

CHAPTER NINE

AS BELLE WATCHED, saucer-eyed, *Nevermore* expanded.

Taller and taller it grew, until it towered over her. When it was nearly touching the ceiling, it stopped growing, and then its front cover swung open, ever so slightly, and sounds spilled out of it: a woman's laughter, a man's shout, horses whinnying, music, glasses clinking.

Belle didn't know whether to feel scared or thrilled. And then she saw something—something spidery and black crouching in the shadow between *Nevermore's* cover and its pages. It darted out of the book and crawled up a wall. Another scurried up the side of the desk. A third jumped onto a bookshelf.

Belle, still sitting on the floor, scuttled backward, away from the creatures. *What are they?* she wondered warily. *Bugs? Mice?*

The cover opened wider and more of the creatures crawled out. Belle scrambled to her feet, ready to stamp them away if they came close.

But then one did, and Belle's wariness turned to wonder as she saw what it was. Not an insect or a rodent, but a *word*.

She knelt down and put her hand on the floor, palm up. EAGER jumped onto it. OAF ran over her toes. CERTAIN chased DUBIOUS around the room. PRECIOUS and EXQUISITE shoved each other.

The room was filling up with words. They spilled out of the book like water tumbling down a streambed. They curled around her ankles and tugged on the hem of her skirt.

Belle put EAGER down. As she did, *Nevermore's* cover creaked all the way open. Its pages started turning, slowly at first, then faster, blowing Belle's hair back, plastering her skirts to her legs. Then they abruptly stopped. And the book remained open to a page with only five words on it: THE COUNTESS GIVES A PARTY.

That page slowly turned, and Belle caught her breath, astonished by what she saw.

There were no words on the paper, just a picture that



took up the entire page. As Belle looked at it, the picture came to life. Dancers whirled. An orchestra played. Belle smelled perfume, wine, and roses.

People, she thought. A longing as deep as hunger filled her as she realized how much she missed human faces, laughter, and conversation.

She walked up to the page and touched it. It rippled and sparkled under her fingers like the surface of a sun-dappled pond. Mesmerized, she pushed her arm into it all the way up to her elbow, then pulled it back out. Droplets of silvery light clung to her skin like melted candlewax, then hardened in the air. When she shook them off, they landed on the wooden floor, sparkling like diamonds.

“What are you?” she murmured to the book.

As if answering her, the page rippled again. The book seemed to be beckoning to her. She’d put her arm into the silver with no ill effect. . . . What if she stepped into the book? Was that even possible?

Belle’s heartbeat quickened with excitement at the thought of walking into *Nevermore’s* pages and finding out where the laughter and music were coming from, but something held her back. What was inside those pages? What if she didn’t like it there? How would she get back?



She remembered what the Beast had told her about the enchanted books. *Most are harmless, but one or two . . . can be a little unruly.*

If I can handle the Beast, I can handle unruly, she thought.

Then she took a deep breath.

And stepped into the story.