirked. "Yeah, I know you wish you could squeeze everyone to your bosom, but it's kind of hard to do with a herd of Bigfoot on your butt."

She pressed a palm to her chest, fighting the anxiety building up inside. *What's wrong with being a nurturer, of wanting to take care of people?* She

wished she'd done the same for her sister.

"We gotta go. We need to be in position for Jules's whistle," Frank said. "Ready to be my prisoner?"

"Yep. I feel like I was ripped out of my world and just thrown somewhere I don't belong. I want to go home, and I have a funny feeling clicking my heels three times isn't going to work."

"Yeah, dirty boots can't take the place of ruby red slippers, I'm afraid, even if I do look like the freaking Tin Man in this thing," he joked, thumping his metal chest.

"Well, you could use a heart." She smiled, stepped in front of him, and placed her hands behind her back. "Anyway, you got here in the nick of time. That psychopath thinks I'm some princess and plans on making me his wife."

He let go of her hands. "What?"

She spun around. "If you hadn't come, I'd be a queen. He wants me to bear his dozen offspring."

Frank looked away, but she didn't miss the narrowed eyes and the frown forming between his brows as he mumbled, "I don't believe this."

"Don't worry. It's not gonna happen. I got caught in the middle of a hellish war between two kings. The one who threw me down here mistook me for Princess Gloria, the daughter of the other king. He wants to use me as a pawn for vengeance. The idiot could've checked my driver's license. It's nothing more than a big fat case of mistaken identity and being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Well, come on. We can talk on the way," Frank whispered, motioning her to step in front of him so she could play a proper prisoner. But halfway up the corridor, he stopped. "Wait...I have an idea."

"I don't know what's running through that mind of yours, but this might be the first and last time I'll ever be willing to ride off into the sunset with you, so let's just go."

He turned to face her, lifting his visor, and let out a long breath. "What you just said changes everything. You've got to go back."

She stared at him for a brief moment, unable to speak. *Why did I have to open my big mouth?* The thought of being left in that place made her gut tighten. "No! No way. You can't just leave me here. Why? That makes no sense."

He pressed his hands on her shoulders, his voice softening. "You *have* to marry the king."

"What the heck are you talking about?" she asked. "Do you even hear yourself? How much ale have you been chugging with the locals?" Anger bubbled up inside her. She balled her hands, emotion choking her. "Wow, Frank. Really, I know you're the jealous type, but this?" She took a steadying breath. "You're even trying to speed things up by dumping me here."

Frank shook his head, his eyes serious. "You're staying."

"He's a lunatic. He threw me up against the wall and threatened my life." And then it dawned on her. "Wait...there's something in it for you, isn't it? Are they making you editor-in-chief of the *Tastian Times* or the *Guardian Gazette* or

something?"

"No! What do you take me for? That's ludicrous."

She shoved his shoulder. "Then tell me why!" She started to walk off, but Frank refused to budge. "What kind of knight in shining armor are you? You tease me with rescue only to send me back to my cold cell that's in desperate need of fumigation?"

"You know there's a method to my madness. I've been talking with my sources. We need that wedding ring to get back home. So you go play nice with Mr. King. Act like that princess and bat those eyelashes a million miles a minute if you have to."

She crossed her arms. "What about the romantic dinner date I promised you for going into the cave? It's not going to be so nice when I bring along *my new husband*, His Royal Pain in the—"

"Yeah, that could be a deal-breaker." He paused for a moment. "Leaving you in the arms of another suitor really sucks, but we don't have any other choice. Is he at least hot?"

She glared. "Very."

His jaw set. "He'll never lay his filthy hands on you."

She cocked an eyebrow. "Yet you want me to marry him."

"I'll get you out of here before he can consummate the marriage."

"Let me get this straight, and excuse me if I'm a tad confused." She took a deep breath. "You came here to rescue me, which you aren't. Now you want me to marry King Victor, and you promise to make some triumphant return before Kingy McJerkwad has his way with me? Frank, I don't get this at all. We should be running for the hills, but instead you're doing a total 180 on me!"

"We aren't going to get back to our dimension anytime soon. Those Guardians, those Bigfeet, can go in and out as they please, but it's not that easy for us."

Sarah tapped a finger against her lips. "Explains why we can't find a specimen now, doesn't it?"

"Seriously? Do you really want to debate Bigfoot at a time like this?" He shook his head. "Anyway, a person can walk through the portal, but once they're in, that's it. There's no getting out, unless we have this special key."

"Let me guess...the key's impossible to get? We're stuck here, just like my sister probably is? How do you even know all of this?"

"I've been digging all morning and have found some reliable sources. There's a way to get back through, but we have to open the lock with an ancient wedding ring that only royalty wears."

"We'll just find a way to steal one, to borrow it temporarily so we can get the heck outta here."

Frank shook his head, a shadow crossing his face. "It's not that easy, Sarah. The owner of the ring has to *wear* it when activating the portal."

"You want me to exchange I-do's with this guy so I will be royalty, so I'll be handed the royal ring? You've got to be kidding."

"Once I found you, my original plan was for us to somehow kidnap a queen, a prince, or maybe a king just long enough to open the portal."

“You were going to hold them hostage with the...” She looked him up and down. “With the tranquilizer gun I gave you? Brilliant, Frank. Just brilliant...and completely insane.”

“Funny. I got the same reaction from the people I’ve met here. They told me it would be a suicide mission. Fortunately, thanks to you, we can scratch that and move on to Plan B.”

“What’re you saying? You want me to be the queen in your crappy excuse of a plan? The only way that will happen is if I marry Mr. Lunatic King so he’ll place a wedding ring on my finger.”

He pointed at her finger. “The vows won’t mean anything, Sarah, except that you’ll be wearing the key to the portal.”

She massaged her temples to ease the sudden tension building inside her skull. “What if this doesn’t work? I’ll be stuck as Queen Guinevere, married to some medieval—and I do mean evil—whack-job for the rest of my life, taking care of his bratty little minions.”

“It will work. It has to, or else we’re both gonna be ditching our careers and putting in applications at the Round Table.”

“That might work for you, Frank, but I’m not having it.” She scoffed. “I can fight with a sword if I have to, even if they’ve never heard of Joan of Arc. Regardless, I’m going to get my hands on that ring-slash-key because I’ll do anything to get back home.”

“I’ll come up with an escape plan.” Frank pulled her close. “If I didn’t think you were up for the challenge, I’d never have asked you to do this, but I know how tough you are. If anybody can pull this off, Sarah, it’s you.”

It was a bold and daring plan, and she had to stay strong, focused, and determined so they could pull it off and get back home. She simply could not allow fear to creep in. “Fine. King Victor is a royal pain in the butt, but don’t worry. I can handle him.” She touched Frank’s arm, knowing full well she should’ve never made Frank go inside that cave. Now they were stuck in some crazy world trying to pull off a jewelry heist. “I’m sorry I dragged you into all of this.”

“Are you kidding? I couldn’t let you have all the fun.” He hesitated, his gaze connecting with hers. “At least not alone.”

She cleared her throat and inched closer, peeling her gaze away just to avoid the depth of those hazel eyes.

Frank shook his head as if in disbelief. “I still can’t believe this place exists. You really think your sister is here?”

“Yes. I believe she’s alive, somewhere in this medieval world. I can feel it.”

“I agree, now that I’ve seen it with my own eyes. Anyway, the first thing we need to do is get the ring,” Frank said. “If we don’t take this opportunity, we may never get home. We’ll be stuck here forever. Once we have the ring, we’ll go undercover and hunt for your sister.”

Hundreds of thoughts raced through Sarah’s mind, but she managed a nod. “That’s a beginning. In the meantime, Frank, do as much digging as you can. You’re a reporter, a million times sharper than Lois Lane, remember? And right

now I need you to be my Superman.”

“I knew those words were going to come back and bite me.”

“While you’re out there, keep an eye and ear out for Liz, okay?” Sarah whispered. Her voice came hoarse, barely audible in her own ears. For a moment, she wasn’t sure he even heard her, but then he gave a sharp nod.

“I’ll see what I can find.”

A black beetle scurried over her foot. She squashed it, digging her boot into the dirty ground until dust whirled up. “I don’t want to risk getting stuck here forever, but there is no way I’m leaving without my sister—not after looking for her for so long.”

“Then you have to play along, or we’ll never get the chance to get our hands on that ring.”

“Princess Gloria seems to be in hiding, letting me take the fall. What if he figures out I’m not the real deal?”

Frank cupped her face. “You need to bring home the Oscar at all costs, babe.”

A shudder rocked her body. “We don’t have much time. The ceremony’s tonight. Boy, I can’t wait to see the comments I’m gonna get when I tweet and Facebook this crap.”

“You won’t *really* be married, Sarah. It’s not legal.”

“Whatever. He said sunset, though, so you have to hurry. Trust me, it’s the only thing he looks forward to. The guy’s dying to knock me up with triplets, quadruplets, quintuplets, and sextuplets.”

Frank smiled. “Wow. What a lucky man.”

“What, you want a try too?” She slapped his armor. “Focus, please. We need all the brain cells we can get.”

“I swear to you that I won’t let it get that far. Our plan is to get the ring, break out, find your sister, and then run like hell to Sabrina Cave—back to reality and that diner we were talking about.”

She shook her head. “It’s doable...I think.”

He nodded. “You can do this. You’re the strongest person I know. Who goes out in front of thousands of people and gives lectures about supposedly imaginary monsters without batting an eyelash? Who politely tells off all the reporters and debunkers? Who got the biggest research grant in the state of California?” He smiled. “You did, Bigfoot researcher, Sarah Larker.”

“Aw, shucks. I never knew you had so much confidence in me.” She smirked.

“You know it, Princess.” He softly kissed her hand. “I can’t believe this. I’m down here dressed like some Lancelot wannabe in a creepy dungeon in another dimension, trying to win you back. What kind of joke is fate playing on me anyway? Man, karma can do a number on a skeptic, huh?”

“Life’s funny that way, always throwing us some kind of curveball. I mean, when I woke up this morning, I never dreamt I’d be a medieval queen in the land of Camelot.”

A chirp sounded nearby. “That’s the signal.” Frank peeked down the corridor. Footsteps echoed, and Sarah jumped. “Somebody’s coming.”

Frank’s lips softly brushed hers. “Leaving you is the last thing I want to do.”

"You know that, right?" He flipped his visor down.

She gasped, anger rising inside her once again. "Don't feel guilty for leaving me here to marry a complete stranger who wants nothing more than to see my stomach swollen with his seed."

He turned around, his eyes wide. "You're right. I can't do this. What in the world am I thinking? Leaving you here is just...stupidly impossible. Come with me, Sarah. We're gonna find your sister and find our own way out of this Renaissance nightmare."

Knowing there was no other way, Sarah turned and ran down the corridor.

"What're you doing?!" Frank yelled, chasing after her.

She grabbed the door and slammed it shut, then walked to the back of the cell. Staying in that freaky dimension wasn't an option. She had to take a chance on marrying the nutcase if it meant she could get her hands on that key. "Lock me in! Hurry!"

"What?"

She met his gaze through the rusty bars. “You heard me. Lock it and leave. Tell the other knights to inform the king that I’ve changed my mind and I’d love to marry him.”

“Sarah, are you sure? You really need to think about this. I mean, you’re risking everything, and what if we—”

“I have thought about it, Frank, and this is the best way.” She smiled. “Now go...and don’t worry.”

“I’ll get you out of this, I swear. Just get that ring.”

“Not a problem.” As he turned to leave, she added, “I’ll be sure to say hello to hubby for you.”

Chapter 5

Sarah smoothed out her white and gold Juliet-style dress. The corseted bodice clung to her chest like a second skin, raising and flattening all the right places, but she hadn’t seen that style in any magazine in the last twenty years. She felt for the tags at the back, but the scratchy piece of material wasn’t there. It certainly wasn’t a designer label, but with all the sequins, lace, and fine details, it would have made a killing on any runway.

The maidservants had wasted no time preparing her for her dreaded nuptials. They scrubbed her skin with lye soap in a tub of scalding water. Countless hands had forced her into a wedding dress so tight she didn’t know whether she was dead as a ghost or just floating from the lack of oxygen, and the shiny tiara that weighed a ton didn’t ease her throbbing headache either. A long veil trailed the ground, promising to send her into a tumbling fall if she didn’t move gracefully.

Curls trimmed her forehead and fell in ringlets down the sides of her face. Thicker curls hung loosely at the back of her head and neck. She played with one gingerly, marveling at how easy it wound around her finger. *So this is what hair felt like before straightening irons and all that hairspray.* She couldn’t remember the last time she’d seen anyone with ringlet curls, but she was beginning to think the trend should be brought back to life.

A guard walked Sarah through the dimly lit corridor, then stopped, his eyes focused somewhere above her chest.

Frowning, she followed his line of vision and let out a groan. The pervert’s stare at her cleavage couldn’t have been more obvious if he’d have tattooed the words on his forehead. She rolled her eyes. “Why don’t you take a picture? It’ll last longer.” She was certain that King Victor had definitely picked out the winner of a dress.

The guard cocked an eyebrow. “Excuse me, Highness?”

“Paint a portrait?”

“I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“Never mind,” Sarah hissed. Of course they wouldn’t know what a camera was in a place where they still knew what a chastity belt was and thought asking for a woman’s hand in marriage meant knocking her over the head and dragging her to one’s cage.

The guard opened the door, letting her into a large room. More guardsmen stood in every corner. She brushed against the wooden frame to avoid touching him. Her eyes fell on the iron chandeliers holding a multitude of taupe-colored candles. Beautiful red and purple tapestries and elaborate arrangements of gleaming swords, maces, arm poles, and shields covered the stone-sculptured walls. She took a deep breath as realization hit: She was there, in that real medieval castle, to marry a real king.

“Wait here.” The guard motioned her to stand by the floor-to-ceiling fireplace.

Minutes later, Victor walked in. He took her hand and kissed it gently. Her stomach fluttered as she peered from his gleaming white teeth and black, shaggy hair into his blue eyes. As much as she hated to admit it, he could’ve stepped out of a fairytale; he was dressed like Prince Charming himself, complete with crown, cape, short breeches tucked into high boots, and tights. The black and white doublet, with a golden lion emblazoned on the velvet, outlined every muscle in his chest. He was a handsome sight, even if he had the personality of a wolverine; she had never gone for the controlling type who enjoyed threatening to murder her for his own political gains. Against her better judgment, her knees went weak. *Quit drooling!* she scolded herself. She was in a very dangerous situation with a man who could kill her at any moment if he found out who she really was—or wasn’t. Sooner or later, he’d discover that she wasn’t Gloria, and there wasn’t a royal bone in her body.

Slowly, his gaze traveled over her. “Princess Gloria, you look dashing...much more like a princess now, soon to be a queen, my dear.”

Sarah knew that she had to play along if she wanted to get out of there. She returned his smile and curtsied, hoping it looked close enough to the real deal. “Thank you, milord.”

A grin grew across his lips. “You respond to your name now?”

An incredibly sexy dimple in his left cheek drew her attention. She moistened her lips; her breath caught in her throat. “I-I must’ve hit my head earlier and was confused, forgetting my identity. It’s all coming back to me, but certain parts still remain unclear,” she fibbed, hoping that would cover her if someone asked her a question she couldn’t properly answer. She had to play the part of Princess Gloria perfectly or Plan B was gonna be a no-go.

He pointed around the room. “Welcome to my home...*your* home now.

“Since you’re mentioning it, the first thing I would like to do is hire an interior designer.”

“I’ve no idea what that is.” He inched closer and touched the side of her face with a caress so tender it sent shivers down her spine. “However, if it’s within my might to buy it for you, then so be it.”

Sarah took a step back, her fingers barely connecting with the material of his shirt as she placed a hand between them. Her throat felt constricted; her heart

hammered in her chest. If he wouldn't have followed her command, she wouldn't have had the willpower to push him away.

"You make a beautiful bride," he said. "I'm glad you finally came to your senses."

"Well, Victor, sitting in a cold dungeon will do that to a girl—that and threats of execution will nudge a gal in the right direction."

"You're taking all of this rather calmly. Your reputation preceded you, and I expected more of a fight."

"My father doesn't care if I live or die, so I hope he chokes on my new title." She smiled inwardly. Getting into character wasn't as hard as she thought.

"That's the spirit! You would never have been queen in your own kingdom. I have a feeling your mother is going to hold on to that title for a long time."

"Exactly, and that's why I've decided to take this wonderful opportunity, though I must admit I would have preferred a bit more romance and a proper courting." She blinked her lashes, amused. "May I give you some dating...er, courting advice, my King?"

"You may." A note of amusement rang in his tone.

"It works best to woo a girl and sweep her off her feet rather than throw her in a dungeon. When you propose, try kneeling and stating your undying love. That works better than threatening your future bride with impending death or impregnating her with ten kids."

Victor laughed, the delicious dimples forming on his cheeks again. "You're here to marry me, are you not?"

She bit her lip. "Guess you got me there," she said, knowing she didn't have much of a choice.

He inched closer, a shadow passing over his features as he peered into her eyes. "You know the consequences of the ring, yet you are still willing to move forward with the marriage?"

Yeah, she knew the consequences. She'd wear a ball and chain for a few hours before she cut it off with a hacksaw and ran as far away from the guy as she could—no matter how gorgeous he was. "I'm aware."

"I knew you were, but I had to make sure. I wouldn't want you to blame me for..." He winced slightly. "Keeping it from you."

Whoa! Is there more to this thing than he's letting on, more to it than what that Jules told Frank? She thought maybe she could play up the amnesia angle, leftover from the bump on the head. She narrowed her eyes to tiny slits, considering her words. "Uh, just to be on the safe side, would you be so kind and refresh my memory? Things are a little fuzzy from the fall."

He nodded. "Of course, my love. It's said that—"

A knock on the door interrupted him.

Victor held up a hand. "Ah, the priest. I want this done quickly."

Sarah grabbed hold of his arm. "Wait! What about your bad conscience? You wouldn't want me to blame you later, would you?"

He laughed, motioning in a short man with white, thinning hair. He was dressed in a wide-sleeved, kimono-style, monk's robe with a knotted rope belt

...tied at the waist.

Victor shut the door, then met Sarah's gaze. "All royalty knows about the ring's secrets. And I'm certain you wouldn't forget something so important. Let's get started."

"You don't waste time," she said. "Nothing says love better than a shotgun wedding."

The priest bowed. "It's nice to meet you, Princess."

She nodded. *Frank had better be right about this ring being the key we need to get outta here. I hope his sources really are reliable, because if I go through with this all for nothing, I'm gonna kick his butt into the next century!*

"Is anyone else attending the ceremony?" the priest asked.

"No, Father," Victor said.

Sarah chuckled and motioned around her. "I think the only guests we have are the guards."

"I need you to stand to my left, and King Victor, please stand to the right," the priest continued.

Sarah moved into position, butterflies dancing in her stomach. *Can I really go through with this?* Staring at all the polished swords and shields hanging on the wall, she gulped. She'd always planned to get married in a church filled with smiling friends and family, not alone on some King Arthur movie set. *And what's Victor hiding from me about the ring?* Obviously, there was something she needed to know, because it was something all the other royals were aware of. The problem was, she wasn't royalty.

"You're so beautiful," Victor whispered, cupping her face. "You take my breath away."

Her heart leapt. *The guy throws me in a hole in the ground and then feeds me a bunch of compliments?* She gazed into his eyes, searching for sincerity. For a minute, she thought he actually meant it. "I'm flattered." Then it dawned on her: *There's got to be something in this for him, even if it is just plain old revenge.*

"Your father and I don't get along, but I bear you no ill feelings. I'm sorry I lost my temper in the dungeon. I am fuming angry with your wolf of a father, and I should not have taken that out on his blood." Victor slipped his hands around her waist, his eyes glistening with something she couldn't place. "I know you were forced into this, and I grant you my deepest apologies. I assure you, my love, that I will spend the rest of my life trying to make you happy."

Gazing up at his face, she was surprised to find that he actually had a soft side. *So his threats were all a bluff? And he really wants to spend the rest of his life making me happy?* Confusion flooded through her. *What girl doesn't dream of getting swept off her feet by a handsome king declaring his undying devotion? Even if we did start off on the wrong foot when he imprisoned me.*

The priest cleared his throat and opened his leather-bound book.

The king grinned. "Ah, yes. Let's get started, shall we?"

The priest nodded. "King Victor Fesque II, wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife? Wilt thou love her, honor her, keep her and guard her, in health and in sickness, as a husband should a wife, forsaking all others? Wilt thou cling only

unto her, so long as ye both shall live?"

Victor met Sarah's eyes and smiled. "I will."

"Princess Gloria Jarod, wilt thou have this man to be thy wedded husband? Wilt thou love him, honor him, keep him and guard him, in health and in sickness, as a wife should a husband, forsaking all others? Wilt thou cleave only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?"

The words sounded surreal, almost as though marrying a man she never met before was nothing more than a dream. Sarah wished she'd get up in the morning and erase all memory of the nonsense with a steaming cup of coffee. Victor looked into her eyes, and she held his gaze. *Bring home the Oscar*, Sarah, she told herself. She was enjoying her undercover work much more than she should have been. *Hmm. Getting that ring on my finger might be easier than I hoped.* She gulped and spat out the words. "I will."

The priest continued, "Do you take Princess Gloria Jarod to be your wedded wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better, for worse, for richer, for poorer, in sickness, and in health, till death do you part, if the Holy Church doth ordain it? And thereto plight her thy troth?"

Victor smiled, flashing gorgeous white teeth. "I do."

The priest turned and repeated the vows to Sarah.

She'd never dreamt she'd be saying the words to a stranger, but she said, "I do." Her stomach twisted into knots, and she took a deep breath. It had all seemed like make-believe to that point, but now it was real. There she was, in that ridiculously fancy wedding gown, facing a man in all his royal finery, wearing a gold crown crusted with jewels.

The priest said a blessing, then joined Sarah's and Victor's hands, "The third finger on the left hand has a special vein called *vena amoris*, which means 'the vein of love'. This vein runs from the ring finger directly to the heart. The special ring that is placed upon this finger is the symbol of the sun, earth, and universe, and it represents perfection and peace. It has no beginning and no end, just like time." He turned to the king. "You may pledge your allegiance to your love and undying devotion."

Sarah smiled as Victor pulled a ring from his pocket, cradling it on his palm. Her plan was coming together perfectly and nothing made her happier.

"The rubies represent love, and the diamonds signify eternity," said the priest, nodding to the sparkling gems set in a gold band.

Sarah's eyes widened. Not only was the ring her ticket back home, but it was also drop-dead gorgeous, a huge, hulking piece of bling. She couldn't stop staring at it. With its four-carat oval ruby silhouetted by shimmering diamonds, it didn't look like a traditional wedding ring.

She cleared her throat and raised her gaze for a second. "It's real?"

Victor shook his head, wide-eyed. "Of course, my dear. I assure you it is genuine, for it has been in my family for centuries. Why do you ask?"

"Because..." She took a deep breath to hide her emotions. "Well, I am a real princess, after all, and I don't do knock-offs." Undying love or not, she made sure to hold on tight to the ring. The least she'd get from that forced marriage would

be a small house with a nice view in a neighborhood where she didn't need to barricade her windows at night and sleep with pepper spray under her pillow.

As her new husband slid the ring on her finger, a jolt of electricity raced up Sarah's hand and spread throughout her body. She blinked, and a flurry of spots flooded her vision. It was weird and quite inexplicable. The sensation stopped just as quickly as it appeared, and for a moment she stood there, flabbergasted. *Wait...did I just imagine that?* Granted, her nerves were on edge, what with almost being blinded by the gemstones. *Or maybe I'm just dehydrated.*

The priest handed her a matching ring. Looking closer, she noticed his ruby was square, making it look more masculine.

"Put the ring on Victor's finger," the priest whispered.

She'd never been through a wedding ceremony before, and they hadn't granted her the courtesy of a rehearsal, so she had no way of knowing what to do. With trembling hands, she slid the ring on his finger and gazed up at his beaming face.

"We've done it," Victor whispered.

Wait...that's it? We're...married? The cave of her mouth felt dry, almost painful, as she swallowed past the lump in her throat. *Is he going to kiss me?* She stared at his best feature, those full, firm, luscious lips. She couldn't come to terms with what was going on in that head of hers. There she was, marrying a powerful king who might keep her from ever going home, but all she could do was stare at his mouth.

The priest broke through her thoughts. "I now pronounce you husband and wife. My King, you may kiss your queen."

"You're mine now—forever. Our bond is unbreakable, the spark between us never to be quenched." In slow motion, she saw his face lower onto hers, their lips barely touching. His hand wandered to the low of her back, drawing her closer, her chest pressing against his as his lips came down harder but with nowhere near as much force as she would've expected from such a man.

Sweet and gentle? That'll work. Don't all fairytales end with the perfect kiss? A flame spread over her, spanning from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. He wasn't kidding about that spark! But she knew it was time to shut that down and go to the reception.

Victor dismissed the priest, and Sarah let out a breath of relief. The ring felt heavy on her finger, reminding her that only the first step was done. The hard part was yet to come. She needed to find Frank and get the heck out of there. She smiled sweetly as she peered at her new husband. "Can we eat cake and smash it in each other's faces now? It's my favorite wedding tradition."

His mouth hovered over her lips, his hot breath giving her goose-bumps. Cake was definitely the last thing on her new hubby's mind. "I'm so blessed to have a bride as beautiful as you." Victor's eyes bore down into hers. "I've been burning to touch you, to hold you, to kiss you since the moment I laid eyes upon you." He slipped his hands behind the back of her head, pulling her even closer. He kissed her again, more deeply this time, pushing past her lips and plunging his tongue deep into her mouth, demanding surrender. Sweet and gentle was out the door.

Is he trying to prove his dominance somehow? Prove he owns me? Maybe I should smack him, Sarah pondered, but she couldn't deny the unexpected invasion of passion that threatened to consume her. Letting out a soft moan, she felt a burst of heat race through her body as she snuggled against his hard muscles, shivering with pleasure. Wrapping her arms fiercely around his neck, she swirled her tongue over his, hot and fast. Somewhere inside her head, a voice yelled for her to come to her senses. *Why am I not trying to fight him off?* She knew she was nothing but a pawn in his game of revenge to piss off Princess Gloria's father, yet she couldn't seem to do anything about it.

He broke away as she gasped for a breath of air. "Guards!" he shouted. "Leave us!"

Footsteps echoed across the room and a door slammed.

Victor ran his hands down her back while her fingers slid through his thick, gorgeous hair, his crown landing next to him with a *thud*. Their tongues tangled and danced furiously in perfect unison. Nobody had kissed her like that before, and his lip-lock drove all thoughts of Frank, the ring, and going home out of her mind. *Frank!* The name jolted her out of her passion, awareness banishing the fog inside her head. She was lucky she still remembered her name. It was time to go, but she couldn't force herself to stop.

Sarah wasn't expecting that kind of kiss at all: bold, hot, addictive, and devouring. She certainly wasn't supposed to be enjoying it. If she kept that up, she'd be sleeping with the enemy right there on the stone floor. She broke away, breathing hard, staring into his seductive blue eyes as her heart pounded away. She wanted him in the worst way, and she could easily imagine giving herself to him right then and there. She'd only meant to give him a peck on the lips to seal the deal, so she didn't understand how that passion had blossomed so quickly. Her escape plan was backfiring quickly. Her gaze focused on his lips again, and she wondered what it would be like to make wild, passionate love to someone so powerful and dangerous.

Victor scooped her up and cradled her in his arms as her wedding dress trailed to the ground. "Do you want to lie with me here or go somewhere more fitting for a queen?" His disheveled hair made him look even hotter.

She opened her mouth but no words came out. Sure, he was the bad guy. He had kidnapped, imprisoned, and threatened her, after all, but he was still hotter than a blazing forest fire. She didn't understand how a complete stranger could give her the most passionate kiss of her life—a stranger who was now her husband, no less.

"Let's stay here," Victor said. "No one will come in and disturb us."

"May I ask for something to eat?" *And some wine—lots of it—to calm my nerves. Hey, while you're at it, why don't you have the royal bartender throw a few cosmos in the mix?* "In case you've forgotten, I've been locked in a rat-infested dungeon all day." It was the only thing she could think of that might stall him and help her get back on track. She had to get him to the reception, because Frank would be waiting there with some kind of rescue plan in the works. *Although,* she thought, letting her mind wander for a moment, *how bad could it*

be to be married to a drop-dead gorgeous king? Not bad at all, until he finds out I'm nothing but a peasant trying to steal the royal wedding ring. Sarah couldn't get caught up in the royal fantasy. He was only using her to procreate, part of his wicked plan to tarnish the bloodline of her so-called royal family. His plan was screwed; her reality set back in. Once he finds out the truth, he'll have me killed. That's what all powerful tyrants do. I have to get out of here...NOW!

"You have my deepest apologies about the dungeon." Victor tightened his grip on her body. "Let me make it up to you...all night long."

"But what I need now is some food," she said.

"This is much better."

Sarah gasped as hot kisses inched down her neck and toward her cleavage. Nothing had ever felt better than that, but she had to focus and keep herself from getting distracted if she ever planned on finding her sister and getting them all safely home. She wriggled, trying to free herself of his vise-like grip. "But I'm hungry."

"We can have cartloads of food brought to my...to *our* bedchamber." Victor slid down the puffy sleeve of her dress, kissing her bare shoulder, sending tingling heat throughout her body.

Enjoying his touch and kisses were a complication she couldn't afford. She could easily lose herself in that medieval world, but it would be at a lofty price. It was not worth losing everything, her entire life, as well as Frank's and Liz's. "Don't you want to celebrate with your people on this joyous occasion? They might hold a grudge if you count them out. I'm talking pitchforks and stormed castles." She raised her brows in the hope that he'd buy it.

He groaned and let go of her. "You think of everything, my love. We'll make a quick show and then get you something to eat." Pinching her butt, he winked. "You'll need your strength, for it shall be a very long night, Queen Gloria Fesque."

Smiling sweetly, she nodded. *If only...*

Chapter 6

Sarah stumbled but quickly regained her balance. *Stupid, big, fluffy wedding dress!* An embarrassing trip down the stairs wasn't the grand entrance she'd hoped for. If anyone noticed, she decided she'd just laugh it off as wedding-night jitters. She needed to pay attention, but focusing on her footsteps seemed impossible when nothing but escape ran through her mind.

"Shall I assist you, Your Majesty?" A soldier appeared at her side, his arm proffered.

She scowled at him, lest he disclose her *faux pas* to everyone watching. "I'm fine, thanks." *Why'd hubby have to go and send a multitude of armed guards as escorts to the after-party? Now I'll just have to lose them once I'm in the*

reception hall. Wait...hubby? Sarah still couldn't get over the fact that she was married to someone who wouldn't look out of place on the cover of a romance novel. She shook her head at her temporary lapse in judgment. *But what a kisser!*

She entered the great hall, which was filled with well-dressed ladies in silks and satins, whirling across the floor in the arms of gentlemen garbed in rich velvets and brocades. Laughter and chatter echoed through the room as her subjects drank to the new queen's good health from brown-colored mugs. A troupe of musicians with recorders, trumpets, and flutes played a sprightly dance tune, while their whistles, bells, and drums kept the beat. She wondered if the DJ would take requests, but she highly doubted it.

Victor smiled, looping his arm in hers. "I see I'm just in time to escort my lovely bride." His eyes glazed over, and she knew he meant every word. Against her will, Sarah felt her cheeks burning.

She knew it was cliché, but she felt exactly like Cinderella at the ball. Maybe she'd watched one too many Disney movies, but she had to keep reminding herself that it was all an act on both their parts. All she wanted out of their "blessed union" was the ring, and all he wanted was to piss off his alleged new father-in-law. Nevertheless, she couldn't help but feel impressed. Nobody had ever given her such a celebration or that much attention before.

A bald man in short red pants blew a trumpet blast. "Noblemen and women, commoners, and all other parties, bow down before our glorious monarchs, protectors and defenders of the realm, his Royal Majesty King Victor and her Highness Queen Gloria."

In one smooth movement, the crowd formed a corridor, bowing deeply as the royal couple stepped into their midst.

Victor held Sarah's trembling hand high as they made their way through the parted sea of people. "My bride!" He inclined his head, a broad grin playing on his lips, his eyes shining with pride.

Part of Sarah wished the illusion was real, but she knew what was really lurking behind that smooth smile of his: revenge. He hated Gloria's father with a passion, and he viewed that wedding and the forthcoming children as nothing more than payback. Of course, Sarah couldn't blame him, as she had her own little scheme going on and certainly wasn't one to point fingers. She scanned the room as the king engaged in friendly chatter, but there was no sign of Frank anywhere. *Where is he?*

"Are you looking to make a quick getaway, my Queen?" Victor asked, gripping her hand tighter. If it was meant as a joke, it sure didn't come across as one. "There's nobody here from your kingdom to whisk you away."

Oh boy. He's not going to let me out of his sight for a minute. Talk about a clingy husband. Maybe I can play up my alleged head injury, talk crazy and make my escape while he's off finding that so-called healer of theirs. That'll be easy enough. All I have to do is mention my world, my California, my cell phones, my high-tech cameras. Sarah beamed at him, spouting the first thing that hit her. "I was a hippie last year, but I didn't win best costume at the work party, so I'm trying to decide which one of these fantasy costumes I'll sport next month for

Halloween—you know...to win the title.” *If I even get home in time for that*, she pondered.

“What?” Confusion crossed his face.

She motioned toward the crowd. “These costumes don’t work for me. How come there are no warrior women in the medieval Arthurian tales? I think it’s time I create one, because some of these chicks look like they’d stab first and ask questions later. I, for one, would love to lead troops out into battle. I bet they make some figure-flattering chainmail, right? But just because I’m wearing a fluffy dress, that doesn’t mean I can’t find a nice shiny sword to match it. I think I’ll be Lady Guinevere/Lara Croft. Whaddya think, Kingsy, dear?”

“I told you I was done with your games. You shall not distract me with your odd babbling.”

Babbling? When did I take a left turn into Crazy Town? Oh, wait. Maybe that was when I decided to chase Bigfoot into a cave with no one but Frank around to protect me. Why didn’t I just stay home and curl up with a good book or rent a fantastic movie? But she knew the answer to that question: The adventure DNA in her gene pool wouldn’t allow her to sit at home watching movies when there were creatures to be discovered in the wilderness. “Maybe it’s best that I visit the healer. Could you please fetch him?”

Victor raised his brows. “Are you trying to get rid of me?”

“What? No!” She laughed, putting on her best performance yet. The last thing she wanted to do was stick around and end up as the inspiration behind some Lifetime movies starring Valerie Bertinelli or Tori Spelling.

“I know you’re looking for your brother, hoping he’ll rescue you,” he said. “After all, he’s the one who got you into this mess in the first place, love.”

“You’re right. It was his fault. Men are always getting me into all kinds of messes.” *Especiallly handsome kings with bright blue eyes. And Frank, too, with this alleged brilliant plan of his. By the way, where’s the nearest divorce court? I’m sorry, but I need more out of a marriage than good looks, money, and a fancy car...er, uh, horse.* “But don’t worry. I always get myself out of trouble. I don’t need anyone to help me with that.”

“Are you angry with him? With your brother?” Victor asked.

Heck yeah! If Frank ditched out on her, she knew she’d be up the creek without a paddle. She frowned, realizing he was talking about *Gloria’s* brother. She wasn’t sure of exactly what he’d done, but she had a pretty good idea how to fill in the blanks.

“Wouldn’t you be? The little sister crosses into enemy lines to warn her brother about a nasty trap in store for him. He gets away while she gets caught. He’s probably home now, toasting his freedom with Daddy dearest.”

“What a nice family you come from.” Victor laughed. “If I were you I’d—”

“Yeah, yeah. I got it, loud and clear.” She turned away because she’d had enough of his mouth. She decided he’d be better off if he stuck to kissing instead of talking. Wasting her time chatting with him wasn’t going to get her anywhere, and it was time to switch tactics. “I have to use the little queen’s room.”

“All rooms belong to the royal king and queen,” he said.

“This freaking lung-squeezing corset is tighter than my skinny jeans, and it’s about to burst. I have to fix it if I ever intend to breathe again. Perhaps oxygen deprivation is what is causing me to talk such nonsense.”

He slid his arm around her waist and pulled her close, whispering into her ear in a husky voice, “How about we go upstairs and I remove it myself?”

She smirked, aware that he would enjoy unwrapping her like a Christmas present out of all those buttons, ties, and layers. It would take hours, and she was sure the guy would love every minute of it. She couldn’t stop the goose-bumps from rushing over her skin though. It was a tempting offer, but one night of passion would be a high price to pay to squeeze out ten kids and be bossed around for the rest of her life. “I’d rather mingle and meet everyone.” She winked. “Remember, we have all night...and all our lives after that.”

He tilted her chin to meet his steady gaze. “Mingle with my subjects? Why do you care, Gloria? You only married me to save your pretty little neck.”

“Not true. I was tired of lonely Friday nights, and I desperately wanted this wedding ring,” she said, for once telling the truth.

Victor inclined his head, his eyes shining with pride as though he’d forged the thing himself. “It’s one of our most treasured heirlooms, dating back thousands of years. The wearers of the collection are bonded for all of eternity with one heartbeat.”

Eternity? How about a few short hours, buddy?

“I’m sure you’re familiar with the tradition,” Victor continued, a twinkle in his eye.

One heartbeat for all of eternity? He is nuts. She swallowed. Wait...could there be any truth to his statement? Maybe I should’ve read the fine print before I said, “I do.”

“Now that we’re connected, I’m positive your father will meet every single one of my demands.”

Sarah raised an eyebrow. “What makes you think so? He didn’t care before if I lived or got my head whacked off by your sword.”

“He cares deeply. According to my sources, he seems to have trouble believing that I actually have you in my possession.”

“Oh?” She realized that Gloria’s father had a heart after all.

“He thought I was bluffing, but he will now know the truth.” Victor leaned in. “Don’t convince yourself for a minute that I would’ve believed that Sarah Larker nonsense. My most reliable soldiers identified you as Princess Gloria. There is no mistaking who you really are.”

Sarah had heard of evil twins, of doppelgangers, but this was ridiculous. A shudder ran through her body as a thought occurred to her. *Princess Gloria’s father is on to my scam. He knows King Victor doesn’t have the real princess. No wonder he wouldn’t meet the king’s demands.* She knew she had to jump-start the escape plan into high gear before Victor figured the whole thing out for himself. “Is there a private place I could go where I can fix this girdle?”

Victor motioned to one of his guards. “Take her to the dressing quarters. Station six guards at the door...no, make that a dozen of my finest men.”

“Yes, Your Highness,” a soldier said. For a moment, he peered at her, beaming with enthusiasm.

Sarah chuckled. “Hey, I know I look like a fairy godmother in this get-up, but I promise, I can’t vanish into thin air.”

A woman approached with her head down. She wore a simple muslin dress and carried a large leather satchel over one shoulder. Copper bracelets adorned her wrists. She bowed in humility. “Would you like me to help you with your dress, Highness?”

Sarah shook her head. “No, but thank you.” She knew the girl could easily ruin her plans and spoil everything. The last thing she needed was some little spy following her around while she hunted for Frank.

As contrary as always, the king motioned to the girl, his voice authoritative. “My queen will definitely be taking any help you offer.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. The guy was definitely a bona fide control freak, and she wasn’t about to let him think he had the upper hand. Just as she opened her mouth to set him straight, though, she remembered something her kindergarten teacher said: “*Say something nice or shut up.*” Nothing had worked so far, so she figured she might as well give it a try. Smiling, she cleared her throat. “How kind of you to think of me. That’d be great.”

Victor grabbed her wrist, whispering in her ear, “Try to escape and you’ll pay dearly.” She knew he meant every word of his threat; the teacher’s advice clearly sucked.

“After that kiss, I thought we were past all that. You’re posting an army at the door? Where’s the trust? How could I possibly run away with everyone knowing my face, thanks to you?”

He released her wrist, and she pulled her hand away, eager to put a few inches between them. “Trust is something one must earn,” he whispered, sounding like something she read on a fortune cookie once.

She met his hot gaze. “I kissed you. Doesn’t that mean anything?”

“Maybe it will when you do it out of enjoyment or passion or love and not for the sake of saving your own life.”

“Are you saying I faked it? Come on! We both know that kiss was real.” For a moment, she watched the dangerous glitter in his eye and wondered whether she’d underestimated him. She knew he could easily overpower her, and the fact that he hadn’t done so yet didn’t mean he wouldn’t once he realized she had no interest in being wife material. *Should I dare an escape attempt?* She snorted inwardly. *Heck yeah! Living in Freaksville isn’t my thing.*

“The girl is waiting on you,” Victor said.

Sarah smiled up at him sweetly. “Thanks for your help, darling.”

The girl touched her elbow. “If you’d follow me, my Queen.”

Throwing him one last look, Sarah followed her through the crowd to a room in the far left-hand quarter. True to Victor’s word, a multitude of minions guarded the entrance, and she could see the king’s prying sapphire eyes not too far away. She stepped inside and scanned the room, then shook her head. There wasn’t one window or opening, and freedom didn’t appear to be an option, at least not

anytime soon. She was only moments away from him taking her upstairs to procreate an entire baseball team.

The girl motioned her behind a giant divider for privacy. "Please hurry, my Queen." The way the girl's eyes darted about, Sarah knew who would bear the brunt of the punishment if she did not do as she was told.

Sarah stumbled over the hem of her dress as she joined the girl. "Listen...I don't need your help."

"Yes you do, Sarah Larker."

She gasped. "What? You know my *real* name?"

The girl nodded. "That and much more. Frank told me King Victor has mistaken you for Princess Gloria."

"Frank? Oh my gosh! You've met him! Where is he? Is he here?"

"I'm working with him. He is currently hiding in the forest."

"So you're really here to help me with more than my dress?" Sarah gripped her hands, relief flooding through her. "I don't know how to thank you."

"Frank said you went through with the marriage only to obtain the ring."

Sarah flashed her hand with a huge smile. "Mission accomplished, baby."

"Good, for that is the one key back to your world, according to legend. Now, are you ready to switch identities? We're pretty close in size. Even our hair is the same length and color. Your true lover, Frank, said I would pass for you with no problem, as long as we are careful."

"Lover?" She shook her head and laughed. "Frank's not my boyfriend."

"Why not? He seems to be a nice man. We met only this morning, but he couldn't stop talking about you." The girl unbuttoned Sarah's dress in the back, groaning. "This is tricky."

"Why are you so willing to help us?" Sarah heaved a huge sigh as the cumbersome dress fell to the floor, happy to breathe freely again.

"My father's dying, and Frank promised to obtain some minerals that will cure him if I help you." The girl slipped out of her far less expensive leather dress.

Sarah thought Frank nuts to make such an outrageous promise, and she almost felt sorry for the girl for falling for it. "What?"

"There's an ancient legend about the Gold Minerals of Life. I've spent years looking for them to help my father, and I've finally found where they're hidden. It is said they shall heal any person who swallows them, no matter the person's affliction, but only a royal with a ruby wedding ring can see the minerals. I told Frank the secret location. I will help you, but you must help me in return, as Frank promised. There is nothing I would not do for my father."

Sarah hated being put in such a position, but she had no other choice at that point. "Get me the heck out of here so I can find my sister, and I will give you anything you want." She knew she'd have to find those minerals to make good on Frank's promise, and she felt like slugging Frank for that—and for referring to himself as her "true lover". She was no fan of him making crazy deals that'd just keep them in that world even longer. *And what if these minerals didn't even exist? We don't have time for this. Once I make my escape, the king will be hot on my trail.* All she wanted to do was find her sister and get the heck out of that

dimension or wherever the heck they were. In spite of her disdain for his crazy ideas, Sarah wished Frank was there. "Any particular reason why Frank didn't come to this little Halloween party himself? He'd make one heck of a Robin Hood."

The girl squirmed into the flowing wedding gown. "It would be far too risky for him to venture inside the castle."

Sarah hurried into the leather dress. "I'm not sure this plan is going to work. My eyes are brown, and yours are blue."

"No one will notice. I'll keep them closed."

"What're you going to do when they discover you're not me?" Sarah had a pretty good idea, and she wondered why the girl would risk her life; she understood, though, because she'd risk her own for her father's in a heartbeat.

For a brief second, a shadow passed the girl's face. Then she shrugged. "I can talk my way out of anything."

She must be quite the con artist. Sarah tied the leather strings in the front. "What do you know about this king?"

"Only that he is one of the Immortals, like all royalty."

Sarah took a deep breath and pondered her strange words, which sounded like something out of a comic book. "That's a rumor, right? I mean, some ancient people in my time used to say they were gods, but they only claimed that to control their people."

"No, it is entirely real." The girl flinched. "Ouch! That pinched. Can we hurry this up?"

"I'm trying," Sarah said. "Do you know how many buttons and ties are on this dress? Please tell me more about the king...and what is your name?"

"My name is Mia. The king is one of the most dangerous of the Immortals. He is feared by many throughout our world. I think it's best that you get as far away from him as possible and never look back. This will be no easy task though, since you're bonded to him now for all eternity, or so the legend says."

"Not sure I can buy all that." Sarah pushed and pulled the corset strings on the wedding dress till the girl squeaked. "I saw a soft side to him during the ceremony, especially when I kissed him."

"You *kissed* him?" Mia asked in a shocked tone, shuddering.

"Not intentionally. I tried to dodge the bullet, but he just laid one on me."

Mia shook her head. "That is not good. You've only strengthened the bond. Now he'll be able to jump into your head and control you."

Sarah scowled. "What? This might be news to you in your misogynistic day, but nobody controls me—and you shouldn't let any man control you either."

"I told Frank all of this, but he doesn't believe it."

Sarah thrust her crown into the girl's hands. "Are you suggesting that Frank is stubborn? Well, you ain't telling me anything new."

Mia slid off her thick copper bracelets. "Put these on. Servants are required to wear them. You know, your lover Frank is a wonderful man. He went through a lot to ensure that this rescue would happen." She reached for a long leather bag and then froze for a minute. She snapped out of her trance as her hands ran over the

satin material on her dress.

“What’s wrong?” Sarah touched her shoulder, wondering if the girl was getting cold feet. She certainly wouldn’t have blamed her.

“Just enjoying my thirty seconds as a queen and being in such a luxurious gown, one like I’ll never see again in my lifetime. I hate myself for what I’m about to do.” Mia lifted up the leather bag and poured a red liquid all over her face. It dripped down her dress, leaving tiny puddles on the floor.

As much as she hated the idea of marrying King Victor, it was a shame for Sarah to watch such a beautiful gown go to crimson ruins. “What’re you doing?!” Sarah stared in shock. It felt like she’d jumped onto the set of *Carrie*, only John Travolta was nowhere in sight. She was pretty sure even Stephen King woulda been running for the hills if he was mixed up in all that mess.

“I am simply playing dead. Relax! It’s only scarlet dye, and it is all part of the plan. I will tell the king that your...er, Gloria’s brother made me switch clothing, drenched me in dye, and then knocked me out. We have to shock them and distract them, or our plan will not prove successful. Please do well in your role of a horrified servant, Sarah.”

Sarah tucked the last strand of hair into her leather hairnet. “Got it. I can do hysterical.”

“A man named Jules, on a brown horse, is waiting outside for you.”

“Jules? Frank mentioned him to me earlier. I’m assuming I can trust him?”

“Of course! Jules is the love of my life. My father told him that if he would do this deed for us, it will prove his loyalty to our family, and his prize shall be my hand in marriage. Of course, that will be a prize for me too, for I adore Jules and want to spend my life with him once my beloved father is healed. My Jules will take you to a carriage three miles away, where your love Frank is waiting.”

“How many times do I have to remind you that he is not my love?”

Mia lay on the floor and closed her eyes. “Forgive Frank if you can, Sarah Larker. Life is too short to hold grudges against those who hold you dear in their hearts, as Frank clearly does. Any man who would risk his life for yours deserves some consideration, don’t you think?”

She had a point, for Frank had done plenty to prove himself. There was no point in being held hostage by anger, and Sarah knew it was time to move on and apologize. But at the moment, there were bigger fish to fry. She was tasked with another Oscar-worthy performance, and she couldn’t remember the last time she’d gone from prisoner to queen to servant girl all in the same day. It was the role of a lifetime.

Sarah covered her face with her hands and ran out screaming. “Help! Somebody! Anybody! The queen’s been attacked.” She shrieked with hysteria, tears running down her cheeks. At some point, her lungs constricted, burning like they were on fire, but she didn’t care. To make it seem authentic, she had to let go of any pain and fear.

A soldier gripped her by her arm. “What happened, girl?”

“She’s bleeding! A man—no, more like a ghost—just appeared before my eyes and—”

He darted off before she even had a chance to finish her makeshift explanation.

Everything played out in slow motion. Soldiers headed toward the dressing room. People gasped, heads turned, jaws dropped, and screams echoed. Every instinct told Sarah to run immediately. She had just spun around on her heels to leave when she noticed Victor racing in her direction, terror etched on his face. Glued to the spot where she stood, her heart pounded with each step he took. Part of her felt bad for deceiving him in such a way after the tender kiss they'd shared, but the greater part of her wanted to live and to have her old life back. She wasn't in her world, her life, and she refused to be controlled by some tyrant, regardless of how hot and how good of a kisser he was. Sarah swallowed past the lump in her throat as he swept her a quick glance, his troubled blue eyes piercing holes in her heart. *Why do I even care? There's no way to soften the blow from a battle axe. He's just gonna have to man up. He hasn't even known me for more than a day, even if I was his bride.* She threw herself into the character of horrified servant, and covered her face with her hands and sobbed as he passed by.

Thrusting the door open, Victor let out a loud shriek. "Get the healer in here now!"

The emotion in his voice made her shiver as she walked away, clutching her chest. Through the crowd of people, directly into the dressing room, she could specifically hear his voice. She wondered when she'd gained the power of superhuman hearing.

"Secure the perimeter!" Victor said. "Nobody comes in or out."

"I feel a pulse throbbing," a man said. "She's alive."

"Thank goodness, but something's not right. Why don't I feel her pain?" Victor asked. "I should've felt this happening the moment it began. We are bonded, one to another, by the ring!"

"Maybe the ring has not taken effect yet," someone suggested.

Feel my pain? Is he talking about the emotional pain of forcing me into marriage with a stranger? Sarah forced her mind into action and swiftly walked through the crowd of people. Dashing off like Cinderella after the ball at the stroke of midnight, she hoped she wouldn't lose a glass slipper, or rather, a leather shoe. She focused on forcing her way through, her eyes fixed on her feet so she wouldn't trip. Something brushed her back, but she didn't halt. Somebody yanked her arm, jerking her back, and she gasped, startled.

Chapter 7

Sarah's labored breathing echoed in her ears. It was even louder than the excited chatter of the crowded room. She took another step forward, pushing

against a bulky peasant, when she felt another tug on her arm. Gasping, she turned, shudders running through her body. A large man towered over her, his bulging eyes fixed somewhere below her head. *Great. Busted.*

The man grinned. "Whom do we have here?"

Holding her breath, she clenched her fists, ready to fight.

The woman standing next to her pressed an empty goblet into her arm yelling, "More wine, girl!" Sarah stared, unbelieving. "Chop, chop."

The man narrowed his gaze, staring from the woman to Sarah.

Rolling her eyes, the woman glared at her, enunciating each syllable. "I said, more wine. Well? What are you looking at?"

She knew she'd be spending ten to twenty in a dark dungeon swarming with bugs once she shoved that glass down her throat. Someone bumped into her, making Sarah stumble. She needed to breathe before panic consumed her.

"Coming right away, madam. I'll fetch a bottle," she said, smiling.

She forged through the crowd to the other side of the room when she saw two huge doors, the outside entrance. Glancing over her shoulder, she scanned the room. The man from before wasn't following. There were no knights, only clueless guests sipping on wine and laughing. Nobody on that side of the room had any clue what was going on, and she was glad for their drunken stupor. She placed her trembling hands on the iron handle and slowly pushed, squeezing through the entryway. Outside, stars twinkled in a blanket of darkness, and a chilly breeze ran over her body. She shivered and wrapped her arms around herself as her breath came out in bursts of steam against the frosty night air.

Strong arms gripped her shoulders, throwing her up against the outside door. "You're not getting away that easy," a male voice said.

Busted again, she turned slowly, fear gripping her. The guy staring at her wasn't the same one, but the frown on his face looked just as mean. Her heart pounded in her chest. She could have tried to run, but there were guards posted every twenty feet. She took a deep breath and continued with her role as a humble servant. "My shift's over."

"This entrance isn't for slaves and riffraff," he hissed. "Next time use the one in the back."

She let out a tiny sigh of relief, keeping her head low. "It won't happen again, sir."

"Over here!" She turned her head toward the man hidden under a cloak, sitting on a brown horse. He grinned at the guards, winking. "I'm here to escort this pretty maiden home."

The soldier shoved Sarah toward the man. He wore a grotesque grin on his face. "At least somebody will have fun with this trash tonight." They all guffawed and laughed as Sarah stumbled forward.

She hesitated for a moment though. She knew if she stayed back, the guards might raise alarm. If she followed the horseman, he might turn into a whacko who'd rape her and dump her body into the next available ditch.

"Come on." The guy offered his hand and whispered, "I'm Jules, Mia's friend." *Jules!* The sound of his name calmed Sarah's racing heart. *Mia's boyfriend.*

Grabbing his hand, she let him pull her up.

"I know you must be tired after your long day of work," Jules said.

"Yes, and I have to be back tomorrow, bright and early." She put her foot into the dangling stirrup and heaved herself up into the saddle.

A soldier whistled, and the rest of them cackled.

Oh gosh! It was then that Sarah realized her leather dress had ridden up, exposing her entire thigh. She tried to pull it down, but it was difficult to do while mounted atop a horse.

Jules pulled hard on his horse's reins, galloping past the army of guards and into the moonlit forest.

Sarah clung to his waist, praying she wouldn't fall. Relief washed over her when she realized nobody seemed to suspect a thing. She shivered as the cool wind blew through her hair. Crickets chirped, and an owl hooted in the distance. Eerie shadows from branches jumped around in the silvery light. "Are you taking me to Frank?"

"Yes. Did everything go according to plan? Is Mia okay?" Jules asked.

"She was fine when I left, but won't they question her once they realize she's not me?"

"My Mia can handle herself. That is one of the things I love about her. But if anything should happen to my love, I shall know who to blame—you and your male companion."

"She's very brave," Sarah said earnestly. "I'll always be indebted to the two of you. Thank you."

He said nothing and only urged the horse on through the woods.

Minutes felt like hours, but they finally reached a wagon, which was situated under a towering tree and loaded with bales of hay. As soon as Jules swung Sarah down from the horse, she raced into Frank's arms. "Oh, Frank!"

He embraced her, and she felt the warmth of his body against hers. "Did I ever tell you how smoking hot you look in leather?"

She smiled, pulling her hair net off, allowing her long curls to bounce freely against her shoulders. "So you're into Tastian servant girls, huh?"

"You look absolutely stunning in anything," he said. He leaned closer and nuzzled her neck. "You smell nice too."

"They curled my hair, painted on as much make-up as an Egyptian princess, drenched me in perfume, and threw me in a Cinderella dress."

"Let me guess... It struck midnight and you lost the gown and glass slippers?" She laughed. "Something like that."

"I can't believe I just rescued you from a real-live castle."

"You should've seen the inside, man."

"That nice, huh?" He gazed at her intently, his hand cupping her face. "Did he hurt you? Did that royal jackass put his hands on you in any way?"

“He only stole a smooch.”

“On the cheek?”

“Lips.” She winked. “And I can’t say I didn’t like it,” she admitted as that magical kiss flashed through her mind, washing her with guilt. She wasn’t sorry about it though. In fact, she wished Victor had made it a longer one, like all night. She cleared her throat, eager to change the subject before Frank started asking questions. She held up her hand with a grin. “Anyway, I got the ring.”

“Our ticket out of here!” His face lit up as he bowed. “My Queen, you rock.”

She grinned. “Yeah, baby—just like this giant rock on my finger.”

He examined the ring, its large ruby and tiny diamonds glinting in the moonlight. “It’s too big, way too tacky. That bragging jerk.”

“Right. It’s so ugly. I mean, clearly, the man has no taste whatsoever.” She rolled her eyes. “Are you kidding me? No woman in her right mind would say no to something like this.”

Frank was jealous and he had every right to be. The darn thing was gorgeous, almost as gorgeous as the man who had placed it on Sarah’s finger. “You’re having a ball with this, aren’t you?” he asked.

She touched his brown hooded cloak. “I see you are too. Love the new digs.”

He smiled, his hazel eyes twinkling. “An investigative reporter knows how to go deep undercover.”

Jules approached and handed her a cloak. “This shall keep you warm, miss. Now, if you will, please take measures to hide and hide well.”

“I made us a little fort inside all these towering haystacks.” Frank reached for some folded blankets on the ground beside the wagon. He hopped on the wagon and spread a few out over the scratchy hay. “A bed fit for a queen.”

She crawled inside and lay down next to him, pulling the top cover over her. She didn’t know which one itched most, the hay, the blanket, or the cloak Jules had given her.

Jules rearranged the haystacks, covering the entrance to their makeshift fort.

“Nice little cubby hole you got here, Frank,” she said. “What’s the matter? You couldn’t spring for a decent hotel? I was kind of expecting a limo on my wedding night, not a hayride.”

Frank snuggled up to her. “I tried to call for a rental car, but they haven’t invented spark plugs yet—or engines or tires, for that matter. They do have horsepower though.”

Sarah rolled her eyes.

“What?” Frank said. “You’re not gonna laugh at my jokes?”

“Gosh, Frank, if you ever lose your job as a reporter, maybe the king could use a court jester,” she said.

“Well, that’s the last straw!” he said, blowing a piece of hay in her direction, to which Sarah just rolled her eyes again.

The horse snorted, and a moment later, the wagon lurched forward. To call the ride bumpy would have been an understatement. It rocked and thumped and bounced over every bump and crack in the road.

“I never thought I’d be riding off into the sunset with another man’s wife—let

alone a queen—on the dude’s wedding night.”

“I hope that’s not a deal-breaker.”

Frank laughed. “That depends. Do I get to enjoy the honeymoon?”

She laughed too, and then continued. “No honeymoon, but I can tell you this. Life throws curve balls you can’t even begin to imagine.”

He chuckled. “Tell me about it.”

“So how did you get these people to do all of this anyway? And what did you promise Mia? Gold minerals? Start from the beginning. What happened to you back in the forest?”

“I was running for my life from a herd of beasts I said never existed. And I’m sure you’re still laughing about that one.”

She grinned. “Just a tiny bit.”

“The next thing I know, you disappear. I hear voices and start running toward them, but there’s this guy in some ridiculous outfit calling you Princess Gloria. He and his armored goons had you cornered, so I had to hang back so they wouldn’t take me prisoner too. Then, when they cleared out, I followed them and found you at the castle. Is this weird or what?”

She snorted. “Thank goodness for horses or you would have never been able to keep up. If you’d have only had a car, you might have crashed it.”

“Hey, those horses were pretty darn fast. While I was looking for a telephone to call 911, I ran into a group of rebels, some local boys who thought for sure I was a spy for King Victor. They tied me up and threatened me, but I used my charm.”

She pressed her hands into her lap, suppressing the laughter bubbling up inside her. It was just like Frank to put the spotlight on himself, even though she’d been the one to survive incarceration and marriage to a barbarian. He got paid to be a sensationalist, after all. “Really?” She bobbed her head, brows raised. “And how did that work out for you?”

“I finally bonded with them over a few glasses of ale and told them about my situation. Then they informed me that I am trapped in some other dimension. Of course, at first, I assumed it was just the ale talking.”

“How do they know that?”

“Well, the legends apparently go back for generations. They only know there’s a magical portal that opens with that royal bling of yours. It’s some kind of ancient door guarded by Bigfoot in the Forbidden Forest, the very same one we came through. For goodness sake, I can’t believe I’m even saying all this.”

“How did you take the news?”

“I freaked out, of course.”

She cringed. “How bad?”

Frank winced, pausing for a second. “Let’s just say that one of them had to throw a bucket of water over my head.”

Sarah laughed, wishing she’d been there to witness it.

“Mia gave me some info on opening the portal, info that had been passed down from her grandmother,” he said. “And the group offered to help me as long as we promised to go to Global Mountain and get some minerals or something to save

Mia's dad's life. Only a royal with a wedding ring can see the ancient minerals."

"So you volunteered me?" She shook her head. "I know I never would have gotten out of there without Mia's help, but even still, how could you make a promise like that?"

"I had to do something crazy to save you from being shackled up with Mr. Tyrant. And get this...the group even knows your sister."

"Really? How? Are they sure it's her? Where is she? We have to go get her and —"

"They specifically remember your sister because they thought she was a witch when she screamed like a maniac that she'd come through the portal. They even held a trial, but she was found innocent when some rich guy named Charles paid off the judges."

"Poor Liz! Oh, thank goodness for that Charles. I couldn't have lived with myself if she'd been burned at the stake!"

"We're heading away from the portal toward another country called Dornia. I got a tip your sister may be there with this Charles dude."

She stared at him in disbelief. "Frank, don't kid with me." If he was playing any of his ridiculous games, she vowed then and there that she would never speak to him again.

"No, I'm dead serious."

"You mean she's okay? Alive? And we're gonna find her?" Tears filled her eyes, and an overwhelming sense of joy flooded through her.

"Alive and in Dornia—at least that's what they tell me, but don't get your hopes up just yet. We don't know if the source is reliable." He caressed her face and swiped away a falling tear with his thumb.

"This is too much. How can I ever thank you?"

"Hmm. I can think of a few ways, but now that you're a married woman and all, I don't know how proper it would be for me to expect you to—"

"Frank!" She went to slug him, but he caught her hand and kissed it.

"Nice thought, but I'm talking about something completely different, like forgiving me and letting me back into your life." Snuggling closer, he said, "I'm sorry I never understood your research. I'm also sorry for all the awful things I've ever said. I'm an idiot."

"You insulted my research." She paused for effect.

"I'll make it up to you, I swear."

Frank's apology meant a lot, but she had other worries. "So Liz's is in Dornia. Let's work on a plan."

"What about my apology?"

"I accept it wholeheartedly, Frank." It was the second time a man had apologized to her that day, only Frank's meant much more to her than King Victor's. "How could I hold a grudge against you when you're here helping me find my sister? And yes, that apology is a good start." She reached up and threaded her hand through his thick hair.

Frank pulled her next to him, his face so close that she could feel his hot breath and his hammering heart. "I've been wanting to hold you since the second

I saw you wearing that sexy Indiana Jones hat and camouflage,” he said.

“I’ve been dying to run a hand through that gorgeous hair of yours from the moment I laid eyes on you at base camp. And you’re right.”

“About what?”

“It was awe when I first saw you, not fright.”

“I knew it! You’re crazy about me.”

“Let’s not get carried away now.” When she touched his face, she knew every defense she’d built against him was starting to melt. He had to care about her, even if they hadn’t seen eye to eye in the past. No man would dive deeper into some bizarre world they knew nothing about, especially while being placed on Tastia’s most wanted list, just to rescue a girl unless he cared deeply for her. Closing her eyes, she let go as he captured her lips with a slow and gentle kiss. She felt the familiar flutter and wrapped her arms around him. She had to admit to herself that she had missed him. He didn’t push any further, and she rested in his warm, comforting arms.

She tried to forget about everything, but the events of the day marched through her mind, making her tremble.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Slowly, the words came out. “No, I’m not.”

Stroking the side of her cheek, he whispered, “Everything’s going to be fine.”

“But what if it isn’t?” she said.

“We have the ring. It’s the answer to all of our problems.”

“I don’t think so. I have a feeling it’s only the *start* of all our problems.”

“No, it’s our way out of here, babe,” he said.

“But Mia said I’m bonded with this king.”

“She’s filling your head with crap she’s been taught since birth, like some of those religious zealots try to do back home.”

“I don’t know what to think anymore.” She took a deep breath. “We’ve actually seen Bigfoot for ourselves. We’re not even in our own world. My sister’s out there somewhere. I’m married to a real-live king. I’m wearing a ring that is a key to some mysterious portal. We’re on the run. And last but not least, Mia told me that if you’re royalty, you’re an Immortal.”

Moonlight pooled in through the cracks of hay piled above them. Sarah’s eyes locked on Frank’s magnetic gaze, quivering from his gentle touch as his fingers brushed her cheek.

“It’s a lot to process, I know,” he said. “The whole idea of another dimension is deeply, shockingly unlikely, but here we are. I mean, I’m blown away by all of it—maybe more than you are because I’m a skeptic by nature—but we’re going to get through this.”

Before she could respond, the king’s voice burst through her thoughts. *Come back to me.* It disappeared as fast as it came. “Get out of my head!” she yelled, pressing her fingers against her temples. She sat up, droplets of sweat rolling down her forehead. Mia was right, for the king could clearly somehow jump inside her head. It was either that or she was going crazy from lack of food and water. Worst-case scenario, she was having a mental breakdown. She began to

wonder where the men in white coats were, as she was just about ready for her straightjacket and her trip on the paddy wagon.

“What’s wrong?” Frank asked. “I’m only trying to help.”

She worried he’d think she was nuts, and she hoped she was just imagining it all based on what Mia had told her. “I swear I heard King Victor’s voice in my head, begging me to come back.”

“Whoa. That’s weird. What did he say exactly?” he asked.

“You wouldn’t even believe me if I told you, Mr. Skeptic.”

“I’m trying to have an open mind here. Did I make fun of you? No, I didn’t.”

“Never mind. I’m stressed out right now. Let’s not talk about this. I-I think I’m going to close my eyes for a little bit.”

“Okay. You’ve been through a lot. Try and get some rest. Goodnight, babe,” Frank said, turning the other way.

“Hey, Frank. I won’t get mad if you decide to hold me—you know, just for tonight. Just remember it doesn’t mean anything.”

“It means absolutely nothing. I got it seared into my memory, just like the kiss that you so didn’t slap me for.”

“Just shut up and hold me,” she whispered.

He wrapped his arms around her, and she closed her eyes, drifting off to sleep.

* * *

The ground thundered underneath pounding hooves, jolting Sarah out of her sleep. She shook Frank’s arm. “Why are we moving so fast?” She moved one of the haystacks over and peeked out. She saw no trees, just the rising light of morning spilling through the clouds. She realized she must have slept all night.

The horses neighed and came to a stop in a meadow at the border of a towering forest. “We have a big problem,” said Jules in a rushed tone.

Frank jumped off the wagon. “What’s up?”

The king’s voice rolled across Sarah’s mind. *Please stop running. You’re going to get us both killed stepping into enemy territory.* She reasoned that if he was so worried about getting killed, he shouldn’t have his men chasing her into dangerous zones. He would have been safe and sound if he’d just stayed in his fancy castle. A picture sharpened into focus, and Sarah felt like she was up in a helicopter looking down; there were swirls of dust, knights, swords, crossbows, spears, and war-adorned horses. Millions stretched out across the land, thundering toward them. An icy chill ran through her, and panic ensued. “The king’s men are close! He didn’t just send a platoon. He sent his entire freaking army!”

“For one person? How do you know?” Jules asked.

“I saw a vision.”

Frank shook his head. “Visions? How’s that humanly possible?”

“I’ve been trying to outrun a few soldiers for an hour now through shortcuts. I didn’t know he had his army after us.” Jules took a breath, his voice frantic. “Our only choice is to take another short cut, through Shadow Forest. If we take the long way around, we’ll be caught.”

“Cut through the forest then,” Sarah said. “They’re coming! Legions of them!”

Jules looked at her like she’d said the most taboo thing in the world. “It is forbidden. If we get caught, we’re dead. Then again, if the king’s men catch us, we’re dead anyway.” He glanced away. “Either way, we’re dead.”

“We can’t sit here and wait for the king’s men to kill us,” Frank said.

Sarah shot him a look. “Or steal this ring off my hand. We can’t wait here like sitting ducks. I say we take our chances in the forest.”

“You don’t know what you’re asking,” Jules said. “Even the king’s men won’t follow us in there.”

“Perfect,” Sarah said.

Jules stepped back. “I’m not taking one step into those woods. Nobody—and I mean nobody—ever comes out alive.”

“You said we’d be dead only if we get caught,” said Frank. “We won’t get caught if they won’t follow us in.”

“I’m not doing it.” Jules ran a hand through his blond hair. “You two are crazy!”

No, crazy is sitting here and handing ourselves over on a silver platter to a bunch of psychopathic swordsmen. “Please take the chance, Jules, or I swear I’m going to knock you out and carry you over my shoulder into that forest.”

“I won’t be the cause of your death,” Jules said. “The more I think about it, King Victor might kill Frank and me, but he won’t kill you, as long as you beg him for mercy.”

“Now’s not the time to play martyr,” Sarah hissed.

Jules threw his hands up. “You’ll fare better with your husband than this forest. I can assure you of that.”

“My *fake* husband. And remember, I deserted him on his wedding night,” Sarah said. “Nobody does that. He’ll make an example out of me.”

Frank grabbed Jules’s shoulder, shaking it furiously. “We don’t have time for your superstitious bull crap. Give us two horses or I’m taking them!”

Hooves echoed off in the distance, and Sarah swallowed. “They’re getting closer!”

“Take us in the woods, Jules,” Frank demanded. “You’re playing with our lives here, and this isn’t a freaking game!”

Jules pivoted back, fear etched in his features. “You’ll be slaughtered.”

“By what?” Sarah asked, her eyes wide. “Tell us what we’re up against.”

“Magical beings,” he answered. “They turn into different forms.”

“Frank shot him an amused look. “Shape-shifters? How do you know they even exist if no one has ever made it out of there alive to tell the tale?”

“They’re real!” said Jules.

“Nonsense!” Frank yelled. “Get these horses moving NOW!”

“He might have a point. Something in there is scaring these people.” Sarah looked off into the distance; she could make out men heading toward them on horseback.

“Have you seen these ‘shape shifters’ with your own eyes?” Frank asked.

“No,” Jules said. “Anyone who has ever lain eyes on them *is* dead.”

Frank pointed toward the forest. "I'll take my chance with them."

He started to frantically unloosen the reins when Sarah grabbed his arm. "I'm not leaving Jules here to die."

"I'm not getting my head chopped off just because he's afraid of some stupid myth. That king's not laying one of his filthy fingers on you, Sarah!"

She glanced over her shoulder. Thousands of mounted soldiers thundered into the open field where they stood. A shiver slid up her spine, and she pointed toward the forest.

Arrows flew over their heads, and Sarah ducked behind the wagon.

"Forget the horses!" shouted Frank. "RUN!"

Chapter 8

Sarah couldn't believe she had defied all reason and escaped the king's clutches. Thinking back, she doubted she could do it again a second time. Nevertheless, that was all the more reason to get moving and escape all the madness. The king's men were gaining on them, getting closer and closer. She took a steadying breath. It was like she had been thrown into some horror flick set in the Old West, minus the Indians and add the knights. She set her jaw and sprinted for the front of the wagon, dashing for the high seat and grabbing the reins all in one fluid moment that would have made any stunt double proud. "Come on! I can drive this thing." She hoped Jules would cooperate and hop onboard. *If he doesn't, I'm gonna have to throw him in the wagon myself, she thought, determined to have things her way.*

The horse neighed, ready to jump into motion. The cart rolled into gear, but it was way too slow. If the horse didn't speed up, they'd be back in a cell within minutes...or dead.

From the corner of her eye, she caught Jules waving his hands. "What!?" she yelled.

"Get off of there, you two!"

"Why?" She glared at him as if he was insane. Maybe he was sick and tired of running, but giving up without a fight wasn't her style. She started to yell but instead switched to a soft voice since yelling at him hadn't accomplished anything. *What is that they always say? "It's easier to catch flies with honey than with vinegar"?* Well, personally, *I'd rather just swat him, but...* Jules, dear, you already said we're dead either way. Let's live for a few more hours, take the gamble. If not for yourself, then do so for Mia. Please? She doesn't want to see you die...and neither do I."

"Perhaps you're right. But you must move over. I'm driving," Jules said.

Sarah stifled her satisfied smile and crawled to the back of the wagon, adjusting her dress as she sat on top of the haystacks next to Frank. Somewhere in the distance, shouts echoed and dogs barked, and

she knew their pursuers might be there within seconds. “Get a move-on, then, Jules,” she muttered under her breath.

The agitated horses neighed and abruptly stopped, stomping their hooves. Jules snapped the reins. “Come on!”

But the horses didn’t want any part of crossing the perimeter into the mysterious forest. Sarah had to wonder if they sensed something she couldn’t. Glancing over her shoulder again, she gasped. Horsemen were less than 200 feet away, the sun glinting off of the polished metal of their armor. She could hear the troop leader call his men to arms. Their galloping hooves kicked up clouds of dust as they thundered along, just as it had in her vision. The dust made her eyes water. She ran a hand over her face, rubbing, but the friction only made it worse. “They’re coming!” she shouted. “Get those horses moving!”

Jules gave a curt whistle and snapped the reins again. The horses snorted, and the wagon lurched forward. He tried to steer them into the forest, maneuvering through the giant ferns. “I hope you know you’re ordering us to our doom!”

“No, Jules, doom is coming up behind us. I think the king’s wrath is far worse than anything we’re going to find in there,” Frank reasoned.

Sarah glanced behind her and scanned for anybody following them. “Do you think they will follow us into the forest?”

“I don’t think so,” Frank said. “Look how scared Jules is—and even the horses. I think they’ll respect the myth simply because they fear it. Walking into this forest is a death sentence, in their opinion anyway.”

Sarah blinked as every detail along the forest’s edge sharpened into focus: the feathery green of a fern, the uneven bark of a tree, even a tiny, six-legged insect scurrying across a red-veined leaf. Unless she had suddenly developed superhero vision, this couldn’t be.

Sunlight shimmered through the towering trees, and a blanket of cold, damp fog surrounded them, sending goose-bumps up and down her shivering arms. The wagon bounced down the rocky path as the horses galloped on. Shivering, she pulled her hood up around her ears to keep warm.

Frank squeezed her hand and pulled her down into the haystacks. “No use getting yourself all worked up. I’ve learned a lot in my years of reporting, Sarah, and one of them is that magical beings don’t exist.”

“Like the Immortals?”

“I don’t believe that crap for a minute. I’ve learned to accept that other dimensions are possible and that unidentified primates can world-hop, but immortality? Not even you could believe something so ridiculous, right?”

“I’d like to believe that the rulers here made the Immortals up to keep their subjects in line, but I’m hearing voices in my head and seeing things, Frank.” *Wait...did I just admit that to him? He’s gonna be looking for a medieval straightjacket if I don’t learn to keep my mouth shut.*

“Seeing things? Hmm. Maybe this dimension is doing weird things to our bodies. Maybe the electric and magnetic fields are off. I mean, we weren’t born here. It could take some physiological toll on us.”

She could only hope that was the truth. The wagon jerked, and Sarah bounced off a haystack. Putting out her hands, she landed on Frank’s chest. “What the heck was that?”

“I dunno, but the wagon stopped.”

While trying to keep her balance, Sarah climbed onto the haystacks and looked at the wagon seat. Jules was nowhere in sight. She glanced at Frank with a confused look on her face. “Where the heck did our driver go? You think he jumped ship...er, uh, wagon?”

“Let’s check it out,” he said, reaching into the hay and pulling out the tranquilizer gun.

“You still have that?”

“Heck yeah! Who knows when we’ll need it? And now might be just the occasion.”

Sarah jumped off the side of the cart and walked to the front. “Easy, boy. It’s okay.” She patted one of the horses, then looked around into the thick blanket of fog. “Jules?”

An icy wind blew across her face, followed by a menacing whisper in her ear. “Gettt oooout...”

She gasped, her heart pounding a million miles a minute.

The horses neighed and kicked wildly, almost as if they’d heard it, too, as if they sensed another frightening presence.

“Something’s spooking the horses,” said Frank, appearing beside her.

“Yeah. I...we heard a voice.”

“A voice? What did it sound like?” he asked.

“A whisper...like a ghost. Frank, do you think this forest is really haunted? Like you said, we weren’t born here, and the people who were probably know more about the place than we do.”

“I really don’t want to find out,” said Frank, pointing the gun into the forest. “Get back in the wagon. We’re getting out of here. Time for Plan B...as soon as I think of one.”

Snap! A branch broke amongst the foliage.

Sarah’s heart thumped wildly. She spun in a slow circle, scanning the dark area. “H-hello?” she stuttered, terrified.

Eerie whispers echoed from all around, as if invisible beings were speaking directly in her ear. Shadows drifted in the trees all around them, causing the hair at the nape of Sarah’s neck to stand on end. “Do you...you hear that? Those voices?”

“I don’t hear anything.”

“You sure? They’re everywhere,” she said, aghast that he couldn’t hear them. *Maybe I’m losing it, having some kind of a breakdown*, Sarah thought. She gripped his arm tightly. “Oh gosh, Frank. There’s something wrong...with my brain.”

“No, I think you’re all right. There is something off in this place though,” said Frank. “We’d better high-tail it out of here...like NOW!”

“What about Jules? We can’t just leave him behind, Frank. I couldn’t do that to Mia, not after all she risked to help me.”

A slow growl echoed through the air.

Sarah froze. “Wh-what was that? And please tell me you heard it too.”

“Yeah, I heard it all right. Sounded like some kind of wild animal.” Frank’s hand tightened around hers. “Let’s get out of here!”

“But Jules is—”

A deep growl rumbled from the vegetation. Sarah glanced up just as a black wolf, the size of a lion, lurched through the ferns toward her. Sarah staggered back against the wagon, gasping. Eyes blazing, body tensed, the furry beast bared his teeth. She suddenly felt like she was playing Little Red Riding Hood in virtual 3D—complete with dark forest, hooded cloak, and the big, bad wolf with real sharp teeth to eat her with. She took a deep breath to calm her racing heart. “Back up slowly...very slow,” she whispered, hoping Frank could hear her. Her hands were clammy, and she had a death-grip on him, even though she knew he would be just as helpless against the wild animal as she was.

The wolf snarled, its top lip quivering over razor-sharp teeth. The horses stood on their hind legs, neighing in terror.

As Sarah looked feverishly for an escape route, she noticed that the fog had mysteriously lifted, and hundreds of wolves surrounded the wagon. “There are so, so many! Wh-where did they all come from?” she muttered, afraid to speak too loudly and set them off.

“Have you ever seen a pack this big?” asked Frank, taking another step back. He pointed the tranquilizer gun directly at the front wolf.

“Never!”

The largest wolf inched closer. It lifted its muzzle to the morning sky and let out a primal howl. The others followed its lead. The bloodcurdling noise sent shivers through Sarah’s body.

“Get back on the wagon,” Frank said. “I’m sure the horses can outrun them.”

“Okay,” she whispered.

A voice thundered inside Sarah’s head. “Leave, and we will tear you to shreds.”

She yanked Frank's arm, showing him she meant business. "No, Frank, change of plans. We need to stay put."

"Are you crazy, Sarah? I'm not gonna stand here and become a snack for those—"

"Frank! If we move, they'll kill us."

"Now's not the time to freeze up on me, Sarah. Now get on the wagon and let's go!"

She took a steadying breath. "No, I mean it. I heard them, Frank, crazy as that sounds. They said if we leave, they'll rip us to shreds."

"What? Maybe you are losing it, Sarah."

She slowly met Frank's gaze. "Listen, I'm going to try and reason with them."

"But they're wolves!" he shot back.

"I think this pack's intelligent. Maybe they're the shape-shifters Jules warned us about."

"It sounds absolutely crazy...but then again, this whole thing is insane. I suppose if you're hearing voices, maybe they're trying to talk to you telepathically."

Sarah gazed into the black eyes of the alpha male, or so she assumed. "We mean no harm. We were being chased. Our lives were in danger, and we had nowhere else to go. We beg you for sanctuary."

Frank nudged her. "No, Sarah, not sanctuary. Ask for safe passage."

She bowed deeply. "We throw ourselves at your mercy and ask for safe passage." She felt like an idiot. *I'm standing here talking to a pack of wolves, begging for protection and mercy? I wonder if there's a padded cell in that dungeon back there. Maybe they should call in the royal shrink.*

The image of the wolf flickered like a television transmission that was about to be interrupted, and a light formed where the animal's chest was, spreading across its shaggy fur until it morphed into the nearby leaves and passed on to the other animals. Sarah blinked against the glaring brightness and raised a shaky hand to cover her eyes, but her curious nature wouldn't allow her to avert her gaze completely. The image flickered more, shifting and elongating, until it burst into thousands of particles. In that instant, every wolf turned into a person.

Sarah's heart trembled at the sight of a tall, copper-skinned man dressed from head to toe in jet black. He looked like an Indian from an old Western movie with his black and white feathered headdress, heavily outlined eyes, his strong jaw, and the stripes and spots painted on his face. Sarah took a deep breath and glanced at Frank. "What the heck?"

Ignoring Frank, the black-eyed man flipped his long hair over his shoulders and spoke to Sarah in a cool voice. "You know the rules. I can only promise you a quick death." With lightning speed, he knocked the gun from Frank's hands.

"No!" Frank yelled. "Don't you understand? We're not from here. We don't know the rules."

Never taking his eyes off Sarah, the man snarled, “They were communicated to you at the edge of the forest, yet you insisted on breaking them and crossing our border.”

“If you heard all of that, then you know my situation,” Sarah said.

The man ran a long, needle-sharp fingernail across her face and down her throat, making her gasp. A tad more pressure, and he could slice right through her skin. “I only know you’re being pursued. I don’t care by whom...or why.”

A woman dressed in the same black leather outfit with more feathers than a Las Vegas showgirl marched forward, holding a gold dagger to Jules’s throat.

Sarah put her arm around Jules. He sucked in air like he’d just run a marathon. “Yes,” she said. “He is with us, and he did try to warn us.”

The alpha male touched Jules’s forehead, then Frank’s, and finally hers. “You’re all marked for death.”

Jules dropped to his knees, and Frank clenched his fists.

Maybe Jules had a good point about not setting foot in the forest, but what else were we supposed to do? Let the knights drag us back to face the jilted king’s wrath? He was a powerful ruler and wouldn’t forgive her for such an act of treason. Besides that, his reputation was at stake; if he didn’t punish her, he’d appear weak, and no king could afford that.

The shape-shifter whipped out a dagger and held it to Jules’s neck. “You’ll be the first to go, since you were the one who gave in like a weakling, knowing the rules, and drove them into the forest.”

Jules gasped.

Sarah gripped his arm and pulled. “Let him go! I made him come in here. If you must punish someone, kill me. He’s done nothing wrong.”

“That can be easily arranged.” Lunging forward, he gripped her throat and squeezed, his nails digging into her soft flesh.

Sarah struggled to take a trembling breath.

The shape-shifter held a cold blade against her throat. “This will teach you humans not to trespass on my territory.”

Sarah gasped as much as she could, her heart drumming in her chest. A burning sensation—hot, deep, and piercing—spread across the fingers of her left hand and quickly intensified. She touched the ring, grunting as she collapsed. “My hand! It’s on fire. Get this thing off me.”

“Sarah, are you okay?” Frank’s voice seemed to come from far away.

She strained her eyes to catch a glimpse of him, but she couldn’t think further than the piercing pain. “Get it off me, Frank!” She met Jules’s gaze as she desperately tugged at the ring, trying to slide it off

her finger. It looked like she was going to need a whole tub of butter or a pan of grease to get the jewelry off. It was stuck, as if it had been cemented to her finger permanently. “Why is it hurting me?” she asked. “And why won’t it come off?”

“I-I don’t know,” Jules said, his eyes wide.

Sarah bit her lip, refusing to cry out as the shape-shifter twisted her wrist. Her trembling calmed some when she saw his arrogant grin falter. As his black gaze fell on the ruby ring on her finger, she heard him mutter with astonishment, “You wear the mark of the Immortals! You...you are an Immortal?” It was like a magnet, drawing him in.

The pain left Sarah’s hand as quickly as it came. Stunned, she shoved her hand toward him. “If you can get it off, it’s all yours—as long as you let us go on our merry way.”

“But that’s our key!” Frank said.

Jumping to her feet, she shot him a glare. “What good is a key if we’re dead?”

The shape-shifter thrust her hand upward, jerking her off balance and causing her to fall against his sturdy chest. Black feathers from his outfit swept across her cheek. He yelled to his people, “She wears the mark of the Immortals!”

Gasps and murmurs erupted as shock registered on every face.

Sarah held her breath, wondering what that yell might imply. They might decide to try and kill her any moment.

His gaze locked on her for a moment, impenetrable and blank, just as guarded as his attitude. Then he bowed, and the hundreds of others scattered about the woods followed suit.

Sarah’s mouth dropped. *This must be what it’s like to be royalty...but I’m not.* She wasn’t keen on all the attention either. “Let’s not make a big fuss. Please rise.”

The shape-shifter scrambled to his feet. “Oh, Highness, I beg your forgiveness and understanding. If I’d have killed you, I would’ve brought the entire wrath of the Immortal world down on my head. Which tribe do you belong to?”

Sarah glanced at Frank, and he gave her the look to play along. “King Victor Fesque is...he’s my husband.” *Husband.* Even still, the words sounded awkward coming out of her mouth.

The woman gasped. “Fesque? He’s next in line to take over the Cardashian Court once King Taggert dies...and that won’t be long now.”

The wolf man’s eyes widened as full-blown acknowledgement registered on his face. “You are married to one of the most powerful men in our world, and I must respect your position as such. My name is Titano, and this is my wife Lana.”

Sarah smiled. “It is such an honor to meet both of you.”

The woman eyed Sarah up and down, focusing on the ring on Sarah’s finger as though she doubted

its meaning. Eventually, she nodded, though it was clear she was still unconvinced. “If she is what she says she is, we can’t afford any trouble with Victor. The Cardashian Court will stop at nothing to avenge her if she is truly his bride. Besides, the rules don’t apply to her, as they are only meant for regular humans. Titano, we have no choice other than to spare her life.”

The man nodded, his gaze focused on Sarah. “I don’t need to start a war with the Immortals with your blood on my hands. My Queen, I am happy to offer you the safe passage you have requested.”

“And my friends?”

He didn’t even blink. “I am afraid they are still marked for death.”

A cold chill ran down her spine. *No!* She couldn’t lose Frank and Jules. She decided that if they were going to force her to play the part of the queen, she was going to use it to her advantage. It was time for another Oscar-worthy performance. “That is unacceptable, Titano. I will not have my loyal servants slaughtered and devoured before my very eyes.”

“Are you forcing my hand, my Queen?” asked Titano.

“I am.” She met his gaze, narrowing her eyes in anger, hoping he wouldn’t see through her. “If you harm one hair on their heads, I shall send my husband back here, and he will come with vengeance and his wife’s rage to motivate him. I assure you, shape-shifter, that it will not be pretty if he has to go to those measures because of your disobedience to my direct commands.”

Lana grabbed her husband’s arm, her black eyes wide. “King Victor isn’t an Immortal we can afford to anger, Titano. Just let them go! They are not worth the casualties of the war he will wage if these servants have a special bond with him as well.”

“Yeah,” said Frank, sounding far too twenty-first century. “King Victor and I go way back.”

The man looked at Frank, then at Jules, and finally at Sarah. “My wife has spoken wisely. You may go—all of you.” He picked up the tranquilizer gun and handed it back to Frank. “Take your weapon with you. We have no need of it, for we are well capable of defending ourselves and our land.”

“Thank you. Your wisdom and obedience are to be commended.” Sarah took a few slow steps back, then quickly jumped on the back of the wagon and crawled into the cubbyhole with Frank right behind her. She peeked out and watched as Jules climbed onto the high wagon seat and whistled to the horses. He pulled the reins, and once again, they were trotting, bouncing, and jerking their way through the bumpy forest terrain. This time, though, they were escorted by hundreds of wolves, perhaps thousands, running and darting through the trees.

Streams of sunlight glistened through the branches and leaves as Jules crossed the border of the woods into a huge meadow. The wolves no longer followed; instead, they sat like trained dogs at the edge of the tree line.

Sarah’s stomach churned, and bile threatened to erupt at any moment. She’d known all along that Victor wasn’t just a regular kind of husband, and that had been acceptable because she didn’t want him, didn’t want the kind of life he offered. But as the lucky trio left the cursed forest behind, something else

dawned on her. Even though he wasn't technically part of her life because their marriage was a scam, he still held power over her life. The shape-shifters had let them go only because they feared Victor's wrath. It defied all logic, and she had to admit that maybe the whole Immortal part wasn't a figment of everyone else's imagination. *Maybe I do share a bond with him that everyone here truly fears—and maybe that's exactly what I need to find my sister and get us out of this crazy place. Then again, maybe I am crazy and am just dreaming the whole thing up. Bring the royal meds, please!*

* * *

A cool breeze blew through the haystacks as Jules steered the horses through the open field to the next town. "Frank!" Sarah called.

He didn't reply.

She poked him in the ribs. "What's wrong with you?"

He turned, a frown crossing his forehead.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

He shook his head. "I just watched a wolf change into a man right before my eyes. I guess I'm a little freaked out. Who wouldn't be, given the situation? I'm trying to hold it together for you, but just don't expect my undying enthusiasm at our prospects anytime soon."

She opened her mouth to speak, but he cut her off.

"No, don't even try to explain this whole mess, because you know you can't. Let's just figure out a way to find your sister and get the hell out of here."

"Forget the pack of wolves. I have a feeling we'll soon have bigger problems than a bunch of weird people howling at the moon. For starters, we're a million miles away from the portal—not to mention I'm a runaway queen, and there's a dangerous man after us." Her chest heaved with each breath. "If Victor's men catch us, we're dead. Frank, we can't afford to waste time whining or feeling sorry for ourselves. We have to stay focused here. If we don't make it, it'll only be because you're sending off those fear-vibes. Even a mouse could pick those up from a mile away, and the mice are probably telepathic here too."

"The king's guys are not going to catch us," Frank retorted. "All we have to do is stay one step ahead of him."

"He's an Immortal, Frank," she said. "We, on the other hand, are not."

He reached for her hands, forcing her to face him. "You don't believe that bull, do you? Nobody lives forever, Sarah."

"I thought it was all a joke too..." She pointed at the forest. "...until I saw them. They said I have the mark of the Immortals. This ring belongs to them, not us, and we stole it. It's grand theft jewelry, Frank, and I doubt they live by the fair trial rule. In fact, I'm sure they're quite okay with cruel and unusual punishment."

“Big dungeon time, huh?” Frank winked, amused.

Sarah shook her head. A few wolf people had him running for the hills, but the psychic bond she was beginning to feel with the king was beyond his rational comprehension. “Try execution, medieval style. We didn’t just steal it from anybody, like a local merchant or something. We had to involve the local mob boss, the freaking godfather.”

Frank glanced down at her finger. “We’ll give it back as soon as we use it to open the portal. Heck, we can even leave a note. What’s so special about it anyway? It looks pretty, uh...gaudy and normal, like something out of a thrift store or Halloween costume shop.”

Sarah twisted a strand of hair around her finger, biting her lip as she considered her words. Frank was freaked out already, but he had a right to know. “There’s nothing normal about it, in spite of its looks. When Victor slipped it on my finger, I felt a weird electricity racing through me.”

“Maybe just cold feet?”

“What?” She peered at him, confused.

“You know...cold feet because you were getting married.”

She rolled her eyes. “Frank, can you be serious for just one minute? I honestly don’t want to wear anything that belongs to somebody who’s not human. Maybe you can keep it safe for us. Just let me get it off.”

He nodded. “I’ll put it in my pocket.”

She tugged, eager to slide it down her finger, but like before, it wouldn’t budge. “Shoot! I still can’t get it off!”

“Are you sure? Let me try,” Frank said. When she held out her hand, he pulled hard. “Nope. A little butter might do the trick. It’s been around since biblical times.”

“Get it off me, Frank!” She stuck her finger in her mouth, biting the band and pulling. “It’s not working. This darned thing almost burned my hand off back there!”

“I thought you were just pretending, stalling for time.”

“Nope,” she whispered. “That was real.”

He gripped the band and started tugging again, harder this time. “Geesh. Didn’t the king bother having it sized first? How the heck did he even manage to fit it over your knuckle to put it on you?”

“Aren’t you hilarious?” She slapped his arm.

“I’m serious, Sarah. You could die from a blood clot.”

Wait...could that really happen? She regarded him, taking in the creased skin around his eyes, as dark as pools.

“Calm down. I’m only joking,” Frank continued. “Leave it on for now, and we’ll worry about it when we reach the next town. Hopefully it won’t start burning your finger again.”

“It’s just so...so weird, Frank.” Her heart pounded in her chest as she turned to face him, realization dawning on her. “Do you think he’ll find out the truth?”

“You mean that you’re not who he thinks you are? You tried to tell him, but he wouldn’t listen. He didn’t give you much choice, did he?”

“I guess not.” Sarah crawled out of their hole and climbed on top of one of the haystacks. She pondered as the wind whipped through her hair and the sun beat down on her face. The horses neighed, making her jump as the wagon ploughed through a meadow of purple and yellow wildflowers. The sweet scent drifted all around her.

“Even if he does find out, he won’t know where we are.” Frank shook his head. “I’m not scared of him.”

“Those shape-shifters were! They sure didn’t want to piss him off, and I’m sure they must have good reasons. Even if we escape from here, maybe Victor can follow us through the portal. He has the key to open it up.” She threw her hands in the air. “This crap might follow us right back home and bite

us in the butt!”

“He only married you because he wants to make Princess Gloria’s dad pay. When he finds out you’re not the king’s daughter, he’ll realize his plan’s been foiled. His revenge game plan of tainting the pure bloodline won’t work, because you’re not Princess Gloria. He will have no reason to waste his time and risk his men’s health coming after us through the portal.”

She glanced down and wiggled her finger. “I have his mark glued on my finger for all of eternity.”

Frank rolled his eyes. “You’re getting a little extreme, babe.”

The soft glow of morning light cast a brilliant shimmer on the blossoming trees. A strong scent of manure wafted past as the wagon raced through the meadow. One good bump, and she’d go flying over the pane, but she didn’t care. All Sarah wanted at that moment was answers. She sat up, her back straight, as she hung on to the haystacks for dear life. “Hey, Jules, what do you know about this ring?”

He steered the reins and glanced over his shoulder. “Not much—just that the Immortals are only allowed to marry once in their lifetime, and when they do, they’re given the ancient ruby ring.”

“Why would Victor waste his only shot at marriage on a stranger he doesn’t love, one he thinks is the daughter of his archenemy?” Frank asked, pulling himself on top of a haystack next to her.

“I told you earlier,” Sarah said. “It’s about revenge. He wanted me to have a whole herd of his babies—to mess up the pure bloodline in their family. Bloodline’s a big deal with these royal types.”

Frank nodded. “I know, but it seems like there’s more to it than that. If this Victor’s an Immortal, how can he have kids?”

“They can,” Jules said through the pounding hooves.

“That’s hard to wrap my mind around,” Frank said.

“Does this ruby hold any sort of power?” Sarah asked. She twisted her finger to catch the sunlight at just the right angles, watching the gemstone reflect the bright rays.

“I don’t know,” Jules said, “but the wearers have some kind of psychic connection.”

She knew how ridiculous it was to believe in psychic powers captured in a ring, but she had also never seen a ring that just wouldn’t come off, no matter how hard she tugged or tortured her finger. She’d also never heard of shape-shifting wolves before. She was beginning to think anything and everything was possible in this strange new—or old—world. Leaning forward, interested, Sarah cocked a brow. “What does that connection do?”

Jules shook his head.

Boy, he’s not much help, is he? They can manufacture magic rings around here but can’t invent Google so I can look all this up? Hmm. “You said all the Immortals receive a ring like this,” Sarah continued. “Can a human even wear one?”

Jules hesitated. “I’m not sure how it works. The Immortals are very private. They live in a secretive

world, following their own set of rules. I do know that every country in our world is under the rule of King Taggert, who resides over the Cardashian Court. I also know that King Victor is rumored to be next in line to rule when King Taggert dies. The king is dying, so it won't be long before Victor takes the mightiest throne."

Sarah blew out a breath. "Yeah, that was what those shape-shifters said."

"Well, it's no surprise King Taggert chose King Victor."

"Why not? Isn't there anyone else?"

"Victor is one of the oldest and strongest men in our world. He's very powerful, rules with an iron fist, and is feared by all."

"Yet you risk your life and face his wrath for us?" Frank asked.

"I'll do anything for Mia," Jules said, his gaze focused on the road ahead. "I love her."

"Wait...did you just say Victor's one of the oldest? How old is the guy?"

"I've no idea," Jules said. "Maybe centuries."

Just my luck again, Sarah thought. Not only am I married to a psycho, stuck with his weird magic ring, but he's an old man with one foot inside the grave, and he just won't ever die. Victor had captured and kidnapped Sarah in broad daylight, but still, she had to ask, "Are the Immortals like vampires or something? I need to know if Victor plans on biting me. Am I gonna start sparkling in the sun, sport some new fangs, and making blood my new choice of drink?"

Jules laughed, looking a bit confused. "Fangs? No, no, nothing like that—at least not that I've heard."

Sarah pressed a hand against her chest. "Thank goodness!"

"In most regards, the Immortals are just like us," continued Jules. "They eat, sleep, laugh, and cry. The only difference is that thousands of years ago, they somehow tapped into the power of immortality. According to legend, they took over every country in our world and have ruled with an iron fist ever since."

"Do the Immortals have any, uh...superpowers?" Frank asked.

"Yeah, and they can do weird things with their minds, like make somebody see visions or—"

"I had one of those! I saw the king's knights and horses before they got near us," Sarah said, her voice rising an octave. "I very vividly saw them coming, and I even heard Victor's voice. I think this is...for real."

Frank shook his head. "I know you've mentioned it a million times, but I find the notion of an Immortal king chasing us a little hard to swallow."

“Think about it, Frank. We’re not in our world anymore. Things are different here. We have to open up our minds to the unexplainable, which I know is a big leap for you.” Glancing down, she whispered, “I’m just wondering how a human like me managed to put on their magic ruby ring in the first place without bursting into flames or something.”

“You know what that proves, right?” Frank said, always the skeptic.

“No. What?”

“That any ordinary person can put one on, which means those people are about as Immortal as me.”

“Can you two please go back into hiding?” Jules asked. “We’re still in Tastia. I will take you as far as Dornia, but then you will be on your own.”

Sarah shrugged. “Sure. I need to forget about all this strange stuff anyway and focus on finding my sister.”

Chapter 9

From the other side of the narrow wooden door, worn with time, Sarah had no idea what would await her inside the local pub. She stepped into the large hall, dirt crunching beneath her booted feet, and stopped to take in the vaulted ceilings and crowded space. Countless tables faced the tarnished wooden bar. Roars of laughter and conversation echoed through the air. Flames flickered from candles in iron chandelier-like wall sconces on the stone walls. Sarah had always thought of candlelight dinners as romantic occasions, but watching a large man with greasy hair bite into a giant drumstick changed her opinion in a hurry. The delicious aroma of freshly baked bread and roast beef wafted into her nostrils, making her stomach growl in spite of the crude and unsanitary atmosphere.

Jules went to place the order for their feast, and Sarah and Frank walked past long banquet tables filled with customers she could swear were wearing outfits straight out of Hollywood. They weren’t dressed fancy like the people in Victor’s ballroom. The women wore long, simple dresses, while the men were garbed in itchy-looking wool breeches with a tunic or doublet and cloaks with a simple belt.

A tall woman seated them at a dark wooden table, on long benches draped in animal furs. It looked as though the woman wore two braids, one on each side, and then wrapped them around her head like a headband and tucked them into place, like some kind of milk maid. Sarah smiled at the lady sitting next to her on the bench, taking in the deep wrinkles running across her forehead and face.

The woman returned the smile, revealing crooked yellow teeth. “Don’t order the peacock, milady.

It's tough as leather and tasty as one's sandals."

Wait...these people eat peacocks? I thought they were only for showing off their pretty feathers in the zoo! I'd rather eat sandals! Sarah smirked. "Thank you. I'll keep that in mind."

The old woman inched closer and patted Sarah's hand as she mumbled, "I hope you're not into dark meat either, love. The pigeon's too salty here."

"I'll take that into consideration as well," Sarah said, cringing at the thought of eating such a dirty, messy bird that leaves feathers and feces everywhere it goes.

Frank glanced over at the woman. "How's the dragon-tail soup?"

"Stop it." Sarah nudged Frank playfully as she peered around. "Look how crowded this place is. This tavern must be the happening place."

"Yeah, it's definitely the medieval hotspot. The only thing missing is the flamethrower...and maybe the jester." Frank slid in next to Jules and smiled. "I hope these furs don't have fleas."

"Thanks, Frank," Sarah said. "Now I'm going to start itching."

"Don't worry, honey," the old lady said. "The furs have been treated with wormwood. Fleas and moths are not keen on it."

"Wormwood?" Sarah stood and waved her hand, trying to get the woman's attention. "Waitress... um, I mean, wench, we don't need luxury seating. We'd prefer a nice hard bench."

"Relax," Frank said. "It's some kind of plant or herb."

Sarah sat down. "I knew that." She chuckled.

Minutes later, a lady in a red velvet dress with a black lace-up waistcoat brought drinks in wooden mugs, along with a generous platter of raw vegetables, fruit, a loaf of bread, and some kind of braised meat on a bed of prunes and cedar nuts.

Jules ripped off a golden-brown leg and bit into it like a starving homeless man. "I hope you will enjoy the duck. Eat, drink, and be merry."

Sarah laughed and looked around for a plate, napkins, or silverware. "Um, are there utensils we can use, or are we supposed to go at it caveman style?"

"Utensils, miss? Why do you think God gave us hands?" Jules asked between mouthfuls of food.

Frank reached for a piece of meat. "The fork's still centuries away from sitting in a silverware drawer, Sarah. Just dig in like he said. We're sitting on animal skins, for God's sake. I don't think manners are all that important here."

"If you don't mind, then I don't. Just don't wipe your greasy hands on my cloak." She bit into a drumstick and smirked as the food stuck between her teeth. Eventually, she managed to swallow and put

the meat aside.

“Don’t like it?” Frank asked.

“Well, for starters, it’s cold.”

“Maybe they could pop it in the microwave for a few seconds.” Frank tore off a piece of bread and dunked it into the meat grease.

“I guess beggars can’t be choosers.” Sarah laughed as she popped a plum into her mouth.

“Better get used to it. You’re not gonna survive on celery and plums, Your Highness.”

“What is this microwave you speak of?” Jules asked.

Sarah met Frank’s gaze. “You do the talking.”

“Well, it’s a kind of box, you see, and...well, I suppose you’d probably think it’s magic or something, but you put food in it, and it zaps it hot.” Frank bit into his pear, signaling the end of the conversation, but Jules didn’t seem keen on letting him off the hook.

“So this box carries a magic fire?”

“Maybe it’s best we don’t talk about our world,” Sarah said. “It might blow our cover or at least get us locked up in the medieval cuckoo’s nest.”

“Right. When we’re done eating, maybe we’ll start asking around about Liz,” Frank said. “I’m sure someone knows her or has heard of her.” His investigation skills were kicking in. No matter where—or when—the man went, he was destined to always be 100 percent reporter.

Sarah took a sip of her ale. “Just keep a low profile, okay?”

He grinned. “Yeah, right, like you fit right in here. Okay, I’ll see what I can dig up.”

“Yeah, me too.”

“We should be safe here in Dornia,” Jules said. “Finish your lunch, and then I’ll take you to somebody who might be able to help. After that, you’re on your own.”

“So this is where we part ways?” Frank asked.

Jules nodded. “As I said before, I must head back to my own land. I must find out where my Mia is and be sure she is well.”

“We can’t thank you enough, Jules,” Sarah said.

After eating her meal, she excused herself and squeezed between two long tables, heading for the bar. Folding her hands on the wooden counter, she waved to get the bartender’s attention.

He was a broad man with a black beard. He turned to face her and arched his eyebrow at her inquisitively (or perhaps flirtatiously) as he wiped down the filthy counter with an even filthier rag. “May I help you?”

Sure. Allow me to fill you in on the wonders of antibacterial soap. If you learned a thing or two about germs, perhaps it would eliminate all those plagues running rampant in the history books, she humored herself. “Perhaps you can be of help. I’m looking for a woman named Elizabeth Larker. She goes by ‘Liz’. She’s my sister, one year older, and she looks just like me.”

The man poured a mug of ale, avoiding her gaze. “Never heard of her, miss, but I know there is an Immortal who looks just like you.”

Sarah shook her head. “No, that’s not her. Liz is human.”

“How can she be a human and your sister if you, yourself, are an Immortal?” He looked down at her ring, then back at her face.

She sighed. “It’s a long story, sir, but let me assure you I am not one of them.”

He smirked, then put the rag on the counter and placed his large, hairy hands in front of her, leaning forward as he emphasized each word. “Your finger bears the ruby ring, and you are the spitting image of Princess Gloria. You must be one of them.”

She regarded him intently, trying to make sense of what he was implying. She was obviously not Princess Gloria, and the only person she’d ever known who looked even remotely like her was her sister. *Wait...could Liz be...? No way. And if she is, why would she change her name to Gloria?* She leaned against the counter, her interest piqued. From the movies, she knew bartenders are the go-to people for everything, so she was sure it couldn’t hurt to ask. “Perhaps you could tell me more about this princess, this Gloria? Was she adopted into the family as a teenager?” Sarah considered the idea that maybe her so-called father, this king, abducted Liz or gave her sanctuary in his kingdom after hearing she came through the portal. Crazier things had happened.

“Adopted?” He scoffed as he used the same dirty rag to wipe down the glasses and mugs—the ones his customers drank from. “No. I worked as a cook in the castle when Princess Gloria was a baby, even courted her nanny for many months. I do know that Gloria moved away to another country when she was twelve, but she recently moved back to spend more time with her family here in Dornia. She’s so grown up now. I saw her last month at a ball at the castle.”

Well, there goes that idea, Sarah thought. *There’s no way that could be Liz.* “Could you tell me—”

A maid inched closer and whispered to the grizzly barkeep, “You’re not supposed to talk about them.”

The guy nodded, a frown perched between his brows.

Sarah straightened her back, and a determined look came over her face. She was unwilling to drop the topic just yet. “You said—”

The man shook his head. “You may ask all the questions you want, miss, but there’ll be no more

answers coming from me, I'm afraid. I have a bar to run here." His tone was sharp, almost arrogant.

Sarah wondered what had caused the sudden sealing of his lips. "But I just—" Sarah started.

He slammed his fist on the counter. "Just leave! I don't want any trouble with your race. The last time the Immortals were in here, they tried to kill me with a sword. Your drinks and food are on the house, but I have the right to ask anyone to leave my establishment, and I am asking you to go now."

Frank approached, touching her shoulder as he whispered in her ear, "Not only does that ring get us out of trouble, but it also gives us all kinds of perks and freebies."

"Yeah, but Victor should've given me a handbook. Clearly this guy doesn't want to help," Sarah said.

Frank nodded, frowning. "Yeah. Nobody else is talking either."

The sound of hooves thundered in the distance. Outside, horses neighed in response. Sarah walked across the room and peeked out the door. The sun glinted off the armor of twenty or so armed knights as they dismounted. She raced back to Frank, her heart racing. "Great! There are soldiers out there—hordes of them."

"Where?" Frank asked, rising from his stool.

She nodded to the door. "Out there. Look for yourself if you don't believe me."

He weaved through the tables, heading for the door. "Don't worry, I still have the tranquilizer gun."

Keeping her gaze focused on the entrance, Sarah hurried after him.

"But how? How did they find us?" Frank muttered.

She shrugged, even though he couldn't see her. "Jules."

He shook his head. "Those aren't King Victor's men. That's King William's entourage."

"How do you know?"

Jules stood behind her, leaning over her shoulder as he pointed out the doorway. "Look at the crest on their armor. See the golden royal eagle?"

She nodded. "Princess Gloria's father, the ruler of Dornia?"

"Speak of the devil, huh?" Jules turned her to face him, a glint playing in his eyes. "King William Jarod. What are the odds of them turning up at the same moment we did?"

She took a step back, her dress brushing the cool wall as she turned to Frank. "Maybe they're just coming in for a bite to eat. Just play it cool."

"But if you look anything like Glor—"

She held up a hand, stopping him mid-sentence as she scanned the room for any other exit. There were no windows and no other doors—not even a trapdoor in the ground. *Crap! Don't they have fire inspections around here! Talk about a fire hazard.* “We should sue them.”

“What?” Frank asked, brows furrowed.

“Never mind.” Sarah pulled the hood of her cloak up and returned to her bench with Frank in tow. She took her previous seat next to the old woman, her eyes darting toward the door as she whispered, “The place is surrounded. How the heck are we supposed to bail?”

Frank gripped her hand tightly, forcing her to meet his gaze. “Let’s just wait and see how this plays out. In our world, police stop for donuts, right? Maybe here they stop for drumsticks.”

She nodded in agreement and hid her face as best she could.

A group of knights in chainmail coats stormed in, and the tavern fell silent. The patrons, mostly humble peasants, lowered their eyes to the ground, as if they were trying to be invisible. Sarah’s stomach fluttered uneasily.

“Attention, patrons,” one soldier said. “We’re looking for Queen Gloria Fesque.”

Sarah gasped. *Just my luck that they aren't here for a bucket of extra crispy.* Shivers ran up and down her spine as she debated whether to make a run for it or play dumb. As much as she fancied the idea of dashing for the nearest exit, she realized her sprint probably wouldn’t get her further than the nearest table.

“We’ve tracked her here,” the knight continued, whipping out his sword. “Point her out, and we shall leave in peace.”

Sarah’s gaze wandered from the tall, hairy guy to the gleaming blade in his hand, frightening in the dim light. People dropped to the ground, scurrying under tables and whimpering. “Oh my gosh,” whispered Sarah. “Are you telling me I’ve somehow managed to piss off two kings? How’s this possible?”

“You better run, dear,” the elderly woman whispered.

Sarah shot her a sideways glance. “I really am a nice person.” Sarah paused, gathering her thoughts. “Really, I am. Everyone loves me. I don’t make enemies. This is way too much for me.”

“I’d say you’re doing a pretty good job considering you have two of the most powerful Immortals on your tail,” said Jules, “and on mine too,” he added.

The knight wrapped his hand in the serving wench’s hair and yanked, hissing, “Where is she, wench? Tell me, and perhaps you will live to serve these miscreants another day.”

Another knight knocked over a thick pillar candle on one of the tables. “We shall have no regrets burning this hole to ash if that becomes necessary!” he shouted.

Sarah peered up from under her hood at the two women pouring liquid from a brown mug over the

smoldering flame that was threatening to ignite a nearby table.

“Tell me if the woman I’m looking for has been here or is in your fine establishment,” the first knight continued.

The wench frowned and looked at Sarah, as if debating whether she should keep quiet or rat her out.

Sarah frowned and bobbed her head ever so slightly, her eyes imploring the woman to keep quiet. Her life depended on the kind stranger.

The knight pulled out his jewel-studded dagger and held it to the woman’s throat.

The hostage’s eyes bulged like a deer in the headlights. Pointing straight at Sarah, the woman said, “She wears the mark of the Immortals.”

The knight threw the woman against a table, sending cups and mugs crashing to the ground. He met Sarah’s gaze. “In the name of the king, you are under arrest for the crime of heresy. You are scheduled for execution. Surrender to me now, and I will make this as painless as possible.”

Wait...did she just tattle on me? What happened to girl power? Aren't girls supposed to stick together? Sarah shook her head. *Boy, she really is a wench. There goes her tip, that's for sure.* Her heart racing, Sarah knelt and crawled under the wooden tables, bumping into everyone’s grubby legs along the way. Jules and Frank trailed close behind. Her hand stuck in something red and gooey, and she quickly wiped it on her cloak, bumping her head. Mice squeaked and squealed, none too happy to be interrupted from their feast of chicken bones, orange peels, and apple cores that littered the ground. She made it to the end of the table and peeked out to meet the eyes of a dreaded knight.

He smiled, showing off the gap where his two missing front teeth used to be. “There she is!” he yelled.

Frank pointed the tranquilizer gun and pulled the trigger. “Go Sarah!”

The knight jumped back startled and pulled the dart out of his chest. Sarah raced for the counter and jumped, easily soaring over it. She’d no idea how she could possibly jump that high, but she was aware that adrenaline could do some crazy things. Landing on her feet, she turned and reached out her hands, dragging Jules over, then Frank. *There has to be a way out. There just has to be,* she thought.

“I lost the gun!” Frank said. “He kicked it out of my hand.”

The bartender stood in the corner, cowering. “I told you I didn’t want any trouble,” he hissed.

Sarah grabbed his hand and gave it a squeeze. “Please help us. This nutcase is going to kill me.”

“Surely you’re an honorable man, sir. You can’t let them hurt an innocent woman over a case of mistaken identity,” Frank said.

The bartender pointed. “Get to the basement. In the back, under crates of vegetables, is a door that leads to a tunnel,” he whispered.

Everything happened in slow motion. Sarah ran toward the doorway that led to the basement, but she suddenly felt a sharp pain in her back. She spun around to see the knight holding a crossbow. He squinted, as if taking careful aim not to miss his target. Before she could blink, more arrows shot through the air. In the next second, another one pierced her heart. Pain radiated through her chest. Frank and Jules yelled. Patrons screamed. Her breath became labored as she dropped to the ground, her face slamming against the cold, dirt floor.

“Evil must be stopped!” yelled the knight. “Your sacrifice will save our land.”

Sarah groaned inwardly. She didn’t have one evil bone in her body. Scamming the king was wrong, and stealing somebody’s identity was too. She only did it out of desperation to get home, to get out of a world she didn’t belong in. Her vision blurred, and her body went limp. She couldn’t even move a muscle, let alone scream. Blinking, she tried to clear her vision.

“That ain’t happening!” Frank scooped her up in his arms.

A door squeaked open, and footsteps thudded down a steep set of stairs. Sarah could feel her head bouncing back and forth, as if she was some kind of inanimate bobble-head doll on a dashboard.

“Keep going! I’ll hold them back,” yelled Jules, barricading the door behind him with giant jugs of ale that he dragged across the floor.

Sarah drew in a shaky breath as pain rippled across her chest. She let out a small gurgling sound.

“Oh, Sarah,” Frank pleaded, his voice wavering. “Don’t you die on me, girl.”

She reached up to stroke his cheek. “I’m sorry, Frank...so sorry.”

“Hang on!” said Frank, squeezing her hand.

“I’m...I’m dying,” Sarah whispered.

He shook his head vehemently, his eyes wide, teeming with an emotion she couldn’t place. “No! Don’t you say that. Don’t you dare die on me, Sarah.”

Spots danced in her vision. *Is this the way it’s going to end? Am I really going to die here, in the basement of some medieval tavern?* She didn’t want to die without knowing what had happened to Liz. “When you find my sister, tell her I love her.”

Frank’s voice wavered. “You’re going to tell her that yourself.”

A loud rattle made her jump.

“Those knights pounding on that door might not agree with...with you,” Sarah said with a pained gasp, squeezing Frank’s hand tightly.

“They’re coming!” yelled Jules. “Hurry!”

She choked on a ragged breath. Her vision blurred even more, and she blinked again, to no avail.

Voices became faint and then trailed off. And then, there was only darkness.

Chapter 10

Sarah's eyes fluttered open. Through a foggy haze, she took in the bright light and the brownish stains on her fingers when realization set in: She'd been shot with an arrow—twice. Someone was pushing down hard on her chest, making it very difficult to breathe. Pain flooded her chest, pushing her to the edge of her consciousness. She opened her mouth to speak, but no sound came out.

A voice hissed to her right, the words too low to distinguish. She turned her head sharply, flinching against the sudden jolt of pain rippling through her. “What do you want me to do?!” shouted Jules. “I’m not a healer! She was shot directly in the heart. I’ve never seen anybody survive such an injury, not even for this long.”

“You must know someone who can help,” the first voice said again.

Sarah could hear their voices coming from all directions. She wanted to answer, but the words remained frozen in her throat. The sweet smell of incense filled her nostrils. Beams of light shone down on her. *Divine light?* Staring upward, she let out a groan. *Stained glass...vaulted ceilings. Painted angels? Am I in heaven or on my way there?* Being dead would at least end the pain rippling through her, but she still had so much to do. *My life can't end now—not like this.*

A picture of a chubby cherub caught her eye. *Maybe this is just a renaissance art gallery.* She peered closer at the ceiling, which rested on six Tuscan columns of great height. *Nice architecture.* Soaring round iron candelabras hung from the ceiling, capturing her attention, as she stared at flickering flames, trying to make sense of everything. Light shone through multiple stained glass windows in a hue of vivid, glowing rainbow colors, the sun making the mosaic patterns sparkle and shine. She surmised that she had to be in some kind of church.

“Sarah,” the first voice said.

She turned her head, taking in the blurred shapes. Her gaze sharpened, allowing her to recognize Frank.

He inched closer until his nose was inches away from her face. “We’ll get you out of this...alive.”

“Don’t make promises you may not be able to keep,” Jules said matter-of-factly.

Frank pulled back, hesitating. "I got the arrows out."

"Yes, but she's still losing much blood," Jules said.

She would've liked to point out that she could hear every word they said, but somehow it didn't register with her that they were talking about her. *They couldn't be. Surely I'm not the one hurt and covered in blood. Did he say an arrow went through my...my heart?*

"Send for a healer and get me some antiseptic of some sort...you know, something with a high alcohol content," Frank said.

"You want a drink when your woman is dying?"

"Well I could use a stiff one right about now, but I need it to sterilize the wound." Frank's voice echoed through the large room, cutting through the silence like a knife as he jumped to his feet, peering around him. If he was looking for some good old whiskey, he wasn't likely going to find it there. "It always works in the movies when those cowboys pour moonshine on a bullet wound," he continued.

"Movies?" Jules asked. "And I know we have wolf people, but what are cow boys?"

Frank dismissed him with a wave of his hand. "It's not important," Frank said. "Please just go. Sarah's life's at stake."

"They're counting on us to look for help. Guards will be stationed all over the healer's cottage."

"I'll go myself then," Frank demanded.

"Have you gone mad? Perhaps you took an arrow to the head."

"Just tell me where to go. Please, Jules. I can't just stand here and watch her die without doing anything. What if it were Mia?"

Sarah moaned. "Bon Jovi would be proud," she said.

"Huh?" Frank said, kneeling down and grabbing her hand.

"Yeah. Brings a whole new meaning to 'Shot Through the Heart,'" she said, attempting a crooked smile

"Sarah, can you hear me?" Frank asked.

"Did the serving wench pack me a doggy bag?" she whispered. "I wasn't finished with the duck."

Smiling, he stroked her face. "Hey, Sleeping Beauty. Welcome back to the land of the living."

"Frank..." She squinted, her gaze searching his hazel eyes. "Where...where are we? This can't be heaven. There's no way they'd let you past the pearly gates."

He laughed, happy to hear her voice, in spite of her banter. "We're in a chapel. Jules has a friend

who's a priest."

Sarah was lying on something hard, a wooden pew. She groaned and tried to move her aching bones. "Surely you could've found a rug or something to squeeze under me. My back's killing me." Pushing up on her elbows, she sat up and noticed that the room was illuminated with hundreds of candles in the front of the church, placed meticulously around a wooden altar decorated with a gold and white cloth. Her hand flew to where Frank had applied pressure rags. "I should be...dead." She scrambled to her feet, and the bloody rags fell to the floor. She pulled down the blood-soaked cloak and stared at the gaping wound as it shrank smaller and smaller, finally disappearing right before her eyes. "What the heck?" she gasped between breaths. "What's going on? The wound's gone—no redness, no pain, and not even a scar."

Frank ran a hand over the smooth skin where the wound once was. "How's this possible?"

Jules looked at Frank, his eyes widening in shock. "It's true. She's an Immortal!" He gasped. "She is one of them."

"What?" Frank asked, his mouth agape with shock. "Because she put on this bubblegum machine ring of his?"

"I don't get it. Why?" Sarah said, confusion filling her voice. "It's just a ring."

Jules lifted her hand, peering down at the jewelry. "This is not just any ring, miss. It's a powerful, ancient one, thousands of years old, and it obviously carries the power of transforming one into an Immortal being."

A shudder of fear ran through her. "Get it off right now! Find some grease or butter, whatever it takes!" She pulled at the band with all her might, wincing in pain. "That knight—he said they could stop evil by killing me. What the heck did that mean? Do they think I'm the devil or something?"

"I don't know, but I am sure they are mistaken. I've only known you a short while, but I know you are not evil." Jules touched her shoulder. "Stop, Sarah. No amount of lubricant will allow you to remove that ring."

"I didn't ask for this." Sarah fell into Frank's arms, and he held her tight. "Why didn't Victor warn me I'd become a walking freak show? Although, I guess I should feel grateful. Without this ring, I'd be dead right now."

"He doesn't know you are human," Frank said.

She had no idea Victor was Immortal either, like something straight out of some crazy *Highlander* movie. *He wasn't going around shouting "There can be only one!" or anything, but maybe I should've picked up on some small sign.* Her senses had been heightened, but she had assumed that only meant the ring had some strange magical properties. Never in her wildest dreams would she have imagined herself becoming Immortal. "I-I don't understand any of this."

Frank ran a hand through her hair. "We're going to figure this out together, I promise. We'll undo the ring's curse somehow, Sarah. There has to be a way. But first, we have to figure out why there's so

much heat on us.” He looked at Jules. “Why are King William’s men trying to kill Sarah?”

His brows furrowed. “I don’t know. Perhaps they are angry because we brought Victor’s wife over here, into their territory.”

“No, that can’t be it. Notice they didn’t shoot *us*,” Frank said. “Sarah had a bull’s-eye on her back, and they were aiming to kill.”

Jules shook his head. “They hate Victor, and I have no doubt they’d hate his wife too.”

“It must be the reason why Victor warned me not to come to Dornia...into enemy territory. How good is your witness protection program out here?” she joked halfheartedly.

Jules cocked an eyebrow.

Sarah waved her hand. “Never mind. Listen, King William is just mad because I pretended to be his daughter, Princess Gloria. Think identity theft. Maybe I brought disgrace to her name somehow, and that’s why they think I’m evil.”

Snap! Outside, someone or something stepped on a twig.

Frank rose to his feet and motioned for them to be silent. When nothing moved, he inched closer, whispering, “We need a game plan. Let’s find Liz...and quick.”

“But how?” Sarah asked. “Everyone’s after us. I’m on the most wanted lists of two kings.”

“There might be a third party after us as well,” Jules said with a sigh. “Sarah was turned into an Immortal without permission from the Cardashian Court. They’ll send trackers the second they find out, if they haven’t already.”

She slapped her forehead. “You’ve got to be kidding me!”

“The Cardashian Court has their own justice and trials,” Jules said.

“Is Victor in trouble with the court for making me Immortal?” Sarah asked. “Maybe that’s why he’s after me.”

“For payback?” Jules shook his head. “How could he get in trouble? He didn’t knowingly marry a mortal behind their back. He thought he was marrying an Immortal princess. He is guilty of nothing in this. In spite of their propensity for swift justice, even the Cardashians should see that. They are very wise.”

“Then he’s only out for revenge, because we tricked him and likely made a fool of him.” Sarah took a trembling breath, her shoulders slumping. “Can this get any worse? It’s like being chased by the FBI, the police, and the Italian mafia all in one night.”

“Had much experience with any of that?” Frank asked, grinning.

Sarah slapped the back of his head.

He shrugged. “What? At least you don’t need a bulletproof jacket. I’ve heard they are harder to come by than the actual weapons.”

She slugged him again. “Focus, Frank.”

“The Immortals from the Cardashian Court will likely give you a speedy trial and then kill you,” Jules said. “We know King William’s men will definitely kill you. As for King Victor, I don’t know his intentions, but he could be the lesser of the evils. You could have a chance with him—especially if you give yourself up and quit running.”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “Wow. I’m overcome with so many wonderful options, aren’t I? Let’s see... courtroom and likely death, definite death, and making babies with a king I barely know. I’ve no idea which one to choose.”

“Try to look at it from another perspective, Sarah. You didn’t die before. If they try to kill you, you might just weasel out of it with the help of that ring,” Frank said.

Sarah groaned. “Awesome. I’ve always wanted to know what it feels like to be a zombie.”

“Then my advice would be to take your chances with Victor,” Jules said softly.

She glared at him. *Take a chance with Victor?* She remembered those dangerous eyes he flashed her, warning her not to escape. She also remembered the way he’d gripped her wrist and told her she’d pay dearly if she ever tried. A chill ran up her spine. “No way! I don’t know why or how, but I can feel his anger and bitterness from my betrayal. He is after revenge, and he has a reputation to maintain.”

Jules put a hand softly on her shoulder. “He may spare you. You are his wife...and an Immortal.”

“Yeah, thanks for the reminder,” Sarah said.

“King Victor has the power to sway the Cardashian Court to forgive you, especially when he takes over after King Taggart’s imminent death. That will put him in the perfect position to save your life. Your husband is one of the most powerful men in their group, feared by all. He may be your best bet to surviving all of this.”

She turned away with a shudder. “*If* he doesn’t kill me the second he sees me.”

“Can she even be killed?” Frank asked.

She nudged him in the ribs, annoyed. “You make me sound like I’m some kind of virus.”

“I’m just saying...” Frank said, effectively dodging another shove. “You might want to put less force into those. I’m not keen on bruises. I have a reputation to uphold too, you know, and getting beaten up by a girl won’t help.”

“I barely touched you.”

He cocked a brow. “Your hours at the gym are starting to pay off then.”

“I only want to look out for Sarah’s best interests,” Jules said. He turned to Frank. “You’ll certainly lose her, but at least she’ll live.”

“Live? Under the rule of a tyrant in some kind of medieval world?” Frank asked. “What kind of life would that be? No. Sarah deserves better, and I promised to get her out of here.”

“Like I said, she’ll live, and so will you.”

“After I stole his bride on his wedding night?”

“He might not even know that you were involved in Sarah’s rescue,” Jules said. “Victor’s her only chance. To get her out of this mess *you*’ve created, he’s a risk worth taking.”

Frank shook his head vehemently. “No way. I’m not going to stand by and let her throw herself at the mercy of some psychopathic royal pain in the—”

“Frank!” Sarah said, getting tired of being talked about like she wasn’t even there.

“And that’s final.”

She shot him a thankful look. Even though it wasn’t really his business, she appreciated how adamant he was about keeping her safe, as if he truly cared for her wellbeing. “I don’t think the king wants me back. I might’ve called him Vic one too many times,” she said. “He really hates that. I’m not sure he’d be very forgiving or eager to experience marital bliss with someone he’s already threatened to kill.”

Jules snorted. “Vic? You called him that, yet you’re still breathing? You must have a brilliant guardian angel.”

Sarah smirked. “More likely it’s because my boobs were half falling out of that wedding gown. What’s with those corsets anyway?”

Jules’s cheeks flushed, and he cleared his throat, signaling that a change in subject was imminent. “You could use your, um, queenly influence to strike a deal to see Frank sent safely back home—to his own world.”

“No deals. Frank and I can get home on our own.”

“You think the Immortals from the council will give up so easily? You think they won’t follow you back through the portal and hunt you down?” asked Jules. “You’ve no idea how vicious and ruthless they can be, and they do not take deceit and betrayal lightly...that or theft of their magic artifacts.”

Frank’s eyebrows rose into arches of disbelief. “Sure. Maybe if they had some kind of tracking device, but I’m pretty sure that cheap trinket isn’t equipped with GPS.”

Sarah noticed the serious look on Jules's face and the intensity of his words. "You don't know that, Frank. Maybe I've been tagged, like a wild animal," Sarah said.

"Doesn't matter," Frank said. "I have all kinds of tricks up my sleeve to outrun them."

"Without their blessing, you'll never be safe again." Jules stood and adjusted his cloak, pulling up his hood as if he was getting ready to leave. "You can't do this by yourselves any longer."

"Yes we can," Frank said. "You've grown up being taught to fear them, but we haven't. We'll fight to the very end."

"With that kind of thinking, you're going to get yourselves killed. Sarah doesn't even know how to use her powers. She's like a newborn fighting against experienced Immortals, hundreds of years old. How long do you think you two can last out there stumbling around in the dark with no knowledge whatsoever of the landscape or what you're up against?"

Sarah's stomach fluttered. She knew absolutely nothing, but she was sure she and Frank could figure it out on their own. They were both investigators after all, though she never would have liked to compare herself to him before they'd arrived here. "I know we're in over our heads here, but I think we can manage."

Jules's gaze narrowed. "You're drowning, milady. You need help from another Immortal, someone who can guide you through the process. Go back to your husband and fall into his arms. Throw yourself at his mercy and beg for forgiveness. He's the only one who can help you now."

"She's not going back to King Victor, Jules, and I'll hear no more of it!" Frank yelled.

"If I go back to him, all of this we've suffered in an effort to escape will have been for nothing," Sarah reasoned.

"So what?" Jules asked. "At least you'll continue to breathe. Did you ever think he might annul the marriage and let you go once he finds out he married the wrong person?"

She knew Victor would never let go of her so easily. "That won't happen. He feels connected to me because—"

Frank met her gaze straight on. "Is there something you're not telling me?"

"Did you bed down with him?" Jules asked, wide-eyed. "I mean no disrespect, miss, but if you did, you completed the bonding process, and it is unbreakable."

"Sleep with him?" Her cheeks suddenly burned. She'd definitely thought about it. "No! Of course not! Who do you take me for?"

Frank grabbed Jules's arm. "Sarah's not like that. She only kissed him on the lips during the ceremony, and that was only to play the part of a happy wife."

"She's seeing visions, and he is behind the sending of them," Jules said. "That would never happen unless a bond was formed, and that would likely require more than a tiny kiss on the lips." He glanced

over at Sarah. “Did you give yourself to your husband before you ran?”

“No, I most certainly did not...and quit referring to Victor as my husband!” Sarah retorted.

Frank shoved Jules against the wall, his eyes throwing daggers as he hissed, “Listen, buddy, I’m really beginning to dislike you. What kind of girl do you take Sarah for anyway? She’d never touch him like that. Do you understand?”

“Perhaps not by her own will, but she could’ve been forced,” Jules whispered, pushing him back. “Victor is a very powerful, persuasive man, and we should have never left her in that dungeon to face him. It was a fool’s plan!”

Sarah nodded eagerly. “Frank is right, Jules. Nothing like that happened! I swear. We just said the vows, I kissed him, and I escaped the first chance I had. The entire thing was a farce.” She didn’t think it was a good time to elaborate on just how much, how deeply she’d kissed him or how much she’d enjoyed it.

“I will be back soon,” Jules said, heading toward the exit.

“Just admit it, Jules,” Frank said, following after him. “You don’t approve of what we did—or should I say—what *I* did. This entire thing was my idea, and you’re just angry that the fool, as you called me, dragged Sarah and Mia into this wedding gig.”

Jules glared at him. “You are correct, sir. As I said, it was a fool’s plan, and it put my Mia and your Sarah in more danger than was necessary.” He took a deep breath before continuing. “This whole thing could have been avoided! My friends and I risked our lives when we took you to the dungeon to rescue Sarah, but did you come back with her?” He pushed Frank away and pointed at Sarah. “No! You left her to her fate. Unbelievable.”

Sarah realized in that moment that Jules had, in fact, been the lookout, the one who had done the whistling. “Guys, stop it!” She turned to look intensely at Jules. “It’s not his fault,” Sarah said. “Frank gave me an out, and I didn’t take it.”

“That is only because of him!” Jules pointed an accusatory finger at Frank and shot him a most distasteful glare. “He filled your head with talk about the ring, the key to your home world. Had you left with us at that very moment, you’d be free from all of these problems already, and my Mia would be by my side instead of suffering or in danger!”

“And I’d be stuck in this world forever!” she retorted.

“We don’t need you anymore, Jules,” Frank said.

“I hope you know your so-called ‘brilliant plan’ has ruined Sarah’s life,” Jules said. “I think you’re the one who needs some sense.”

Frank took a menacing step forward, his cheeks ablaze with anger. “Get out! We don’t need you.”

Sarah grabbed his arm. “Everyone calm down. Let’s take a breather.”

“I’m going to look for my friend,” Jules said, opening the door.

Wait...is he crazy? But the knights saw his face in the pub. They know he’s in on it with us. Sarah grabbed his arm, his gaze imploring. “It’s not safe out there.”

“It’s not safe in here either.” Jules shot Frank a glare over his shoulder before he walked out, slamming the door behind him. Ironically, as loud and ominous as the slam sounded, the ornate door was carved with a bevy of angelic symbols and cherubs.

“You idiot! How could you chase away the only friend we have in this dreadful place?” She turned to face Frank, challenging him to a fight that was long overdue. She wasn’t keen on his Victor-marrying plan in the first place, and he had talked her into it, just like Jules said.

He hugged her tight, pressing her against his broad chest. “I’m sorry, Sarah,” Frank whispered into her ear, “but the thought of sending you back to that whack-job infuriates me. We’ll find another way. I promise.”

She snuggled into him, inhaling the manly scent of his skin, comfort washing over her, if only for a second. She let out a sigh, eager to forget her own incredulity and just trust him for a change. “I know, babe. Just try and keep your cool. Your outbursts aren’t helping my nerves.”

“So what exactly did you do to strengthen this so-called bond with your so-called husband?” Frank asked. “I’m sorry, but I gotta know.”

She looked up at Frank, ready to confess it all. “I kissed him.”

His gaze narrowed. “Yeah. You mentioned that.”

“No, I mean...I-I *really* kissed him...like, uh...a lot.” She felt the telltale heat rising in her cheeks. Her breath caught in her throat, but not from shame. Somehow, Victor’s kiss lingered in her mind, all too vivid, and it wasn’t an unpleasant memory.

Frank narrowed his gaze. “What happened to the alleged smooch?”

Is he jealous? She regarded him intently, taking in the frown perched above his brows and the tight lines around his mouth. “It was more than that—more like some serious making out, but it didn’t go very far. I swear! Besides, it was only because he seduced me with those bright blue eyes of his, and I think—”

He pushed her away. “I just wanted the truth. You think I want to hear the details? How could you let him lock lips with you anyway?” He shuddered for dramatic effect.

She shrugged, anger rising up inside her. *How dare he corner me like that and try to make me feel guilty?* “It just happened, Frank. It’s not like the priest announced us man and wife and I jumped him. It was more like the other way around. I guess when I didn’t resist, when I kissed him back, I somehow triggered the darn ring. It was really just some kind of accident.”

“So he just attacked you?”

“He just seized the moment.”

“And you obliged him because you liked it?” He groaned. “I don’t believe this. I know we’re not dating, but still. You’re attracted to him big time, aren’t you?”

“What woman wouldn’t be?”

“Right, with ‘those blue eyes of his’,” he mocked. “Gosh, Sarah, I can’t believe you’d kiss that jerk. Do you want to be with him, to be his queen or something?”

“Frank, he’s not my type. You know as well as I do that the last guy I’d want to be with would be a guy who wants to control me.” She gripped Frank’s hands. “Besides, I’m here with you, aren’t I?”

“Right,” Frank said, not sounding too sure.

Chapter 11

Jules returned but refused to talk to anyone, and Sarah thought it best to give him some time to cool down.

When footsteps echoed outside the door, she held her breath and motioned Frank to keep silent. Jules’s hand moved to the dagger tied around his waist. She had no idea what he’d do with it against an entire army, but it was the thought that counted. At least it indicated that he wasn’t going to jump at the first opportunity and turn his back on them, leaving them to their fate.

The thuds stopped in front of the door, and an eerie silence ensued. Sarah barely dared to peel her gaze off the entrance to shoot Frank a questioning gaze. His brows were drawn together, his tense shoulders, and the muscles peering from under his short sleeves told her he was ready to battle for his life—and for hers. So was she. She decided that groveling was fair play; if need be, she’d punch and scream her way out, tugging at hair and kicking them where it’d hurt the most, hoping their armor didn’t protect them everywhere.

The door handle moved slowly, and the sound of old hinges cut through the silence of the chapel. Sarah clenched her hands and nodded at Frank as the door flew open. The second it did, she pounced like a cat, ready to claw her way out, stopping only inches away from the face of an old man with thinning white hair and a scraggly white beard.

“Hello, Father,” said Jules calmly.

The priest hugged Jules in a tight embrace. “It’s so good to see you, son. Thomas told me you are here and of the dire situation you are facing.”

“I would have come myself, but I got tied up here.” Jules smiled. “These are my friends, Frank and Sarah.”

“Greetings,” he said, smiling. “Welcome, my Queen. My name is Father Haster, and I am the priest of this sacred house.” He wore a hooded monk’s robe with a rope-like belt.

She peered behind the man to see whether it was a bluff, to see if anyone was hiding outside to ambush them. The cobblestone path seemed deserted, the woods to the left and right devoid of life.

“Did you expect someone else?” The priest looked away as he broke the silence, drawing her attention to him.

“It’s our pleasure to meet you, Father, and we’re actually glad to see you and not *someone else*,” Frank said, grabbing the old man’s hand in a tight grip until his knuckles turned white.

“You’re killing him,” Sarah whispered.

He threw her a questioning look, so she pointed at his hand. Frank let go, a smile playing on his lips. “It’s not my fault I’m built like an ox.”

She smirked. “You got the ox part right—in smell and brains at least,” she joked. “Father,” she said, bowing, “it’s an honor to meet you.”

The priest touched her forehead with a finger as dry as sandpaper and gestured her to straighten. “You can’t leave until tomorrow, child. There are orders about to execute you on sight. I’ve never seen King William react this way to anything or anyone. Sending his troops to kill a defenseless woman is uncalled for. Jules has filled me in on your problems, and I am more than happy to offer you sanctuary.”

Of course, he doesn’t know I made out with Victor, she presumed. She smirked. “Jules is a very helpful soul...and so very understanding.”

Jules nodded, not getting the hint.

“Yes, he has always been known to help those in need,” the priest said, “and I’d like to think he gets that from his priest.”

Sarah eagerly shook his hand. “Well, truly, Father, it is a pleasure, and thank you for your kindness.” Then she said dryly, looking embarrassed, “I guess I shouldn’t have played the part of Princess Gloria. It might’ve earned me an Oscar in our time, but here, it seems my only reward would be a death sentence. Can I ask, Father, what would be the means of execution for someone of my crimes?”

The priest looked away as he whispered, “Beheading.”

I’ve been thinking I was losing my head all this time, but literally? Sarah let out a breath she didn’t realize she’d been holding. “I better calm down and keep my head on straight then.”

Frank wrapped an arm around her waist, forcing her to face him. “Your life isn’t a joking matter, Sarah.”

“Let me deal with it the way I want,” she hissed. “Remember what I said about controlling men, Frank.”

“As you wish.” He shrugged and let go of her as he turned to the priest, but she could see her reaction didn’t sit well with him.

That’s just too bad, Sarah thought. I’ve had enough of people telling me what to do and how to react. It was time to be herself and play it all down because pretending no evil would ever befall her was a better coping strategy than expecting the worst and letting herself fall into an abyss of worry and depression.

“Even if Sarah’s refuses to acknowledge it,” Frank said, shooting her a sideways glance, “I say we need to protect ourselves. Do you have any weapons we can use? Wouldn’t have an Uzi lying around, would ya, Father?”

“I know not what an Uzi is,” Jules said, “but weapons in a church?” Jules snorted. “What do you expect? Crucifixes and holy water?”

“Well, given that we’re dealing with Immortals, maybe,” Frank said.

Sarah peered at him, not amused at his jokes after he’d just scolded her for making her own. “An Uzi, Frank? Really. Don’t be stupid. Try to think more along the lines of swords, Jules—or maybe even a dagger.”

“Did you see their armor? What do you plan to do with a dagger, sweetheart?” Frank asked. “Peel them an apple and poison them with it?” His arrogant, superior attitude was slowly beginning to irritate her.

“Do you have a better idea? And I swear, you better not start talking about some Rambo arsenal again, or I’m going to find the closest dragon and personally feed you to it.”

The priest held up his hands to stop their banter, which was becoming a bit more heated than friendly. “Enough! There’ll be no violence in this house of God.”

“Sounds good to me,” Sarah said. “But does the army outside agree too?”

Frank nodded, agreeing with her for a change. “Yeah. Why don’t you remind the leaders of Tastia and Dornia about peace and goodwill, because right now, we’re toast. If you don’t toss in a sword or two, we’ve no way to defend ourselves.”

The priest shook his head and turned on his heels, walking out of the room without another glance back.

Jules chased after him. “Father, do you need any help?”

Sarah elbowed Frank in the ribs hard. “Now you did it! You made the priest mad.”

“What did I do?” Frank hissed.

“You know all too well. Quit pissing everyone off, will ya? We already have a long list of people fuming at us. We don’t need the clergy on our heels as well. Think witch hunts and all that.”

“What?” He snorted and rubbed a hand over his face, annoyed. “Every soldier out there’s trying to kill you, and you think I’m just being paranoid.”

“Nope. Just irrational and negative.”

“I sent Jules out to get the rest of my bags and take them to my quarters in the back.” The priest’s voice made her turn around. “And this is for you.”

Her gaze fell on the silver heart necklace he held out to her. For a moment, Sarah could only stare. Her eyes clouded with tears as she lifted a finger and traced it over the face of the locket. Her hands trembled while she pried it open and saw a photo of Liz inside it—a photo of the two of them standing side by side, together, happy and healthy as ever. *Why would anyone in this world have Liz’s belongings? Liz would never give this away. Unless...* Sarah shook her head defiantly. *No! It can’t be! Liz has to be alive and well. She just has to be okay after all we’ve gone through to find her!*

Frank snorted. “What are we supposed to do with that? Choke them to death or ask for their hand in marriage?”

“Shut up, Frank!” Sarah screamed, casting him a death glare. “I bought this for my sister the Christmas before she disappeared,” Sarah whispered, her gaze fixing on the priest. “How did you... where did you get this?” she asked, almost scared to hear the answer.

The priest inched closer and cupped her hands. “My child, Jules has brought you here for a reason. He told me that you are looking for your sister.”

Frank peeked over Sarah’s shoulder at the picture. “Yes. She went missing ten years ago, and no one knows what happened to her.”

“I met a girl by the name of Elizabeth Larker when she was fifteen,” the priest said.

Sarah stared at him, for a moment unable to comprehend why he was avoiding her gaze. Her heart pounded hard against her ribcage, threatening to jump out of her throat any minute. “Oh no! Tell me she’s not...” Her voice came thin and low, so low she wasn’t sure anyone had even heard her. Someone who wasn’t out to kill her had seen Liz, and she was finally making progress, but something didn’t feel right. She met Frank’s gaze, her mouth gaping. “This proves without a shadow of a doubt that she definitely walked through the portal.”

“Don’t do that, Sarah,” Frank said slowly.

“What? Why?” She met his dark, brooding eyes and found there what she’d been trying to control all along: her hope that somehow, Liz was still alive and well.

“I don’t want you to be disappointed, that’s all. I couldn’t bear to see you hurt.”

He was right, but she couldn’t help herself—not until someone proved her wrong.

The priest smiled, the thin skin around his eyes morphing into hundreds of tiny lines. “Elizabeth does look very much like you indeed, my dear.”

“I knew she was alive!” Sarah squeezed his hand, fighting the need to grab him into a hug, which she was rather certain would not be appropriate. “I never believed for a moment she was dead. Where is she? When can we go to her? How do I find her, and—”

“She was only here for one year, I’m afraid. During that time, I tried to help her through the pain of being stuck in this world, but she didn’t adjust well. It must’ve been a great shock for her. From what she told me, I gathered your world is very different from ours.”

Tears welled in Sarah’s eyes as realization kicked in.

“Babe, I tried to tell you,” Frank muttered.

“You said she was here for a year?” Sarah said, ignoring him. “How long ago was that? And where did she go when she left?”

The priest scratched his forehead, thinking. “It’s been a while. I have been out in the mission field for two years and just recently returned. I’m afraid I don’t know where she went.”

“Do you know whether or not she’s still alive?”

“I don’t know, but why shouldn’t she be?”

Sarah shrugged, hysteria bubbling up inside her. The journey had proven to be nothing but an emotional rollercoaster. If she continued this way she was bound to develop a borderline personality disorder, what with all the crying and laughing and hoping, only to have her hopes dashed an instant later. “I shouldn’t have left her. How can I ever forgive myself? I shouldn’t have been so scared of the creature and dumped my own sister like a sack of potatoes.”

“You were only a kid yourself,” Frank said, “a teenager. “A grown man would have been scared seeing one of those Bigfoots up close and personal. Heck, even I about crapped my pants, and you know how brave I am.”

“She was fifteen, Frank—lost, scared, and wandering around in a forest with countless Bigfoots chasing her.” Sarah turned back to the priest. “When was the last time you heard from her?”

“Let me think.” The man’s eyes glazed, deeply buried in his memories.

Sarah appreciated his help, but her patience was growing thin. She wished she could shake them all out of him, make him answer faster, because her pangs of hope were killing her inside, but she couldn’t risk alienating him; he was her only link to Liz. So she clasped her hands behind her, digging her nails deeply into her skin until a burning sensation traveled up her arm.

The priest answered eventually. “She left when she fell in love with a man. Last I heard she was still with him, and they are doing splendidly.”

Sarah smiled. Somewhere in the midst of all that tragedy, Liz had found true love—something Sarah

couldn't manage to hang on to if her life depended on it. "So she's happy."

The priest nodded. "Very much so."

A thought struck her. "When we arrived in the cave, it was nighttime, but when we walked through the portal, the sun was out. They're opposites!"

"So she would've arrived at night," Frank finished.

Sarah swallowed, unclasping the necklace and putting it around her neck. "She had to be so lonely and frightened. I hope that man is good to her, whoever he is."

Frank lifted her hair and clasped the locket around her neck. "We're going to find her and take her home. Do you remember the man's name, Father?"

The priest scratched his head. "His name was Charles, and I believe he was from Ripteenia, north of here. Liz never told me much else about him. She was a bit secretive, that one."

Sarah jumped as the front door slammed open and Jules walked in, his eyes wide. "Two villages away, when the sun sets, they plan to hang three people by the names of Beth, Steven, and Adam," he announced between labored breaths, as though he had just run a marathon. "I heard they were dressed in odd clothing, similar to those Frank was wearing when I met him. My friend said they came through the forest of the Guardians, just like you two. Do you know them?"

Sarah gasped. "Of course! That would be my BFF, my lead researcher, and my cameraman."

"BFF?" Jules and the priest asked in unison.

"Never mind," Frank said to them with a groan. "Sarah, they followed you in? You've got to be kidding!"

Chapter 12

Sarah stared at Jules, wide-eyed. Three members of her team had made it through the portal, but now they faced execution. She felt awful about that. Once again, it was all her fault that people she cared about were in trouble. She'd been in charge of the expedition, and she'd picked the spot where they hunted for Bigfoot. Waves of guilt surged through her, first over Liz and now over her friends, her

team. If anything happened to them, she could never live with herself. She grabbed Frank's hand, avoiding his apologetic gaze. "We can't just let them die in this place, Frank. We have to do something—anything! Let's go!"

"What do you suggest we—" Frank started.

Jules grabbed her shoulder, interrupting Frank. "Where do you think you and Frank are going? We're in the middle of a big village crawling with knights. You take one step out there, and it will be an execution of five instead of three."

"He's right," Frank whispered. "Besides, it might be a trap. They probably know we all came from the same world and that we're friends. They might be trying to bait you out of hiding, Sarah."

Sarah was trying to think logically, but having more people on her conscience wasn't an option. She had done enough harm already. Shaking her head vehemently, she turned to face Frank, her eyes ablaze. "I don't care! They are only here because they were loyal, trying to find me, and I'm not going to desert them now. I'm going, with or without you."

"Sarah, you're being irrational," Jules said. "I won't let you go."

"And you care why?" Sarah asked. "Last time I checked, you couldn't wait to get rid of us."

"You scammed King Victor and dragged Mia into all your craziness. I might not like it, but I promised Mia I'd keep you safe. I'm not going to just stand by and watch you walk into death's arms. Throughout this journey, I've regarded your safety as my top priority because I will not break a promise to my love."

"Walking out there is a suicide mission," Frank said. "Unless this Immortal nonsense can also make you invisible, we're gonna need a disguise and a smoking hot plan...and a couple of Uzis really would have helped."

The priest smiled. "I may be able to help with the disguises," he said proudly, walking over to a peeling wooden chest. He pulled out two black cotton robes, frayed where the hem had dragged over the ground. "Just wait a bit longer. In one hour, hundreds of priests will gather for prayer and to attend a short midday service. When they leave to return to their villages, you'll blend right in with them."

Frank nodded, brows raised. "I love it when a plan comes together," he said with a smirk.

"I think this will work," Sarah said, slipping into a robe, tying the hood, and then adjusting the white belt cord. The coarse material hid her supple curves, giving the impression of someone much leaner and less feminine.

She turned her attention to Jules. "Are you onboard with this or not?"

He seemed confused. "I don't understand. It is not necessary to use a boat, as we'll be traveling on foot."

She rolled her eyes, more at herself at forgetting the poor guy wasn't accustomed with twenty-first century slang. "Sorry. I meant to ask if you are in agreement to help us with this. Can you guide us? We

cannot find the village on our own.”

“I said we’ll be traveling on foot, didn’t I? And I know a shorter way.”

The mention of a shortcut made Sarah smile, in spite of the sarcastic tone in Jules’s voice. “Even better,” she said, tossing him a robe.

The priest handed Sarah a staff, a pair of glasses, and an oversized silver cross on a long leather string. “You need the best disguise possible, considering you’re their main target.” He squeezed a small bag of gold into her hand. “Take it. Your sister would want me to help you, and you may need this on your journey.”

For a moment, she struggled with the idea of taking the old man’s money. His torn clothes and the tattered condition of his church told her he needed it as much as she did; however, she knew they might not make it without his monetary support. Even though her throat constricted at the idea, she held out her hand and grabbed the sachet, then hugged him tight. “You’ve been a huge help, Father. Thank you,” she whispered, vowing to come back and repay her debt.

* * *

Sarah leaned against the giant stone pillar outside the back of the church. The beams of sunlight felt good on her face. She wondered how her sister had dealt with the drama of finding herself in a dangerous new world with no one to protect her when she came through the portal at fifteen. The sudden helplessness had to be world shattering. Not only had Liz lost all of her friends and family, but this odd world was very different from what they were used to, and one tiny mistake could’ve cost her her life. Sarah jumped as bells chimed in the distance, jolting her out of her thoughts. She straightened her back at the realization that the church service must be over, and the time had come for her to leave the sanctuary of the kind priest’s church.

Frank put up his hood and turned to face her. “It’s time.” His voice came low and grave, too grave for an easygoing man like him. It wasn’t like him to let his worries take hold of his spirits.

“Yep, I’m ready.” She infused as much cheeriness into her tone as she could muster. At least one of them had to keep up the good mood before they drowned in their own pool of despair.

Smiling, Frank straightened up her glasses. “There, you look perfect.”

“Thanks for everything, Father.” She turned to hug the old man. “And thanks for taking care of my sister when she had nobody else to look after her. That means the world to me.”

“My doors are open to anyone in need of refuge, as our heavenly Father would have it.” The priest nodded graciously, and Sarah thought she might have seen a tear in his eye. “Be careful,” the priest said. “I’ve just received word that Ethano Milers is tracking you as we speak.”

“Who is he?” Sarah asked.

“He’s a very powerful Immortal from the Cardashian Court. I don’t understand why they would send somebody so high up to personally bring you in for trial. Usually, they just send in an experienced and skilled tracker. My prayers will go with you, child.”

Sarah shook her head. Obviously there must be a reason. She officially had her third enemy. “They must really want me.” She gave the priest one last hug, and this time, there was a tear in her own eye.

Jules led the way through the lush green grass to the front of the huge stone church. They blended in with all the other priests in monk’s robes, exiting through the two giant oak doors.

Sarah’s mouth dropped. Reality came crashing down at the sight of hundreds of knights on horses, all there with one mission: to behead her. Shudders rocked her body. She couldn’t give in to her fear, though—not when her life and the lives of so many others depended on her. She forced herself forward, gazing only at the ground, trying to gain her composure. She hoped that if she didn’t look, her heart would stop beating so fast, but the closer she inched, the more her hands started to sweat. Her nerves felt like they were fraying like the bottom of her borrowed robe with every step she took.

The knights swarmed the place, waiting for the moment she’d come out of hiding, as if they were cats and she the mouse.

Taking a deep breath, she started limping as she clung to the staff, hoping it might throw them off her trail. Her heart pounded as she swerved between two knights on black horses. A horse neighed, and Sarah nearly jumped out of her skin. She wasn’t sure if her nerves could take another moment of it. She took a deep breath and focused on seeing her sister’s face again.

“Sorry about that, Father,” a knight to her right said.

She nodded and tried to understand his logic. He was sorry his horse had scared a priest, but he seemingly had no qualms about killing an unarmed woman for no apparent reason other than identity theft. *What kind of place is this? Is that their idea of justice?* She hobbled along, and in no time, they came to the edge of the city where knights guarded the perimeter.

“Halt!” a knight ordered.

She peered up past the black horse to the red tunic covering the guy’s chainmail.

“Let us pass so we can get more bread from the next village,” Jules said. “No one told us about the extra guests.”

“You intend to feed our troops?”

“Indeed,” Frank said. “We just need a few supplies—some wine, bread, and potato chips.”

Potato chips? Sarah nudged him. It was no time for making jokes.

“Splendid, Father.” The knight lifted his visor, his brown eyes shining at the thought of filling his stomach with a free meal and then plundering the village.

“What is your answer then?” Jules prompted impatiently.

Sarah kept her head down and bit her lip, waiting for the soldier’s answer, her heart pounding hard.

The knight motioned his colleagues to clear a path. “Let them pass to go for provisions!”

The others obediently took a few steps back.

Sarah let out a tiny sigh of relief and walked into the forest, taking swift but measured footsteps so she wouldn't look conspicuous. Either the disguise or the kind priest's prayers had worked—or maybe a little of both.

An animal snort, along with the sound of thundering hooves echoed behind them. She spun around to see a group of knights approaching, and her hands began to tremble. She frowned.

The knight's hand moved to the hilt of his sword as he inched closer. “Wait, you.” His hard gaze focused on Sarah. “Hello, Father.”

She swallowed hard, words frozen in her throat. Sweat gathered across her brows, and her pulse started to race again. Their plan was falling apart, she knew it, yet she wasn't about to go down without a fight, dressed like a clergyman or not.

“I'm sorry,” Frank chimed in. “He's a mute. I can translate for him if you'd like. I know the language of hand signs.”

The knight didn't tear his gaze off Sarah. “Ask him why he's wearing pearl earrings in his ears. Is he blind as well as dumb?”

She took in a sharp breath, marveling at her own stupidity. *Crap! How could I have forgotten to remove those?*

“Oh. I am sorry, sir, for the confusion, but it is our way of penance, a punishment to purify a troubled soul and thoughts,” Frank said, unfazed.

“Really?” He let out a chuckle. “Ask *him* this. What is it like to be married to the most evil man in the entire world?”

“We don't marry,” Jules said.

“Perhaps you don't, but I can assure you *she* does.” The knight dismounted. In two long strides, he reached her and yanked down her hood and glasses. “We've finally got you!” he hissed, the stench of his breath floating into Sarah's nostrils.

“Get away from me!” she spat, her anger flaring.

His hand clasped around hers, and his eyes lingered on the ring. “She wears the mark of the Immortals! Seize them!” Pointing at the others, he drew his sword out of his sheath, his cold stare meeting hers once again. “My Queen, for your crimes, you are hereby sentenced to death.”

“No!” She shook her head, willing her magical powers to make an appearance, but nothing happened. Whatever the Immortal thing was, it didn't work on command. In her time, Frank or someone like him would have debunked those so-called powers ages ago. Her heart thundered in her chest.

Jules and Frank shouted from behind.

The sun caught in the soldier's blade as he raised it over his head, ready to strike. "I promise that I shall make this as quick and painless as possible, Highness. Your friends won't feel a thing either," he said with a laugh that told her he was lying about that part.

"No!" she screamed, her heart pounding in her ears.

He turned to the other knights. "Get her in position."

Sarah glared, and a few soldiers backed away.

"Do not fear her!" a knight said. "She's merely an infant, a baby Immortal who ran away from her teacher. She doesn't know a thing about her powers or how to wield them."

How could this be the end? Maybe I can appeal to him emotionally, make one last-ditch effort. She looked deeply into his eyes as a knight jerked her to her knees. "Please stop this! Put that thing down. You don't want to kill me." A burst of heat spread through her forehead.

He stared at her, wide-eyed. For a moment, all color drained from his face, as though he had just seen a ghost. Then his cheeks turned red and his eyes beady.

She stared at him, frowning, wondering what was happening to him.

The soldier's hand waved, his sword dangling over her head menacingly.

She shook her head.

He imitated the action, then put the sword away ever so slowly. His voice came low, barely louder than a whisper. "I don't want to kill you, miss, but you're still under arrest." He had a grim line perched on his forehead, his hands clenched as though he was leading an inner battle.

"You did it!" Jules whispered.

She stared at him as realization kicked in. *Maybe this Immortal ability business isn't a hoax after all.* She couldn't believe it was so easy, but ultimately, it worked! She'd somehow managed to tap into his softer side, appealed to the part of him that did not want to harm or kill a helpless woman. But being arrested wasn't going to help her situation. She knew somebody else, some heartless individual, would just do the dirty deed and behead her in a second.

A knight gripped her arms behind her back. Pain surged through her body, blinding her for a second. In spite of the burning sensation, she struggled against his strong hold hissing, "Let go of me!" Another burst of intense heat flooded her mind, weakening her against the pictures that threatened to form before her eyes.

His grip loosened.

Sarah swung around, baffled. *What is going on? He's listening to my commands. Where did this ability come from?* She didn't know what kind of power it was, but she planned to use it to her full

advantage. “You’ll command your men to let me and my friends go. This is a big misunderstanding. Let us go so we can bring back food for the feast.”

His head bowed, and he looked at the other soldiers. “My mistake, milady. You and these men are free to go.”

Another knight stepped forward, shaking his head vehemently. “Sir, you can’t do that! She’s put a hex on you. Our orders clearly state that—”

Sarah gazed into his green eyes, drops of sweat rolling down her forehead. Anger built up inside of her. *How dare he question his superior?* She closed her eyes against the building surge of electricity pouring through her. Her body jerked in convulsions, and she couldn’t move. *Am I--paralyzed?* It was as if she had absolutely no control of her body. She gasped and lifted her hands. *No...I CAN move!* As she opened her eyes, a wind whipped through her hair and rose to a fierce howl. Lightning flashed; thunder cracked. Ice-cold drops of rain fell from the sky, cooling off her hot skin.

“Seize her!” yelled the man in charge.

“Ain’t happening!” she yelled back. She gasped as she gazed down at her hands; they were glimmering, glowing with energy. Without warning, red balls of light centered in the palms of her hands, some kind of sparking electricity. *What the heck? Where did the wizard-like powers even come from?* They didn’t even fizzle with the rain. It was freaky but she decided she might as well put them to good use, especially with soldiers bolting in her direction, swords drawn. She threw crackling balls of fire from her outstretched hands. Dirt and leaves exploded all around them, as if she was tossing grenades on the battlefield.

“We can’t take on an Immortal with unstable power,” a knight said.

“We’ll get reinforcements. Let’s go!” The leader pulled on his reins and steered his horse back toward the perimeter, his group trailing behind in a hurry.

Sarah blinked the dripping rain out of her eyes. She whipped a few more balls of energy toward the departing knights just as a precaution. The fireballs only slammed haphazardly into tree trunks, but she had to scare them at all costs while she still possessed the weird power; she didn’t want them to come back anytime soon. The horses whinnied in terror, and more shouts echoed as clouds of dirt, bark, and mud exploded high into the air. *There! That should do it.* Gazing down, she watched her hands instantly turn back to their normal color. She sucked in a deep breath and tried to control the trembling in her hands. She gazed out ahead at the billowing smoke that hung over the trail of smoldering fires—fires she’d created with her very own hands. She watched the rain extinguish the flames.

Jules and Frank rushed over as she stared at the splintered tree trunks.

How the heck did I do that? But it didn’t matter. The only thing that mattered was that they were alive and breathing. She wiped her forehead with the long sleeve of her wet cloak. Relief flooded through her as she grabbed Frank’s hand, and they slowly walked deeper into the woods, her legs threatening to give way beneath her, her forehead still on fire.

The rain ceased, and the sunshine peeked out from behind a pile of fluffy clouds.

“You did it, babe!” Frank said. “What kind of superpowers are you sporting anyway?”

She heaved a sigh. “I’ve got no idea. That was just...weird.”

He let go of her hand. “You’re burning up, Sarah. Are you running a fever?”

Beads of sweat rolled down her back. Her clothes were soaked in an instant. “I feel like I’m being sautéed in a frying pan, like stir fry. I haven’t a clue how to work these powers. I’m navigating through them blindly. Wish you guys had the Web somewhere,” she said to Jules. “I could Google them.”

“Web? I am not sure what a spider would be able to do for you,” Jules said, causing Sarah and Frank to roll their eyes at one another. Then he averted his eyes to the ground and said in a whisper, “But Victor could teach you.”

Frank rolled his eyes again. “Just drop it, will ya?”

Victor! His sapphire-blue eyes flashed in her head. She could hear his voice roll across her mind, repeating those precious wedding vows to her in the sweetest and most sincere way: vows he intended to keep, at least for that first day. She remembered how her hand had trembled as he’d placed the ring on her finger, the touch of his lips, the way he’d held her, the passion they’d experienced in such a short time. Her heartbeat spiked. *He probably didn’t know what to make of me—a woman who talks back, talks of things he’s never heard of, and runs away.* But she couldn’t forget that he had a dangerous side, and he might just kill her the moment he captured her. She needed to focus on saving her friends, finding her sister, and getting the heck out of Dodge. She didn’t have time for Superpowers for Dummies 101, instructed by Victor the Conqueror. “I’m going to take a rain check. Now let’s go find my team. We have an execution to stop.”

“Follow me then,” Jules said. “The village we are headed to isn’t a pretty sight. Just to warn you, the people living there will beg you for money, food, and anything they can get their hands on. They are starving, for their cattle have died in the drought, and the ground is too dry for their crops to grow.”

Sarah let out a slow breath. “That’s awful. My heart goes out to them,” she said, and it truly did. She’d been supporting charities since the second she’d received her very first paycheck, clear back when she was sixteen. In spite of the fact that some of her pursuers thought her evil, Sarah had a heart of gold and wanted to help the less fortunate.

Hours later, they arrived. Within minutes, a little boy ran up to her with dirty cheeks and greasy hair. “A visitor!” he shouted. “Can you spare me anything to eat?”

Sarah knelt down, her heart melting at the sight of his big brown eyes. “What’s your name?”

“Edward.”

She handed him a gold coin and whispered, “Use this to put something in your tummy, Edward.” She watched him as he scurried away, smiling, then turned back to Jules. Edward didn’t strike her as a boy from a poor country with a swollen head and belly, eating from trash piles, yet she couldn’t help but offer some token of support. “Jules, what does the face of hunger look like?”

“You just hugged it,” whispered Jules.

Tears welled up in Sarah's eyes. She vowed to somehow help this village, even it meant giving away all her gold.

A red and orange sunset glowed in the sky. Sarah took a deep breath, hoping they had made it in time. Her friends were to be executed at sunset, and she still blamed herself for their predicament. *Why did I have to pick the Sabrino Cave area to hold those stupid expeditions?* Liz had disappeared from that same place, yet she risked the lives of her team by dragging them there. Waves of guilt washed through her as she watched peasants with sunken cheeks walk around the village square in simple robes and cloaks. Jules wasn't kidding: The villagers were absolutely starving. She noticed that small stone buildings lined the streets, and she wondered if her friends were meant to be executed in a jail cell or put on display.

She noticed a red-haired woman squinting in the dust, rocking a crying baby. Her frightened blue eyes glistened with desperation. A little barefoot girl with the same long, red hair clung to her mother's side. Her bony arms and legs stuck out from baggy clothes. A shabby dress covered in patches of dirt hung from her shoulders.

"Jules, is there any milk for the babies?" Sarah asked.

He shook his head, wearing a grave expression. "Without cattle to give it, no."

The woman pulled on her sleeve. "Please help me and my little ones. Do you have anything to eat? Anything? I cannot bear to watch my children die."

Sarah's heart sank. She had never witnessed world hunger in person, and suddenly all those infomercials and commercials had a whole new meaning for her. "I don't have any food, but I have money." With shaking fingers, she reached inside her bag and pulled out a few gold coins.

"Oh, thank you for your kindness, miss! You have given my children a few more days to live!" Tears streaked the woman's face as she bowed at Sarah's feet, kissing the tattered hem of her robe.

"Please," Sarah said, helping her up, meeting the surprised expression in the woman's gaze. "Go with God...and feed your children and yourself."

The woman nodded and darted off down the cobbled street, pulling her daughter along.

"I see a crowd gathered over there." Frank pointed. "We better check it out."

Weaving through the crowd, Sarah peered closer. Adam, Steven, and Beth were all bound to long wooden stakes in the ground. A group of townspeople surrounded them, shouting obscenities and waving torches. Sarah's mouth dropped; it was medieval torture at its finest, being burned at the stake. "This is outrageous! I cannot let them roast my friends."

"Better hurry up then," Jules said. "Do you have a plan to save them?"

Frank craned his neck. "It's hard to see with all these people. We're just going to have to wing it. Maybe you can use those powers of yours, Sarah."

Sarah took a closer look. A pile of wood was arranged by their feet, along with small bundles of

sticks and straw. One spark, and her friends would be doomed. She shook her head. "I'm not sure, Frank. I don't know how to control it yet. What if I accidentally ignite them? I already feel awful enough about this. I could never live with that."

Jules touched Sarah's arm. "Tell them you're Princess Gloria."

She nodded, even though she knew she was about to sign her death sentence. Making her way through the sea of people, Sarah hoped it would work, or else she'd be burning right along with her team. She wondered if fire would kill her, but even if it didn't she was sure it'd hurt like crazy.

As Sarah pushed past a stick-thin woman to the front, Beth spotted her and screamed out her name.

Sarah gazed up into her pale face and terrified green eyes. Her long blonde hair was a dirty mess. "Shh! Beth, I'm going to get you out of here."

"Hurry!" Adam said, struggling against his bindings.

"The roast's about to start any minute," Steven hissed. "Since we're the main course, this is one dinner I'd rather miss."

"I'm doing all I can." Sarah's gaze fell on a man with long black hair and a matching beard. Somehow, he stood out from the cheering crowd as he stood by her friends. Maybe it was the glint in his eyes or the serious expression, as though he didn't quite enjoy the display like all the others. She straightened her back and marched over to him, regarding the guards as she whispered, "Please, sir, I beg you to stop this execution."

The man glared at her. "Get back with the others, miss, or we'll have another fire to light."

"But—"

He turned his back on her as he addressed the crowd. "These thieves were caught stealing a loaf of bread that'd just been dropped off by a friend from the next village. Now they must pay for their crimes. What do we do with thieves?"

"Hang 'em!" the crowd cheered.

"Nobody steals from us. NOBODY!" a man yelled.

"We don't have enough to feed our own children, yet they steal bread for themselves!" a woman screeched. "Kill them now! That will teach them and other would-be thieves a thing or two about greed!"

Sarah groaned inwardly. Her ability to read people was awfully off track, as she had thought the man might have something remotely gracious within him. Like the rest, his smile likely only meant he was already imagining the gruesome details of the execution about to take place before his eyes.

"My baby hasn't eaten in two days!" someone yelled.

Sarah had to stop the madness, even if it meant sacrificing her own life. Slowly, she rose from her

cowering position. Her gaze met Frank's somewhere in the distance, but she ignored his questioning frown. Her voice came low, then increased in volume as she gathered more courage. "I'm Princess Gloria, and I demand you stop this nonsense now." To prove her point, she lifted her hand to flash her ring.

The bearded guy bowed, deeply muttering, "Your Highness."

The crowd fell silent and followed suit.

Now that she had their respect, she demanded, "Release these prisoners."

"With all due respect, milady, our orders come straight from your father, who despises thievery more than anything," the bearded guy said.

She watched in horror as he retrieved what looked like an axe from behind his cloak. Not only did she suck at reading people, but she gathered that her sixth sense and ability to pick up any dangerous undercurrents must suck too.

The man continued, "Please step aside."

Taking a deep breath, she thought back to what Jules had said. She was an Immortal now, and immortality did come with a few perks. She had no idea how it all worked, but she had to give it a try. "I demand that you stop this execution right now!" A pang of heat burst through her head, making her wobble on her feet for a second. *Maybe the ability of influencing someone's mind is connected to emotion.* It had surely worked when the knight had planned on executing her. The executioner laughed, his eyes glinting with malice. "Trying your parlor tricks on me? I know how to block you out. You Immortals are really something, and you? You're not even that strong. Stick to the weak-minded, young one."

She smirked. *Great. Even strong-willed humans can block me out.* Irritated, she blew out a breath and walked back over to Frank and Jules. "It's not working! We need a Plan B...pronto. You two got any more bright ideas?"

Chapter 13

Sarah stared at her three friends tied to long poles, awaiting their fiery fate. Her heart lurched. "So? What's the plan?"

"We could try creating a riot," Frank said.

Jules cocked a brow. "That may work. We could force a fight in the crowd. It might be enough of a distraction to pass through without further incident."

"It's worth a shot." Sarah tilted her head, considering his suggestion. For once, Frank's idea wasn't such a bad one, particularly since pretending to be Princess Gloria didn't work. "Look over there by that wood pile. See Steven's black camera bag in the straw?"

Frank nodded.

Sarah continued, "Maybe you should show them some of our technology. We could pretend it wields great and dangerous magic."

"Why me?"

She rolled her eyes. "Obviously because Jules has no idea how to use the stuff, and everyone knows

my face.”

Frank groaned. “Do you remember what used to happen to anyone who dared to brew tea from some herbs?”

She shook her head, grinning.

“Think pyre and lots of fire...and surely not for roast beef.”

“You got any other brilliant ideas then?”

He sighed and pushed his hood further down his face. “All right. I get it. We could film me commanding them to let the others go, threatening to send down hail and brimstone if they don’t cooperate. Then we could play it back to them.”

The crowd cheered, excited again at the prospect of murder and suffering. *How can they be so excited about killing people?* “I’ll sneak over and grab the bag,” Sarah said.

Without waiting for Frank’s answer, she took a few steps forward, bumping into a broad guy. She glanced at the executioner, who now held up a torch as a priest gave last rights. She’d never seen Beth so freaked out. Tears were streaming down her cheeks as she pleaded for them to change their minds.

“Hurry!” Frank hissed.

“No!” Jules said, grabbing the edge of Sarah’s cloak. “Come to think of it, Frank’s plan is a better idea. We should go with a distraction. We don’t need them trying Frank and me as witches. I’d rather not leave it to you to save us all.”

She turned to Frank. “So which is better? Distraction or magic?”

Before he could answer, Beth let out a wailing shriek. The executioner lit the straw beneath them.

Sarah gasped as her stomach lurched. Without another thought, her Immortal reflexes took over, and she blew at the tiny flames, extinguishing them with one single breath.

“Powers like that can only come from an immortal being.” The executioner’s gaze shot straight to the crowd, focusing on Sarah. “You can’t stop this, Highness.” He nodded at a monster-sized muscular man. “Seize her!”

Pain shot through her as he grabbed her arms from behind and dragged her on her heels through the crowd. “No!” she shouted. Without her, her friends didn’t stand a chance. They were all as good as dead.

Suddenly, a man charged into the crowd, yelling, “She’s dead! Mella’s drowned. I need a healer! Only a healer can save her.” The crowd turned toward him as he laid down a woman on the ground, her face blue and swollen, her brown hair dripping wet. Cries and shrieks echoed through the crowd. For a moment, the attention was drawn away from the execution to the crying man cradling the woman’s head.

“But...but she’s dead already!” shouted a man.

Sarah jerked out of the man’s grasp. When he grabbed her arm again, she flung him into the crowd as if he weighed nothing more than a fly. Somehow, emotion was connected to her powers, but she wasn’t sure how to use it just yet. She inched closer when she noticed the woman’s finger twitching, indicating that there might be some life still lingering in her. Without giving it another thought, she rushed over and knelt down, placing her ear over the woman’s mouth to hear or feel for air. *Nothing*. Putting two fingers on her neck, she felt for a pulse. *None*. “Frank!”

He nodded and positioned himself at the woman’s chest. “Two-person CPR? What’s the ratio?”

Sarah looked up at Beth, still tied to the pole. “It’s been years. I don’t remember. How many?”

“Thirty to two,” she answered.

Sarah tilted the woman’s head back and pinched her nostrils closed. Bending forward, she blew two breaths into her blue-lipped mouth.

Frank started chest compressions. “One and two and three and...”

“Gentle CPR won’t save her life!” yelled Beth. “Pump hard and fast. Push on her chest hard enough to compress the heart. Depress the chest wall about the width of an 800-page book. We need uninterrupted chest compressions of about 100 a minute.”

The man grabbed Frank’s shoulders, his face a mask of fury. “Get off of my wife, you freak of nature!”

“We’re only trying to help,” Sarah whispered.

“Listen, mister,” Beth yelled, “give them a chance. It might look strange, but they’ll bring her back to life.”

“Why would anyone kiss the dead, unless they’re dead themselves?” the husband hissed.

“Untie me,” Beth said. “I’m a nurse...a healer. I can save your wife.”

“It’s a trick!” a woman yelled. “The dead are beyond healing.”

Sarah gazed into the man’s eyes. “Do it! She isn’t dead yet, but we’re losing her. You’re wasting precious seconds that we need to save your wife’s life.”

He looked down at his wife and then up at the executioner, nodding. “Release the healer!”

Sarah’s attention focused back on the CPR. There was no way she was going to let the poor woman die.

An instant later, Beth appeared beside her and took Frank’s position, starting chest compressions. Sarah shot her a bitter smile, then focused on her breathing again.

The crowd fell silent, countless eyes peering at them. Sarah could feel beads of sweat gathering above her brows as she tried to ignore their probing gazes.

After several minutes passed, Beth finally said, “Got a pulse.”

The frail woman coughed, and water gushed out of her mouth. Her color went from blue to pink.

Her husband scooped her up in his arms, stroking her hair. “Oh, Mella!” He looked up at Sarah, then Frank and Beth. “Thank you! I cannot allow my wife’s saviors to be harmed, let alone killed. You saved my precious Mella. As magistrate of this village, I offer you pardon.” Glancing at the executioner, he ordered, “Untie the others. These people are free to go.”

Tears welled up in Sarah’s eyes as she met the magistrate’s eyes. “Thank you.” Sarah reached for her bag of gold and untied it. The villagers needed food, and she was going to do whatever she could to help. People surrounded her and started to shove and bump her as she tried to hand out coins. Getting trampled wasn’t in her plan, so she threw the gold up in the air and watched it fall like rain over the villagers’ heads. The crowd screamed with delight and scrambled for the coins, like children searching for candy from a broken piñata.

Beth pulled Sarah to her chest, tears shimmering in her eyes as she whispered, “That was so generous. I’m so happy to see you, girl.”

Sarah hugged her back tight. “Think I was going to let you guys fry?” From the corner of her eye, she noticed Frank helping to untie the others.

As soon as his hands were free, Steven hurried over and grabbed his camera bag, checking it over as if it was his child.

“Yes, your camera’s lovely. You won’t even find a scratch. We’re all great, too, just in case you were wondering,” Beth said.

“Let’s cruise out of here before these medieval nutcases change their minds,” Steven said to Beth once he realized his camera was, in fact, fine.

Adam scooped Sarah up and swung her around. “I owe you dinner, big time. You know what I’ve been thinking?”

“What?” Sarah loved his sparkling blue-green eyes and his laugh too. She looked up to him like a big brother.

“We’re not in California anymore.”

“Gee, really? I didn’t even notice.” Sarah rolled her eyes, smiling.

Adam’s eyes grew wide. “I saw...all of us saw the creatures for the very first time. It was mind-blowing! Did you see them?”

“I did! It was spectacular. I even managed to snap a few pics.”

“I knew they were real! I searched all over the world for them. Native Americans have been talking about mythical giant apes for centuries, and in legends handed down through the ages from Europe and Asia. And I saw them firsthand!” Adam could barely contain his excitement.

Sarah smiled. “It’s an amazing discovery!”

“I must be on my way now,” Jules announced. “Walk two hours north toward your destination. There, you will find a cave that should be safe for you to camp in for the night. It’s used all the time to escape immortal beings or hide things from them.”

“What?” she asked.

“As long as you are near or in the cave, Victor won’t be able to find you.”

“So it breaks the signal and keeps me off his radar. And he can’t find me?”

He nodded yes and then waved. “Goodbye, dear friends.”

Sarah nodded, a tight sensation choking her. “Thanks, Jules. I hope we’ll meet again. Send Mia our love.”

“I will. Just do not forget your promise to obtain the Gold Minerals of Life.”

“I won’t.” Sarah watched him smile and walk away.

Around them, the crowd had started to disperse, hurrying home after a long afternoon, some of them rushing off to buy much-needed food and supplies with the coins she’d shared. The sky had turned a dirty shade of gray, promising a cold night and possible rain. Even the air smelled damp, carrying the heavy promise of precipitation. If they were going to reach the cave before nightfall, they had to be on their way. Much to Sarah’s relief, the knights had long since disappeared, leaving no trace of their presence, as though they had never been looking for her.

“Ready to leave, guys?” she called out to the others.

Frank nodded and wrapped his arm around Sarah’s waist. Adam scowled as they walked down the well-worn path past several dilapidated cottages with candles burning on the windowsills and smoke rising from the chimneys.

They had barely reached a large meadow away from the village when darkness rushed in too quickly, a silver moon appearing in the sky. Sarah looked up at the black sky, worried and wondering if they’d be able to find the cave in the darkness. “You know what really bugs me?” she whispered to Frank.

“Besides me?”

“Well, yeah. How does it manage to get dark so quickly?”

He shrugged as though he didn’t care, but she could discern the deep set lines around his mouth.

“Dude, nice ring.” Steven pointed at her finger. “Didn’t know you were so loaded, buying antique jewelry and all. Otherwise I’d have charged more for my services.”

Sarah smiled and held up her hand. Any other would’ve pissed her off with such a remark, but Steven was quite the joker. He was bound to be forgiven for his trespasses.

Beth touched the ring, her eyes lighting up. “Now that’s a rock! How did you get it?”

Before Sarah could answer, she saw Adam shove Frank in the chest. He hissed, “She’s way too good for you, and you know it.”

They were fighting like two gorillas squaring off over a banana. Her team hated Frank more than anything, mostly because he’d spent his life trying to prove researchers wrong, and he’d been debunking their hard work for years.

Why couldn’t Adam behave? After all, he was the oldest out of the bunch, maybe in his late thirties. He smoothed out his brown hair to one side before putting his fedora hat back on. He was a true explorer if there ever was one, traveling from one part of the world to the other. He was definitely an asset to the team when he kept his temper in check.

“What’s your problem?” Frank yelled. “I just saved your sorry butt.”

“You’re my problem, punk.” Adam shoved him again. “I’d rather be here with anyone but you. I don’t see why Sarah told you the location of our expedition.”

“I didn’t tell him,” Sarah hissed. “He found us on his own. You know he’s a journalist...and apparently a stalker.”

Frank ran a hand through his hair. “I know you guys are pissed about some of my articles, but get your crap together. We’re in a different dimension here. Obviously, getting out of here is much more important than rehashing who did what to whom back in the twenty-first century.”

“You debunked us by name in that trash book you wrote.” Adam clenched his fists. “I should sue you for slander.”

Frank shrugged. “Suit yourself, but I’m pretty sure you won’t find an attorney here. You have to get home first, and that might be difficult since I’ve no intention to save your ass a second time.”

Adam lunged, the vein on his forehead ready to burst any minute.

Steven grabbed his arm and held him back. “Listen, man, we got bigger problems. He’s so not worth it.”

“He made us look like the laughingstocks of California,” Adam said. Even though he was still fuming, he took Steven’s advice and backed off. “I can’t believe Sarah would ever date a guy like that, let alone let him put his arm around her. Are you two shacking up or something now, Sarah? Sleeping with the enemy?”

As much as she would’ve liked to have convinced him otherwise, Steven was right. They had other

worries to take care of first. Frank was often obnoxious, as were the claims he made in his book, but alienating him wasn't an option. They needed all the manpower they could get, and he'd risked his hide more than once to save her. "It's none of your business who I spend my time with. We're all stuck here, so quit acting like preschoolers. Let's figure out how to find my sister and then get the heck out of here!"

He looked at her, shaking his head slowly. "I don't think you're running this expedition anymore, boss."

"That last word said it all." She smirked. "As long as I'm paying you, you'll do as I say, and as of right now, you're still on my payroll."

"Fine then. You're the boss."

"Wait...Liz? Your sister's here?" Beth asked.

"I'll explain later." With a last warning look at Adam, Sarah turned and focused on the path ahead.

To both sides, large trees stretched as far as she could see, their thick canopy of leaves filtering the last natural light of the day. Branches and twigs snapped under their booted feet, the only noise exchanged between them until Beth resumed the conversation after a few minutes of walking. "So, you're back with Frank? I thought you two split up."

What is this? Why can't people butt out of my private life? She opened her mouth to answer when Frank slipped his arm around her, beating her to it. "Listen, all you enquiring minds, we're trying to work things out here. Digging up dirt isn't going to help our blossoming relationship, so just shut the hell up, will ya?"

"You're unbelievable! Such an idiot," Beth said, unfazed. She went to slap Frank's face, but he caught her hand.

"Listen, Beth, don't start on me too. I hope we can all be friends."

She rolled her eyes. "Not a chance."

Steven turned on his camera and started filming the trees and narrow path. "Come on, man, that's enough. Everybody stop. I apologize for their behavior, Sarah. Being stuck here with Frank Hedford is the pits, but we're also stressed. You've no idea what we've been through. Fortunately, I caught it all on film."

Sarah grabbed the camera and looked directly into the lens, anger edging her voice. "On the contrary, I just might have a feeling. It hasn't exactly been champagne and caviar, limos and five-star hotels for us either. We've gone through quite a bit ourselves."

Adam adjusted his fedora against the gust of wind blowing in their direction. "Well, we almost died countless times. Like Steven said, you've absolutely no idea."

Sarah waved her finger in the air, showing off her ruby ring. "Well, you poor, poor babies. I mean, I was only mistaken for a princess and thrown in a dungeon crawling with bugs and rats. I was then

forced to marry the king of Tastia, who just so happens to be an Immortal eager to impregnate me with a whole freaking medieval baseball team. He slapped this ring on my finger, and I can't get it off, and now fireballs shoot out of my hands." She took a breath and gathered her thoughts. "Oh, and did I mention I pissed him off by running away, and Frank and I had to fake being monks to escape him and his knights? If that's not bad enough, the king of Dornia is pissed at me, too, and this is his turf. He wants me dead too. There's also a group of Immortals who want to kill me because I became one without their permission, which is how I managed to get shot in the heart, and I'm not talking about eighties music here."

Steven laughed. "Wait...fireballs? Shot in the heart? And you're...married to a king? Wow, Sarah, you should start writing fiction. You're pulling my leg. If someone shot you, you'd be dead as a stone, sweetheart."

"She ain't kidding," Frank muttered. "And remember, I'm the skeptic here. I saw it all for myself."

Sarah nodded. "Yes, I was shot directly in the heart and the back as well. I had to walk disguised as a monk through a village of knights whose only goal in life was to behead me. So Adam, do fill me in on your little horror story, won't you? I'd love to hear it."

Beth put an arm around her. "You were mistaken for a princess? And you married a king? Seriously? How come that stuff doesn't happen to me?"

Sarah smacked her hand. "Stop it."

Beth laughed. "But blondes are supposed to have more fun."

Steven gave her a fist bump. "Yeah, baby! Us blonds have to stick together."

She smiled, and then continued. "Is this king a good kisser? Was it nice and slow or fast and furious? And more importantly, if he was any kind of kisser at all, what in God's name are you doing traipsing around poor villages and sleeping in caves when you could be sleeping in one of those fancy canopy beds ordering room service from the royal kitchen?"

"That's enough!" Frank hissed.

"Oh!" Beth squealed. "Even better? Is he hot?"

"How about we don't go there right now?" Frank asked.

Beth smiled. "Jealous? Bet you never thought you'd have any competition here, of all places. If I were you, Frank, I'd be worried—for more reasons than one. Just look at the muscles on some of these guys. A knight in shining armor is every girl's dream...and don't even get me started on the dark hair and broodiness."

"Ain't that the truth?" Sarah said as Victor's face flashed across her mind. "Actually, it was Frank's brilliant idea for me to marry the king, when he came to rescue me like a knight in shining armor."

Steven cocked an eyebrow. "Say what?"

“Long story,” Frank said.

Adam ran his hand across Sarah’s forehead. “How hard did you hit your head, boss?”

“You better get your employee on a short leash, Sarah, or I’m going to slug him into next week,” said Frank, “or maybe last week. God knows around here.”

Beth cleared her throat. When everyone fell silent and she had their attention, she said, “While our little Sarah here was busy joining the royal family and impersonating a monk, we’ve discovered a few things. The cave’s still here, but there’s no portal back home. We tried to snoop around for a bit longer, but a ton of Bigfoots—or is it Bigfeet?—chased us out of the forest.”

“And I got it all on tape.” Steven’s voice went up an octave. “Six o’clock news, here we come! No—better yet—Discovery Channel!”

“There’s a way back,” Frank said. “You just need a key. Bet you didn’t know that part.”

“Frank!” Sarah elbowed him in the ribs. “Don’t be rude. Just because you stumbled across that little tidbit of information doesn’t mean you knew it all along. You got lucky.”

“Hmm. I don’t recall getting lucky...yet.”

“Shut up. I meant you got lucky with Jules...er, uh...” Sarah smacked her forehead and scowled at him. “You know what I mean.”

“A key?” Steven asked, interrupting their chiding. “How exactly do we get one of those? I haven’t seen a Ye Olde Portal Locksmith shop around here yet,” Steven asked.

“I’m wearing it.” Sarah held up her hand.

Steven pointed the camera down at her ring. “Awesome. Then what are we waiting for?”

Sarah rolled her eyes. “I told you I have to find my sister first. She’s here. She’s been here all along.”

“I thought you were delusional,” Adam said. “You’re for real?” When she nodded he continued, “Let’s hurry up then. This is a dangerous place. We can’t stay here one minute longer than we have to.”

“I’m carrying the key, so you know what that means, right?”

A couple of them nodded, but Adam just shook his head. “No. What?”

“It means everyone plays by my rules,” Sarah said. “Got it? I’m the one who married a complete stranger so we could all go home.”

Steven nodded. In the darkness, his pale skin and huge blue eyes gave him the appearance of a teenager. No one would’ve guessed he was at least her age. “Got it, boss. You went through some tough times, just like we all did.”

“Yeah. We were chased by a dragon south of here,” Beth said. “Can you believe that? A real-live dragon! Of course I guess it could have also been a dinosaur that hasn’t gone extinct yet.”

Steven smiled. “Yeah...and I got it all on tape!” He put his camera away in a giant bag and swung it over his shoulder.

“I wonder if that tops the shape-shifters that turned from wolves into people,” Sarah said.

“Whoa!” Steven’s voice raised another octave. “We need an entire expedition with at least fifty researchers.”

“We better go. I’ve already made enough enemies in this place,” said Sarah as she scanned her surroundings.

“Tell me more about the men trying to kill you,” Beth requested.

“Define kill. If you mean kill immediately, on sight, that would be King William’s men. If you’re talking kill after a speedy and slanted trial, that’d be the Immortals, some group called the Cardashian Court. If you’re talking about execution for being a runaway bride, that would be King Victor.”

“Wow. Throw in the mafia, a couple of Terminators, and a motorcycle gang, and you’ve got the makings of a real epic film here. You think you have enough killing machines after you?” Steven asked.

“Let’s just hope the shape-shifters don’t get mad. We lied to them too,” Frank said. “The last thing we need are a bunch of pissed-off werewolves after us. I guess you might say pissing people off is our specialty.”

“Well, that’s no news to me when it comes to you,” Adam said, “but it’s not Sarah’s normal M.O.”

Frank sighed. “Humph. In any case, there are several angry mobs hot on our trail. You might think twice before traveling with us.”

“But you have the key,” Adam said.

“I guess you’re stuck with us then,” said Frank. “I hate to interrupt this meaningful, pleasant conversation,” he continued, taking a deep breath and pointing behind him “but people with torches and pitchforks are never a good sign, right?”

Sarah followed his line of vision to the crowd gathering in the distance. Village people—and not the kind who liked to sing about the YMCA—were closing in from all sides, marching closer. Her gaze fell on the two men riding on white horses, leading the congregation. The ruby ring on the finger of one of them shimmered in the light as he lifted his arm to signal. “And neither are Immortals,” she muttered. “I can see their rings.”

Beth squinted. “How can you possibly see that far?”

Sarah shrugged. “I guess being Immortal comes with a good vision plan. How are you guys at fencing?”

“I’m no ninja,” Adam retorted.

Sarah backed up a few steps and glanced over her shoulder; they were at the edge of a steep cliff with a roaring river below. “From the looks of it, maybe we should be more worried about our diving skills. Everyone can swim, right?”

People hurried in their direction, the torches in their hands flickering in the breeze.

What the heck? Why the sudden 360? Listening closer, she could make out some of the shouts.

“Kill the witch!”

“Evil be damned!”

“Death to the intruders!”

“Save our world!”

“Make them beg! Make them bleed! Kill them for their evil deeds!” shouted one particularly creative mercenary who should have been equipped with a set of pompoms.

She groaned, irritated. *What makes them think we’re witches? Did the Immortals tell them that?* She took a glance over the cliff and shuddered. “Ready to do some nighttime cliff-diving, team? I know I’m not, but it might be our only chance.”

“Well,” Frank said, “we’d better get to it while the adrenaline’s pumping. Let’s do this.”

She looked at the others. “You guys up for it?”

Shaking her head, Beth grabbed Sarah’s arm, her eyes filled with unspoken terror. “Sarah, I...I can’t! I can’t do it.”

“Now’s not the time to wuss out on me, Beth.” Sarah gave her a shove forward. “This is your life we’re talking about.”

“They’re getting closer!” Adam said.

“JUMP!” Sarah yelled.

“I can’t!” Beth screamed.

“Beth, you have to!”

“No, I mean I really...I can’t because...because—”

“Why not? C’mon! You can do it!”

“I can’t because I’m pregnant!” she said, shaking her head. It wasn’t exactly how she wanted to break the news to everybody.

“Oh my gosh! Jump then, for the sake of your child. If you don’t, they will kill you. They’ll kill all of us, because we’re not leaving you behind.”

Beth’s eyes wavered as she glanced over her shoulder. “Looks like I don’t have a choice.” Taking a last breath and wiping the tears from her eyes, she leapt.

“GERONIMO!” Steven yelled as he jumped into the air, realizing the mob would have no idea who he was paying homage to with his yell.

Sarah shot a glance over her shoulder at her Immortal pursuers. If she wanted to survive in that mad world, she had to know what to look out for in the future. They weren’t wearing the colors or bearing the crests of King William or King Victor. Their pale skin shimmered in the bright light of the moon. She could discern their eye color, hazel and green, even from such a distance, as well as the ruby-red glint of their Immortal jewelry.

“You’re going to the Cardashian Court!” the blond one yelled.

“Like hell I am,” Sarah mumbled. Daggers flew inches from her face. Before she could move aside, one pierced her right shoulder blade. Another one flew into her chest, inches from where the arrow had pierced her flesh before. She spun around and jumped just as another one plunged deep into her back.

Chapter 14

Jumping off a sixty-foot cliff did seem ridiculous, but Sarah knew they had no other choice. Tumbling, cold water gushed into her mouth and soaked her clothes, pulling her under the surface. She pinched her nose, fighting the sensation to draw in her breath, her lungs on fire. With deliberate, long pushes of her legs and arms, she broke the surface and spewed out water, her whole body screaming for oxygen. She took giant gulps of air as she gazed up. In the distance, the dark shapes of the Immortals rose against the almost black sky; they were still mounted on their fancy white horses, looking down on her from their place atop the high cliffs. She smiled and waved her hand. “So long, suckers!” Sarah’s vision sharpened quickly. From this distance, she thought she could even see deep lines forming around the blond guy’s mouth, his eyes two glimmering flames of anger.

Suddenly, his voice rolled across her mind. “My name is Ethano. You’ve been summoned by the Cardashian Court to be tried for the crime of claiming Immortal status without permission. This is forbidden by King Taggert, and now you must be judged. Know that I too, can easily jump over this

cliff. I recommend that you stop fleeing, because you will be caught and tried eventually, one way or another.”

“I’m sorry I broke your laws!” shouted Sarah. “Truly, it was an accident. I didn’t know anything about the Immortals or this world of yours!” Gasping for breath, she swam toward shore until her feet touched the ground beneath her. Sarah waded through the waist-high current that pulled at her hips and legs with a violent undertow. Pebbles and sand shifted under her feet. She climbed out, shivering as a cold breeze ran over her body. Piercing pain radiated across her chest and back. She bit her lip and held back a moan. Finding her friends was more important than focusing on a little discomfort—or a lot of pain. She took another deep breath and forged ahead. “Frank!” she called through the moonlight, stopping midstride to scan the area. Shadows stretched and shifted in the trees. Squinting, she peered closer until she could make out figures in the distance, hopefully her friends, leaning against black boulders, catching their breath. She raced over, calling out their names.

Frank grabbed her arms. “Are you okay, babe?”

“We have to...to keep going,” Sarah said, breathing heavily. “They’re...they’re coming over the cliff. They’re...right behind us!”

“Sit down for a minute, Sarah,” Beth ordered. “You’re hurt, and you need to catch your breath.”

“No. There’s no time.”

“But I don’t see anybody,” Beth said, looking back.

Sarah glanced up. The two Immortals had disappeared into the darkness. Maybe Ethano didn’t want to get wet after all, but she was sure he’d come a different way.

“Sit down! You’re drenched and shaking,” Beth ordered, guiding her to a nearby tree.

Sarah shook her head. “No! We don’t have time for this nonsense. They could reach us any minute.”

“Oh my Gosh! Are you...bleeding?” Beth held her hands up to her face, smelling the dark stains covering her pale skin. Her blue eyes shone big and bright in the dim moonlight. “Sarah, you could be hurt bad. It’s too dark to tell for sure, but you’re in no condition to go anywhere.”

“I’m sure your condition is more delicate than mine,” Sarah whispered in her ear.

“I’m fine. Now drop it,” Beth hissed. “I’d rather not talk about it right now.”

Sarah regarded her intently. She was sure Beth was hiding something, because most pregnant women she knew were happy to tell the world about it.

“Dude, is that blood?” Steven said, inching closer.

Sarah looked down and noticed she’d been hit three times.

Adam shook his head. “We’ve got to find a doctor. You’re bleeding like a stuck pig.”

“A pig, huh?”

“Sorry.”

“It’s just a scratch anyway. Don’t worry.” Sarah gripped the dagger tightly and moaned as she pulled it out.

“Stop that!” Beth grabbed her hand and pulled Sarah to the ground, elevating her feet with a rock. “If you elevate your legs above your chest, it will slow your blood loss.”

“We don’t have time for you to play nurse,” Sarah said.

“Well, I’m all up for playing doctor if you want,” Frank joked.

Sarah rolled her eyes at him and offered Beth a grateful look. In spite of the seriousness of the situation, she decided to let Beth have her way. Helping everyone else was what her friend did. She just couldn’t help herself.

Beth rolled her eyes. “I know you’re not used to taking orders, especially now that you’re a queen and all.” She smiled. “But this time, Your Highness, you need to listen to one of your humble servants who knows a thing or two more than you do about anatomy.”

“She’s right,” Adam said. “And quit trying to pull out those daggers. We don’t even have a medic here.”

“No use to call 911. Sarah will be over it before they get here,” Frank said, placing his hands over Sarah’s wound to apply pressure.

She glared up at Frank. “I’d really like to know why I’m the one getting shot at with arrows and having daggers thrown at me. Last time I checked, putting this stupid ring on and marrying that king was *your* dumb idea. What did Jules call it? A *fool’s* plan?”

He lifted his hands and peeked at the wound. “I’m sorry, Sarah. Really, I had no idea we’d get in so deep.”

“That’s the problem,” Beth hissed, pushing his hands away. “The Frank I know never thinks, just acts on his impulses. Maybe he’ll learn one day that consequences are part of life.”

“Look, can we just stop all this bickering and chitchat and do something?” Adam said in a frustrated tone. “Beth, Sarah’s gonna bleed out or get an infection if we don’t figure something out, and I’m pretty sure there’s not a Walgreen’s around here for bandages and peroxide.”

Beth touched her forehead, then took her pulse. “It’s rapid. Her skin’s cold, pale, and clammy. She’s going into shock! We have to control the bleeding and keep her warm. Better yet, we need to get her through the portal and to the closest ER!”

“She’ll never live that long!” Adam pushed Frank out of the way and frantically applied more pressure, making Sarah cringe in pain. “Look out, Frank. Let me take over here. Maybe I can do something other than make jokes and wait for some magic cure.”

Sarah shook her head. “No, listen, Frank’s right. I—”

Steven cut her off. "Look, no one's gonna die. I'll run to the next village, and I won't come back without a doc."

Sarah knew if she didn't do something to stop all the debating, they'd still be sitting there in a week, if the Immortals didn't show up and get rid of them first. As much as she valued their concern, she was still the team leader, and she had to get a grip on the situation because being stuck there any longer than necessary wasn't an option. Rolling her eyes, Sarah held up a hand. "No, Steven, you're not going off by yourself. I'm fine. Look." She wrapped her hands around the second dagger and pulled once again, groaning. The blade moved out inch by inch, leaving a hollow emptiness behind. She held it up with a triumphant smile, even though the others could probably not see her in the darkness. "Now we've got two weapons."

"See? She's delirious already. She's not going to make it if we don't do something drastic," Adam said. "Steven, c'mon. I'll go with you, and we'll drag the local witch doctor back here."

Frank smiled. "You guys got a death-wish or something? She's fine. This is nothing."

"What does Sarah see in you?" Adam rolled his eyes. "Her life's hanging in the balance, and you couldn't care less."

"No...you don't understand," whispered Sarah, trying to breathe through the pain.

Frank let up on the pressure. "What happened here is nothing compared to what she took earlier. Like I told you, she was shot in the heart before, and she lived."

"So she was just lucky," Adam said. "Karma probably owed her that after having to put up with you!"

"No. She's Immortal, you idiot." Frank shook his head, as if he could barely believe the words coming out of his own mouth. "Haven't you been listening to anything we've been saying?"

Adam stood and shook out his wet fedora. "I don't make it a habit to listen to your nonsense."

Frank threw his arms up. "Whoa! Now who's the skeptic?" He nudged Steven. "Did you get that on camera?"

"Think I will." Steven unzipped his bag and started to film. "Dude, thank goodness my camera bag's waterproof."

With the knives out, her skin started to burn, and the healing process began. She gnashed her teeth against the first pang of pain hitting her somewhere in the chest. Adam held her hand as more pain radiated through her body. She peeked up, forcing her mouth into a weak smile so she wouldn't scream. "What Frank...what he says...it's true."

"Hold steady," Frank whispered.

She nodded as she felt his hand tighten around the third dagger in her back.

He pulled, and a moment later, he held the dagger out to her. "Here's number three."

Sarah pulled down her robe, exposing her bare shoulder. Cringing, she looked away; the bright red tissue, blood, and tendon made her nauseous. “Now watch.”

Adam cringed. “No way! I’m not looking at that.”

“You need to,” Sarah said. “All of you need to see it with your own eyes. Otherwise, you won’t believe it.”

In the bright moonlight, the wound began to shrink. Sarah bit her lip against the piercing pain that made her body tremble. With every inch that closed, a strong tremor ran up and down her spine, and the pain grew in intensity. Just when she thought she couldn’t take the pain any longer, the gash finally disappeared before their eyes.

Adam gasped and ran his hand across her skin. “How...how is that possible? How did you do it?”

“It’s the ring.”

He met her gaze. “Well, I don’t know what to say.”

“Say you believe us now.”

He nodded, awestruck.

Beth traced her skin with her fingers. “I’ve never seen anything like that before.”

“And I got it all on camera!” Steven said. “Yeah, baby!”

“If you’re feeling better, Sarah, we really should get a move-on,” Frank said.

“Definitely.” She stood, but she doubled over when a piercing pain hit her abdomen. “My stomach! It feels like somebody just stabbed me.”

“What? How?” Frank touched her back and eased her back down to the ground.

A picture flashed in her head: wavy black hair swaying in a cold breeze as mist built in front of a pale face. It was Victor, fighting the same two Immortals she’d just seen in the meadow. Blood trickled from a wound in his abdomen, but he still raised his sword and fought like some kind of brave warrior. Then, as quickly as it had come upon her, the vision faded. “He’s here! Right where we jumped.”

Beth rubbed her back. “Who?”

“Victor,” Sarah whispered. “I saw him in some freaky vision.” She raised her hand to rub her eyes, but more spots clouded her vision, drawing her into a sense of floating.

“Your, uh, husband?” Steven asked. “Are you sure it’s not just separation anxiety?”

Beth slugged him. “Her *fake* husband, you moron.”

“Victor took down the two Immortals who were chasing us,” said Sarah. “That was why they didn’t

jump over the cliff to follow us like they threatened.”

“Can you walk?” Frank asked. When she nodded, he wrapped his arm around her waist to support her and pulled her closer, until she leaned into him.

Electricity flooded Sarah’s body, and she went limp. Her friends shouted and shook her, but their voices trailed off. The picture in her head returned to the meadow. The two Immortals lay in the grass unconscious, under the silver light of the moon. She stood only feet away from Victor. Over his white long-sleeved shirt, he wore a gold metal ringed tunic, and his legs were clothed in short purple knickers and tights. As he towered over her, she stared straight ahead at the center of his broad chest and powerful arms. She was scared to death to meet his gaze.

She scanned her surroundings. A roaring river echoed in her ears, and she stood on the same cliff she’d just jumped from minutes earlier. Her friends were gone, and she was in the meadow with Victor.

“I know you’re here. I can feel you. Haven’t you figured out that the ring bonds us? We have a connection like none other, my Queen.”

Her breath trembled. It was all beyond weird. There was some pretty freaky psychic vibe going, but at least he couldn’t see her. *Now, how do I get out of this little hallucination?* She wondered.

He turned slowly in a circle, his eyes scanning the area as though he was looking for her. “I’m sorry I burned your finger, but it was the only way to show the Shadow People who you really were. It saved your life. I did it to protect you, to protect us.”

“Wait...back there with the shape-shifters? That was *you?*” she said out loud.

Victor tilted her chin, looking directly into her eyes. It was like as if she was simultaneously there with him and still down by the river with her friends. *How is this even possible? Wait a minute...I’m... I’m not human anymore, right? This is because I’m...because I’m Immortal.* The idea haunted her.

“I can see you now. What a beautiful vision you are, like an angel,” Victor said.

She rubbed her temples, hoping to escape the vision. “Get out of my head!”

“Do you know how close you came to death, love? The Immortals missed you by mere minutes.”

“Why would you care? You threatened to kill me yourself.”

His lips captured hers in a slow, gentle kiss, sending shivers throughout her body. “You *are* my wife, and I will fight for you in that regard, even if you *aren’t* Princess Gloria.”

He knows? Crap! Her heart thundered as she bit her lip, scanning his eyes; his face was a cold mask, betraying no emotion. She shook her head slightly, a fool for feeling so guilty. “I’m sorry I misled you. Surely we can have this scam of a marriage annulled or something. Please tell me the secret to removing the ring.”

“There is no way. We *are* bonded for eternity.”

She stepped back to escape the happy glint in his eyes. “I tried to tell you I wasn’t Princess Gloria, but you didn’t listen. You said if I didn’t go through with it, you’d kill me.”

“That wasn’t your only motivation, and you know it,” he said softly.

Sarah gulped. *How did he know of my ulterior motive, to obtain the ring so I—so we—can go home?*

He stroked her cheek. “You didn’t think I’d figure it out, but it turns out that Mia valued her life more than keeping your secrets, Your Highness.”

Her body trembled, and her heart raced. “But I didn’t know what it meant to put the ring on. I truly didn’t. I just want to go home. Getting you in trouble with the court wasn’t my intention. I’m sorry. I just...I just don’t belong here.”

He took a deep breath, regarding her intently as he slowly shook his head. “I’m not in trouble. You, on the other hand, are buried beneath it.”

“Yeah, so I’ve learned.”

“I see you’ve been busy testing your new immortality,” he said, smirking. “You were wounded in the heart, the back, the chest, and the shoulder. I felt it, every tear of your flesh, and I know you just felt the blow to my stomach.”

“Yeah. That hurt.” Realization hit her full force: The ring really did somehow connect them, and they could feel what one another felt. “I know I’ve ruined all of your plans,” Sarah said. “I’m afraid I will be of little help in contaminating that bloodline for you.”

“It wasn’t about that, although that would’ve made King William’s blood boil.”

“What? So, let me get this straight. All this time you really didn’t want to contaminate the royal bloodline?”

“No.”

“Then why?”

“The idea to marry Princess Gloria was a brilliant military strategy. If I had connected myself to her the way I’m connected to you, I would have King William at my beck and call. If he laid one hand on me, his beloved daughter would’ve felt any pain he inflicted upon me. He could never bear that, for he loves her way too much to make her suffer, even for a moment. As such, he would be forced to obey every command I barked out and submit to my rule as long as he lived. I could have marched right into enemy territory, and not one of his men would have touched a hair on my head. I could have been so bold to walk up to King William himself, in his castle, and spit in his face, and he still wouldn’t kill me.”

“Maybe, but now he still can, since I’m not his precious daughter,” Sarah said a bit flippantly, growing weary of talking to her bully of a spouse. “Too bad you screwed up and married the wrong

person.”

“I don’t care about those plans anymore,” he whispered, cupping her face.

She touched his hand. “I get it. Your plans flopped, so now I’m your consolation prize. Why don’t you cut your losses and release me?”

Moonlight shone against his disheveled hair. “I loved how your eyes lit up when I kissed you after our vows. There’s a spark there that even you cannot deny. We both felt it, and you know it. Why fight it?”

“Let me go, Victor,” she whispered. “It’s better this way, especially since I don’t belong here.”

“You’re like no other woman in this kingdom. I’ve never met such a free spirit. You’re just as strong-willed as I am. Finally, I have met my match, an equal—a true partner. How can I let you go? I’ve been waiting for someone like you for hundreds of years. It was fate that I found you instead of Gloria, and I wouldn’t change it for anything.” He pulled her closer. “I can help you with the Immortals, but you have to come with me. I am personal friends with King Taggert, who resides over the Cardashian Court and all Immortals.”

“I heard you’re next in line to rule this world once your dying king takes his last breath.”

He nodded. “Yes. I am well connected, and I can and will use that influence to my advantage to see that nothing happens to you. Please let me help you.”

“And never go home to my world?”

“Your home is here with me now, ruling by my side.”

She reached for his hands to make one last plea. “Go back to your castle. Forget about me. I have to run one quick errand, and then I’m going back home.”

“Heading into deeper enemy territory to find your sister, are you? Do you want to get us both killed?”

She gazed up into his blue eyes. “Don’t follow me, and you won’t have to worry about it.”

“Let me come with you. I assure you that I can help.”

“No way!” she demanded, certain he’d say anything to get her back in his grasp.

“I can’t let you go deeper into Dornia without me. I hate to do this, but it’s the only way. I’m sorry. I need you to surrender to me now.” He closed his eyes and repeated his command in a stern voice.

She could feel him at the edge of her mind, trying to break in. Closing her eyes, she tried to break out of the vision and go back to her friends, but her mind would not let go of him; it was as if he was held there, captive, right before her eyes. She could smell his woody scent, and her skin still felt his light caress on her bare arms.

He kissed her forehead. "Don't fight it. I'm hundreds of years old, while you are merely an infant, only a day old as far as Immortals go. I'm doing all of this to save your life."

She could feel him stroking her hair, his hot breath on her cheek.

"I can't let you die," he said.

"These feelings we're having...it's just because of the ring," Sarah reasoned, trying to convince herself as much as she was trying to convince him.

He picked up her hand, touching her finger. "This ring is capable of more than you know, but one thing it cannot do is force someone to fall in love where those feelings do not exist. I can sense what you feel. It's stronger than your will, yet you frivolously try to run from it, from me?"

Sarah fought to wake up, but it was no use.

"Wait for me along the river's edge," he commanded. "Come alone."

A burst of heat spread through her body, and everything seemed clear. *Why am I even running? Of course I must surrender to him. I'm his...his wife. He's only trying to save my life. If he says it's dangerous to go into Dornia, he must be telling me the truth. This is his world, and I need him if I'm to survive in it.*

"I'll be there soon," he whispered in her ear.

"I'll wait for you at the river's edge, my King."

Like through a tunnel, she could hear the voices of her friends breaking through.

Beth yanked on her finger. "Get that ring off!"

"That's not the way it works," Frank explained. "We've tried everything, and it won't budge."

She felt somebody rocking her back and forth, shaking her. "Snap her out of it!" said Adam.

Panic flickered in Frank's voice. "I'm trying!"

"How did he hypnotize her like that?" asked Steven.

Ice-cold water rushed over her skin. She blinked as if waking up from some kind of long nap. Pushing the hair out of her face, the rushing river echoed in her ears. *I'm back in the river?* Her gaze darted up to her friends' faces, staring at her. "I felt like a swim?"

Steven touched her shoulder. "Yo, man, what happened? You were in some kind of freaky trance. We thought dunking you in the cold water would snap you out of it."

"Sorry 'bout the bath." Beth helped Sarah to her feet. "You walked to the river to meet Victor."

Sarah cupped a hand over her mouth. "How do you know that?"

“You told us,” Adam said, rubbing his arm. “You were on some kind of mission. I tried to stop you, but you threw me against that tree like ragdoll. We didn’t know what else to do.”

“It’s okay...and, um, I’m so sorry about your arm. I guess I don’t know my own strength, especially when I’m in Zombie Land.” Sarah stood and glanced up at Frank. “He can feel everything I can, and I can feel everything he does. He was stabbed in the stomach while fighting the two Immortals we saw. That was why I fell down in pain—his pain.”

“How’re you feeling now?” he asked.

“I’m fine. He healed quickly.”

“So if we keep ourselves safe and he gets hurt, then Sarah pays?” Adam asked. “He’s bound to get some bumps and bruises along the way, considering he’s in enemy territory.”

Sarah shook her head. “Add that to our long list of problems.” She put a hand to her head. “I can sense him. He’s close.” Looking up, she gasped. Victor was mounted on a white horse riding along the cliff’s edge, wind blowing through his dark hair, blue eyes blazing as he met her gaze.

“I can see a figure, a man,” Beth said. “He’s hard to make out. Can any of you guys see him?”

Sarah could see him perfectly, down to his dimple. Anger flooded through her as she held up her hand with the ruby ring. *How dare he use his powers to control me? Who does he think he is?* Her voice echoed into the cliffs. “I don’t want to be Immortal! I want my life back. Do you hear me? I’m going to figure out a way to get this ring off, and when I do, I don’t ever want to see you again!” He stared into her eyes, and her knees weakened. *Am I...am I going to faint?* Clearly, he was using his psychic ability, showering her with mumbo-jumbo again. She could feel herself losing control as his voice filled her mind: “Come to me now.”

Beth tugged at her arm. “Do something...quick! She’s going into that trance again.”

“Why do you engage him?” asked Adam, shaking Sarah. “You know he has those freaky mind skills. Come on!”

Sarah’s legs wouldn’t budge, though, no matter how hard she tried. It was as if she had no choice but to wait for Victor. Closing her eyes, she could feel him. He was so close she thought she could touch him. She reached out her hand and collapsed.

“Great. She’s back in Zombie Land,” Steven said through the blanket of fog that enveloped her mind.

Somebody scooped her up. “I’ve got her!” Frank said. “C’mon. It’s about time we break the connection between her and Houdummy.”

Sarah opened her eyes and found herself being carried. She looked up into green eyes. “Frank,” she whispered.

He motioned the others to stop as he laid her down on the ground. “She’s coming to.”

Sarah's mind started to clear at the sound of Frank's voice. He helped her stand on her feet and touched her shoulders at arm's length. "You okay?"

She nodded.

The others stopped, and Beth rubbed her back. "You sure you're all right, Sarah?"

Sarah hated being the damsel in distress. "Listen, I'm fine, but thanks for asking. Let's keep moving."

"Look!" Adam yelled. "The king just got off his horse, and he's standing by the cliff. I bet he's going to jump down. He'll be here in seconds, man!"

Sarah rushed back through the vegetation.

"Sarah!" Beth shouted. "Do not engage the king. Get back here!"

There was no way he was going to drag her back to his castle. She felt a sudden jolt of electricity rushing through her body as her hands glowed and crackled with balls of energy. Focusing on Victor, she whipped her hand back and flung a fireball straight up at him. He fell backward just as darkness enveloped her and spots danced in her vision. *Oh no! I'm going to pass out.*

Sarah fluttered her eyes opened and felt the cold ground.

"Dude!" Steven shouted. "Whoa! You're like some kind of superhero. I want powers like that! The way you flung that fireball was like something straight out of X-Men! You just—"

"Steven, that's enough." Beth touched her forehead. "I guess you can feel what he does. You knocked yourself out right along with him, Sarah."

Sarah slowly sat up and groaned as a rush of dizziness flooded over her. "Oh gosh."

"I was wondering when you were going to wake up," Steven said. "We've found the cave and everything."

Adam touched her shoulder. "You've been out for nearly two hours."

Sarah moaned. "I know. Me and my bright ideas. At least I stopped him from following us for a little while." She rubbed her temples. "I'm so sorry about passing out. I'm sure whoever carried me has a sore back."

Frank raised a hand. "That'd be me. I could sure use a massage, Your Highness."

Beth rolled her eyes. "You're such an idiot."

Frank shot her a glare when Steven changed the subject. "Why doesn't the royal dude just go look for someone else to marry?"

"Because," Sarah began. "The Immortals only get one chance to bond with someone, and he wasted

his opportunity on me, thinking I was Princess Gloria. Immortal idiot.”

“Well, yeah, if you completely ruined his game, I guess he would be pretty royally ticked off,” Steven said. “Pardon the pun.”

Beth sighed. “Geesh, Steven.”

Sarah stood. “He says he’s not ticked off at me and that he doesn’t care about whatever little agenda he previously had going. He’s just glad fate stepped in and that we met.”

“Don’t trust him!” Adam said. “That could be a ploy to get you into his grasp. He could throw you in a dungeon for the rest of your life or worse...kill you.”

“I know.”

Adam started picking up small twigs. “Let’s get a fire going and we’ll start fresh in the morning. So where to, boss?”

“When we wake up, we’ll head north to Ripteenia. We need to find Charles, the man my sister ran off with. Maybe she lives there with him, or maybe we could find his family. Anyway, let’s get some rest. I’m beat...and hungry.”

“Hey, any chance Dominos delivers around here?” Frank asked.

“Right. In thirty decades or less,” Beth said, rolling her eyes yet again. “Besides, between yours and Steven’s stupid jokes, I think we’ve already got plenty of extra cheese.”

* * *

The fire crackled as hot embers floated into the night air as they camped in the cave Jules had clued them in on. Frank, Adam, and Steven had already fallen asleep.

Sarah smiled at Beth. “Looks like it’s just us gals.”

“Great,” she said. “Maybe you can fill me in on how you managed to tie the knot with that gorgeous king...or even better, what’s up with you and Frank?”

Sarah hesitated. “I guess I can say it’s complicated on both counts.”

Beth grinned and sat down next to her. “I like complicated...and I’ve got all night. We don’t need our beauty sleep as much as those three do,” she said, glancing back at the snoring men.

Sarah laughed. “You have a point.” She glanced down at the ring. “I married the guy because I had no other choice,” she began, then went on to explain the entire story. It sounded insane, even to her, and she was the one who’d lived through it.

Beth squeezed her hand. “Don’t worry. We’ll find your sister. I’m so glad you found out she’s here in this place because the ‘not knowing part’ was killing you inside.”

Sarah nodded as tears welled up in her eyes.

“I know she’s a beautiful person. I can’t wait to meet her.”

“That means so much to me, Beth.”

“Let’s talk about the king. So he’s hot and a great kisser?” Beth asked.

Sarah’s heart fluttered. “Yes, the best kisser I’ve ever had.”

“Hmm. In that case, why would you feel so guilty about being drawn to him? I’d die to have a powerful king chasing after me.”

“For one, I’m pretty sure the only part of me he wants is my head on a silver platter. In my vision, it seemed like that wasn’t the case, but I don’t trust him. He could be trying to trick me so he can drag me back to his castle for a public execution—to make an example of me since I made a fool of him.”

Beth shook her head. “After the kiss you shared? Girlfriend, I don’t think so. I think that’s what you’re telling yourself, but you’re just running from what you feel. You’ve been hurt by men your entire life, so you put this shield up to protect yourself from any more pain. But somehow, I think Victor has gotten past it. Something tells me you’ve fallen for him...hard.”

But I haven’t...have I? Sarah set her jaw, her eyes shifting to the flickering fire bathing half of the cave in a soft glow. “Whatever. Nobody can fall in love that quick, especially with a complete stranger who starts off by kidnapping you and throwing you in a dungeon.”

“You started off on the wrong foot. But he was in the middle of a war and thought you were the enemy king’s daughter. He knows the truth now and things are different.” She grinned widely. “You got it bad for him. Your eyes are a dead giveaway. You light up every time you say his name.”

“You should have heard the pride in his voice when he introduced me as his wife to everyone as he paraded me through the crowd of people. I had on this fancy wedding gown and this gorgeous crown, and he looked so handsome. I felt like Cinderella, like I was in the middle of some fairytale, some dream.”

“See?”

“But that’s just it. None of it was real.”

“How so? You were there. He was there. It was as real as this cave is—as real as that ring on your finger, Sarah.”

“What I mean is that everything was based on a lie. He’d never marry a peasant like me. He’s next in line to rule the Cardashian Court. And it won’t be long now, because their Immortal king is dying. Anyway, once he takes the title, it’ll make him the most powerful person in this world. What would somebody like that want with somebody like me?”

“Don’t be so hard on yourself. He knows the truth—that you’re not really the princess—yet he still wants you.”

“The thing is, I can’t stop thinking about him.” Sarah smirked. “Especially that kiss.”

“How does Frank fit into this equation?”

She shook her head. “I don’t know. Frank and I were kind of getting back together, but—”

“But your tall, dark, handsome King Kiss-a-lot is coming between the two of you?”

“Nobody has ever made me feel the way Victor did, and I hardly know him. I know it sounds absolutely crazy. I don’t even understand it myself. We have this spark, this connection, this passion, and this chemistry that blows me away. It’s amazing...yet it scares me. Frank was the last straw, and it was because of him that I’d sworn off men. I just can’t win in the game of love. I guess it’s fine for everyone else, but romance is not for me, fairytale or not.”

“It’s not just your eyes.”

“What?” Sarah asked.

“When you talk about your new husband, it’s not just your eyes that light up, but your entire face and even your voice.”

Sarah giggled and gazed down at the ring, touching it, remembering how he’d slid it on and declared his undying devotion. “Really? Even if he was telling the truth and doesn’t want to kill me, I can’t spend my life here in this world. It’s not where I belong.”

“Follow your heart, Sarah. That’s the only way to know where you really belong.”

“You do realize they only say stuff like that in movies.”

Beth smirked. “Meh. It can happen in real life too.”

“I hope he’s not mad at me for knocking him out, but I can feel that he’s all right now.” Sarah lowered her gaze to her ring again. The soft light bounced from the red gemstone, shimmering unnaturally bright. “I just need to find a way to get this ring off, find my sister, and go home. But enough about me. How’re you feeling?”

Beth rubbed her stomach. “I’m four months along. They tell me I’m having a bouncing baby boy. I guess he did a lot of bouncing when we jumped off that cliff today. I’m pretty sure that would have been against doctor’s orders.”

“I didn’t realize you were even dating anyone. Who’s the lucky guy?”

“Um, I am not really dating—nothing serious anyway. I met this hot guy in a bar, and we downed a couple of pitchers together, drowning our loneliness away I guess. One thing led to another, and...well, bingo, I’m knocked up.”

“Does he know?”

Beth shook her head. “Nope, and I prefer to keep it that way. I don’t need his help or his money. Besides, he’s too hung up on some other chick now. Plus, he’d never understand my research.”

“Kind of like Frank?”

“Definitely...and unfortunately.” Beth laughed, brushing a stray strand of hair out of her face.

Sarah hesitated, considering her words. She didn’t want to make promises she couldn’t keep, but she wanted to help Beth feel better. The baby’s wellbeing depended on it. “Well, you know I’m always here for you, and I never got a chance to officially congratulate you.” Sarah reached over and hugged her.

“Thank you,” Beth said between sniffles.

“What’s wrong?”

“I can’t...Sarah, I just can’t have this baby here.” Beth hugged her more tightly. “What if we don’t get back home in time?”

“You’re only four months along, Beth. That gives you five months! We’ll be back home way before that baby’s born, and I’m going to spoil him rotten.”

“I’m not usually such a wimp or a crybaby. I’m sure it’s just the hormones,” Beth said. “I’m sorry.”

“You’ve got nothing to apologize for.”

Tears streamed down Beth’s face. “If we do get stuck here, what about my epidural?”

“Honey, women have been having babies naturally for generations. You will deliver your son one way or another, and you’ll both be fine.”

Beth smirked. “Yeah, I get that, but I’m not like other women. I’m not a fan of pain. They have to knock me out just to pull a tooth, and that’s a lot different than yanking an eight-pound baby out of me!”

“We’re going to get you back home, and you’re going to be a fantastic mom.”

Beth hugged her Sarah tightly, burying her face in her hair. “You’re such a wonderful friend. I really don’t deserve you.”

Sarah smiled and rubbed a hand over Beth’s back, soothing her. She wasn’t sure about the wonderful friend part. If they didn’t get back home, Beth’s child might just be born in the Middle Ages, and Beth would be in danger of losing her life in childbirth like so many mothers of that era did. Sarah had already suffered the loss of her sister; losing a friend was not an option.

Chapter 15

The iron gate, faded and rusted in patches from years of rain and snow, creaked as Sarah opened it and walked through. The moon hung high above the horizon, casting a silver hue over the trees on either side of the road. At that time of day, the village seemed deserted, devoid of life, reminding Sarah of a ghost town minus the eerie wind and hundreds of eyes peering from behind closed curtains. Her feet thudded across the bare ground as she led the way to the first tiny house with whitewashed walls and flowerpots on the windowsills. Stopping, she spun in a slow circle. *How are we going to find anything out if the entire town is asleep?* “Are you sure this is Riptenia?”

Frank nodded. “Yep, the one and only. Maybe we should split up—you know, start asking some questions.”

“Sure.” Sarah shot him an amused look. “I’m sure they’ll be happy to accommodate us, particularly if we show up knocking so early in the morning, in a world where robbing and burning down villages is as common as baking bread.”

“Do you have a better idea?”

She shrugged. “Let’s look around and see what we can find out on our own before we wake up the entire town. Some people can be real nasty if they don’t get their beauty sleep.”

“Sounds reasonable.” Beth pulled Frank’s hand. “C’mon.”

Frank’s gaze lingered on Sarah and she motioned with a laugh. “Go on. You guys go that way, and me and the guys will go the other.”

“I can protect her just as well as you can,” Adam said to Frank’s arched eyebrow.

Men—always trying to out-macho each other, Sarah thought with a sigh. “Actually, guys, I think I’m well capable of protecting myself. Technically, you can’t even take a bullet for me.”

Frank glanced over his shoulder and winked. “Hmm. I wonder if I could get the jump on inventing bulletproof vests—or bullets, for that matter. Any idea where Ye Olde Patent Office is around here?”

Beth sighed and took charge, leading Frank away. “C’mon, Frank.”

Adam smiled. “I told her to do it. Come to think of it, I actually begged.”

“What for?”

Adam shrugged. “Just needed a break from your lover boy, I guess.”

She could only hope Beth wasn't embarrassing her. Frank was not necessarily her idea of Prince Charming, but he wasn't such a bad choice. He was surely better than an Immortal sociopath who was trying to marry her one minute and telepathically kidnap her in the next. She slapped Adam's arm, returning her focus back to the conversation at hand. "You're so bad. And for the record, he's not my lover boy. I have no idea why everyone in this place seems to think that."

"Hmm. I wonder what gave them that impression."

She rolled her eyes. "Let's go."

Frank and Beth had disappeared to her right, where the wide street seemed deserted now. The houses to the left looked barely bigger than cottages that wouldn't withstand a strong autumn wind. She sighed and took that direction, the others following right behind.

Steven resumed the conversation first. "Where are we going?"

Sarah pointed to what looked like a large open space, peering through the houses. "The middle of the town. It's too early in the morning to do much other than wait."

"I thought people got up with the sun to milk cows," Steven said.

"This world's amazing—dangerous, but amazing nonetheless." Adam quickened his pace, passing her.

She grabbed his arm and pulled him back. "Wait up! It isn't safe to just venture off on your own."

He seemed to barely hear her. "We gotta take proof back with us. Somebody can always say the film is fake, but if we have something concrete, some tangible proof, I could be the first scientist to prove other dimensions exist. We could prove this is where Bigfoot comes from."

Steven patted his bag. "But I've got the footage, man! I even got the Immortal dude on tape."

"That's admirable, man, but you know someone will say it's like all that fake footage on YouTube." Adam motioned around him. "Boy, I never thought a Bigfoot expedition would turn into all of this, that's for sure. We just need proof—tangible proof."

"Interesting conversation, guys, but in order to be actually able to tell the world about it, you'll have to get out of here first," Sarah said. From the corner of her eye, she noticed something flickering in one of the windows. *Who would be awake at this ungodly hour?* Regardless of who it was, she was glad someone was up, because she was tired and hungry, and the cold night wind had sent shivers through her. In all the excitement, the others didn't seem to care about such trivial things as keeping warm and eating, but she knew they'd thank her for it later. She took a tentative step toward the house.

Suddenly, the door opened, and a woman clad in an off-white dress peered out. A wimple like that of a nun hid her features, and a fur shawl was draped across her shoulders, going halfway down her legs. "Elizabeth?" The woman's voice came low and hoarse, as if she was still half-asleep. "Is that you, dear?"

Sarah stopped, frozen to the spot.

The woman inched closer and gripped Sarah's arm. "It can't be! Elizabeth?"

With her heart pounding hard, Sarah shook her head. "No. Elizabeth is my sister."

"Your sister?"

"Yes. Do you know her?"

The woman's eyes glinted as she turned Sarah to inspect her from all sides. "She came from so far away. How's it even possible that you're here?"

"I found a way into this world just like she did—sort of by accident." She took a step back, hiding her hand from view so the woman wouldn't notice the incriminating ring. Everyone seemed to fear her or hate her for it, and there was no need to push her luck. "I heard that Elizabeth met a man named Charles, a man from this town."

"Charles?" The woman looked away into the early dawn.

"Yes, that's what we heard," said Adam.

"Charles wasn't born here. He spent a year helping us rebuild after the flood. He met Elizabeth a few towns over." She looked around and lowered her voice to a whisper, as if she was about to share some juicy gossip. "But they had to keep their relationship a secret, you know."

Steven inched closer, his camera and aspirations of fame forgotten. "Why? Was he a rich noble or something?"

"An Immortal, and as I'm sure you know, it's forbidden for an Immortal to court a mere human."

Sarah gasped. "What? Did you say he's an Immortal?"

"Yes. Elizabeth grew quite fond of King William's son."

Sarah's jaw dropped. *Liz fell for the son of evil King William, the guy who's trying to have me killed? And furthermore, how can Charles be such a saint, helping these peasants after a disaster nearly destroyed their city, if his father is such a monster?* Her sister was so close, she could feel it. Her eyes widened, her heart pounding even harder. "My sister's in the castle then?"

The woman looked away, tears welling up in her eyes. "Dear, your sister married him and slipped on the Ring of Immortality. The other Immortals found out and..." She looked down for a moment before she could finish. "Oh, I hate to have to tell you this, but—"

"What?" Sarah demanded.

"They executed her...and Charles too. The funeral was last year."

Wait...Liz is gone? Murdered? For the same mistake I made? Horror washed over her as she fell to her knees. All her pent-up emotions came flowing out like a tidal wave.

The woman dropped to her knees and patted her back. "I'm so, so sorry. It was a shock for all of us. I can take you to her gravestone in the cemetery if you would like. Perhaps it will give you some comfort and allow you to put it behind you, as we have all had to do. Oh, how awful it was."

Sarah spoke between sobs. "Please. I need to see it for myself."

"We put the headstone up to remember her. She was actually buried with Charles at the castle." The woman looped her arm around Sarah's, and they walked in silence to the other side of town with Adam and Steven in tow, shock written all over their faces. After they passed rows and rows of crude headstones, she pointed at a marble one.

"I need a few minutes alone, if you don't mind," said Sarah, her voice quivering.

"I understand, dear," said the woman, and she turned and left.

Adam touched Sarah's shoulder. "We'll be waiting outside the gate. Take your time."

Sarah knelt, and her trembling fingers slowly traced the letters: E-L-I-Z-A-B-E-T-H L-A-R-K-E-R. "Oh, Liz. I've spent the last ten years looking for answers, looking for you...and I guess now I have them." Tears rolled down her face as she spoke softly, "I know life here is tough, but you adjusted because you were always strong, just like Mom. You even...you even met someone to fall in love with. I am so glad to know you were happy in this place, if only for a little while. Charles must be a wonderful man who truly loved you." She wiped her eyes and then continued. "It looks like I've gotten into the same terrible situation, only I don't know the one who slipped the ring on my finger. He's my husband, yet he's a stranger. I've known him less than a few days.

Oh, Liz, the Immortals are hot on my trail now, and if they didn't spare you, surely I stand no chance against them. Déjà vu, I guess. Isn't it funny how fate works?" She wiped a tear rolling down her cheek as she peered around at rows after rows of dry earth and bare crosses. Every few spaces, a gravestone jutted out of the ground, providing a change in the dismal display of poverty. "You weren't just my sister, Liz." She stopped and pulled her nose, her voice failing her. "You were my best friend. I'll never forget the beautiful memories we shared. They might have taken your life, but you're alive in my heart, and that's one thing they can never take away, no matter what they do to me."

Numb and exhausted, she closed her eyes and tried to think of better times, of their happy childhoods, hide-and-seek, skipping rope, and Christmas mornings. "Do I have any regrets? Yes! For one thing—maybe the biggest regret of all—I'm sorry I left you in those woods years ago. I deserted you, and I have never forgiven myself, but I hope you were able to forgive me. Know that I'll always love you, Liz, and I never stopped looking for you. I hope you are...resting in peace, dear sister." Emotion choked her as she straightened her back and, with one last glance back, walked back through the iron gate. She had been looking for answers about what had happened to her older sister, but now she wished she'd never found out. It had been easier holding on to hope than it was to know the truth. She would never have stopped searching, but now she had lost all purpose in life. *How can I go back to my life? How can I ever be happy again knowing my sister was killed...because I left her behind?*

The others had been waiting patiently in front of a big boulder. "I'm here for you," Beth said, embracing her as she reached them.

Frank wrapped his arms around her in a hug. "I'm so sorry."

She buried her head in his chest and let her tears flow freely into the fabric of his shirt. "She died a year ago—killed by the Immortals when she married King William's son Charles. Liz and Charles were killed. Those same Immortals are after me!"

"I know. Adam told us." He held her tightly. "Everything is going to be okay, Sarah."

Okay? How can he even say that? Nothing is okay. My sister is dead, and I will never be okay again! The pain cut out a huge part of her heart.

They all gave her words of hope and encouragement, but nothing they said could take away the pain in her heart, the only part of her that was still human. She wiped her eyes and took a deep breath. Even though she knew she would not find the person she had really come for, she couldn't leave without meeting Gloria. "Maybe we could track Princess Gloria down and talk to her."

Adam shook his head. "Go into King William's castle? There are probably wanted posters of your face plastered on every brick! Every single person in there is probably after your head...literally."

"No way," Beth said. "We have to think about your life."

Frank gripped her hand tightly. "Remember, babe, those are the people who shoot first and don't bother asking questions now or later. I know you want your questions answered, but getting yourself—and possibly all of us—killed isn't the way to go."

"I know! Of all of you, I know! They shot me in the freaking heart. If I could get to Gloria, though, I think she could help us," Sarah pleaded.

"She might be able to," Beth said. "She's Charles's sister."

Steven leaned against a rock and met Sarah's gaze. "Yeah, man, that sounds great and all, but you won't get one breath out to explain yourself before they string you up to be roasted like a marshmallow."

"Why do you even need to find Gloria?" Adam asked. "I'm not trying to be insensitive here, but it seems pointless when you have the answers you need. Let's just get the heck out of here."

Sarah rolled her eyes. Adam wasn't sporting an irremovable ring and running around with everyone out to kill him, or he might have been singing a different tune. "I'll tell you why. Sure, I wouldn't mind finding out more about my sister's life, but that's not the reason. I have a feeling those Immortals from the court will follow me right back home to my doorstep, and so will King Victor. For all I know, King William might even have a way to crash the party. I need to find out how to get this ring off and what I can do to get the Immortals off my back. Until I know that, I will never have control of my life again."

"They're at war with King Victor," Frank said. "They hate him. They might help us based on that fact alone."

"Gloria lost her brother," Beth said. "She won't want to lose you, too, especially over the exact same thing."

“I agree,” Sarah said. “I’m sure Princess Gloria loved Liz, and I think she will understand why I pretended to be her. It’s her father who is crazy, not her.”

“Then we’ll avoid him like the plague,” said Frank. “Sarah’s right. She’ll never get her life back until we figure out how to get this ring off.”

Adam kicked at stones in the dirt, his brows furrowed. “This sucks.”

“This is something I have to do,” Sarah said. “If you don’t want to go with me, that’s okay, but I hope you understand.”

“Nobody’s backing out on you now, Sarah. We’re a team, remember? Now c’mon. Let’s head toward the castle,” Frank said.

Sarah nodded. Heading into dangerous enemy territory was risky, but it was something she had to do to get answers to the lingering questions in her head—and even more importantly, how to get that ancient wedding ring off her finger. “Let’s go.”

To be continued....

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Thank you so much for sharing Sarah’s journey. It was a pleasure having you along. I hope you enjoyed the story just as much as I enjoyed writing it. Connect with me online!

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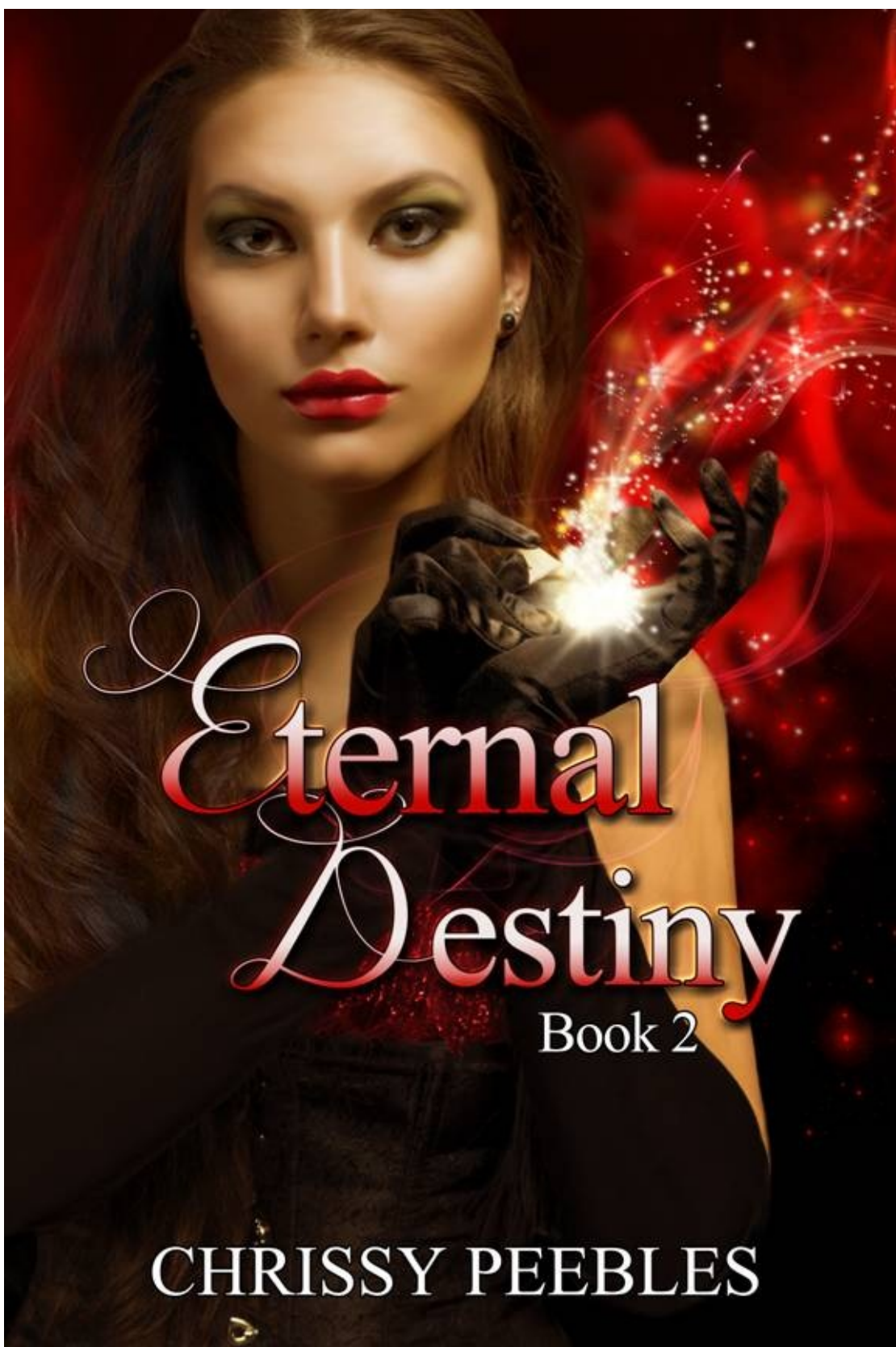
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