

# MIRROR, MIRROR

A TWISTED TALE

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# Prologue

The castle looked different from the outside.

It was the first thing the princess thought of when she saw it again. It felt like years since she had laid eyes on it, but in reality, it had only been a few weeks. Now, as she stared at the monstrosity looming high on the hilltop, she felt her breath catch in her throat. Those walls were filled with so many ghosts and memories of the life she'd lost.

But they didn't have to be.

If they could do what they'd set out to, they could change all that. The castle and those who sat upon its throne could be a beacon for the kingdom again. But that meant not running away from what the princess knew she'd find inside that castle, even if every inch of her body wanted her to.

“We should hurry,” Anne said as she slashed at the brambles to make her own path, which would lead them right to the village outside the castle without being seen. “We haven’t much time before the celebration begins.”

The princess quickened her pace, following her friend. She was going home.

It didn’t feel like home. It hadn’t for a long time, but technically that’s what the castle was. Or had been once upon a time.

If she concentrated hard enough, she could picture the castle the way it had been when she was a child. In her mind’s eye, the kingdom was beloved and beautiful, with a castle the people took pride in. (After all, they were the ones who had placed every stone to build it.) Overgrown ivy didn’t trail across the gray stone walls. Every bush, every tree, every flower was manicured. The aviary was brimming with the songs of birds. Windows gleamed. The lake at the base of the hill glimmered with hope as visitors frequently came from other shores. The gates to the castle were almost always open, and it wasn’t uncommon for parties to spring up at a moment’s notice.

But now things were different. The windows appeared dark and the curtains were always drawn up tight, giving the castle an abandoned appearance. The waters surrounding the castle looked like glass, for no ship dared cross into

their kingdom’s borders. The gates, rusted and leaning, were locked. The grounds were, except for a few faithful guards, deserted. Her kingdom’s renaissance was long gone.

When King Georg and Queen Katherine had sat upon the throne, they had looked benevolently upon their province. The land’s soil had been rich enough for farming, and held a thriving diamond mine beneath the earth. The pair celebrated the province’s growth by throwing frequent festivals in the castle’s courtyard, where subjects from every walk of life were welcome. When she closed her eyes, she could see herself being swung through the air as a fiddle played and people danced. But the memory quickly vanished, replaced by the sound of Anne splintering more tree branches.

For too long, she had spent her days and nights inside that fortress wishing someone would break her free. She’d lived without love in that castle for so long, with little laughter or company to bolster her spirits. Maybe that was why, despite the castle’s splendor, it had always felt tainted and tarnished. The princess had accepted her fate in an effort to make the best of things, but she refused to do so any longer.

It wasn’t till she was outside those walls that she’d realized the truth: the only one who could truly break her

free was herself. That's why she was back. To claim what was truly hers. Not just the castle, but the province and its throne. Not just for her own happiness, but also for that of her people.

Now was the time to strike. It was why she had traveled so far, risked so much, and found strength within herself that she hadn't known she possessed. Queen Ingrid's popularity had never been strong, but in the last few years, the kingdom had gone from indifference to downright terror. She couldn't allow her people to suffer this way any longer. It was time.

"There!" Anne had slashed through the last of the branches, and sunlight was now shining through the shadows. "We've reached the road. It's just a little bit further down, and then we can slip through the castle gates near the butcher's shop unseen. The queen has demanded everyone be at the celebration, so there should be crowds near the gates today."

She hugged the brown cloak Anne had made her tightly. It was quickly becoming one of her most prized possessions. Not only did it keep her warm, but the jacquard pattern reminded her of a traveling coat her mother used to wear. It felt like her mother was with her somehow, or at the very least, making sure she found the right companions to keep at her side. She was grateful for Anne's friendship and all

the subjects she'd met who had helped her. Their kindness wouldn't be forgotten.

She turned to Anne. "Won't that make it harder for us to get through?"

Anne took her hands. "Don't worry, my friend. You will have an easier journey than Prince Henrich and I had this morning. These crowds are the perfect cover for you to slip inside."

"Have you heard from Henri at all?" the princess asked hopefully.

Anne shook her head. "I'm sure he's safe. If he wasn't, we would have heard something." Anne pulled her along. "It's *you* I worry about. Once you cross the gates, everyone will recognize you. We need to get you indoors before you're noticed. We must move quickly and get you to your love. He's waiting for you."

*Your love.* The words caused a small smile to play on her lips. She and Henri had been through a lot in the last week, and more before that. Her steps quickened.

As Anne predicted, the road to the village was deserted that morning. They didn't pass a single carriage on their hike in. No one was traveling on foot at the moment, either, though she saw plenty of footprints in the dirt. She'd expected the village entrance to be guarded, but there was no one manning the post when she and Anne walked through the open

gates. A declaration had been nailed to a wrought iron post. She read it quickly as she passed:

*Queen Ingrid demands all loyal village subjects join her for a celebration in the castle courtyard today at noon. In preparation for this momentous occasion, all village establishments will be closed. Those not at the celebration will be noted.*

She shuddered. Anne was right about the celebration being mandatory, but it was an odd request. It wasn't that she was surprised by Queen Ingrid's insistence, but there hadn't been anything close to merriment or official festivities in the kingdom for years. The people were so frightened by their queen that they avoided doing anything to make themselves noticeable. Instead, they spent their days with their heads down, living in the shadows. Being drawn out for a rare celebration—if that's what it really was—had to be unnerving. What was the queen playing at?

They were both silent as they made their way onto the dusty village road that led up to the castle. The princess had spent some time in these streets—albeit limited time—but she was still surprised by how quiet things were. The small wood homes with thatched straw roofs that lined the road were closed up tight. The monastery's bell tolled

solemnly to mark the time as noon, but there was no one around to hear it. Evidently the people had heeded Queen Ingrid's warning. She sighed heavily and Anne looked at her.

"You don't have to do this alone. You know that, right?" Anne's voice was gentle. "Let me come with you and Prince Henrich and fight!"

"No." She shook her head. "I appreciate all you've done for us, but this part of the journey I must take alone."

Anne stared at her as if she wanted to say more, but they were interrupted by shouting. A man came running toward them, his face filled with terror.

"The queen is a witch!" he shouted. "Steer clear of the town square—run! Hide! Or Queen Ingrid will curse you, too."

The princess was so startled she couldn't comprehend what the man was saying. Anne looked equally frightened. What had the queen done to her people now? She started running toward the town square to see what was going on.

Anne went after her. "Wait! You heard the man. This could be a trap!"

If the queen suspected she was near, so be it. Her gut told her something was seriously wrong. She needed to know what had happened.

As she approached the castle, she could see what looked

like the entire village gathered in front of it. Heads bobbed up and down as villagers gawked at whatever was behind the closed gates. Clearly this was no celebration. She watched villagers anxiously jockey for position, trying to get a better look. Some screamed and cried while others lifted children onto their shoulders to get a better look. Anne and the princess struggled to get a better view.

“Don’t look,” she heard one mother say to a young boy. “We must go now! Before one of us is next.”

“Does anyone know who it is?” asked another.

“Looks like royal blood if you ask me.”

The princess pushed her way through the crowd, trying to make her way to the front. Anne clung to her arm, not wanting to lose her.

“Excuse me,” she kept saying. “May I please pass?”

But the townsfolk continued to goggle, talking and staring as if they didn’t see her.

“It’s witchcraft, I tell you!”

“A warning!” said another. “She is not to be crossed!”

“Is he sleeping or is he dead?”

“He hasn’t stirred. He must be dead.”

*He?* She pushed harder, going against all the manners she’d been taught so long ago to reach the front of the gate and see what the others were so upset about. As soon as she did, she wished she hadn’t.

“No!” she cried, pulling her hand from Anne’s and grasping the bars in front of her.

It was Henrich. Her Henri. Lying in what appeared to be a glass coffin on display on a raised platform. His eyes were closed and he was dressed in the finest of garments. His face looked almost peaceful. Clasped in his hands was a single white rose. It was a message for her, that much was clear. Was he dead? She needed to know.

“Wait,” Anne said as her friend pushed on the gates, slipping inside so fast the guards couldn’t stop her. “Wait!”

But she kept going, the cloak falling from her shoulders as she ran.

“It’s the princess!” someone shouted, but she didn’t stop. She didn’t care who saw her. She rushed up the platform steps and leaned over the coffin, lifting the glass lid. “Henri! Henri!” she cried, but his eyes remained closed. She clasped his hands. They were still warm. She leaned her head on Henri’s chest. There was shouting and commotion behind her. Screams and cries rose up from the crowd.

“It’s her!”

“She’s come back for us!”

“Princess, save us!”

She blocked out their yelling and listened for the most important sound in the world: a heartbeat. But before she had the chance to register one, she was ripped off the

platform and spun around. She instantly recognized the large, burly man holding her.

The man smiled, his gold tooth gleaming. “Take the traitor to Queen Ingrid. She’s been expecting the princess.”

She held her head high as he marched her past Anne and the crowd and whispered in her ear.

“Welcome home, Snow White.”

## Snow

### *Ten years earlier*

Flakes fell softly, covering the already frozen castle grounds. When she stuck out her tongue, she could feel the flakes land on it. The little droplets of frozen water had the same name she did: Snow.

Was she named for the snow or was the snow named for her? That’s what she wondered. She was a princess, so the weather *could* have been named after her.

Then again, snow had been around a lot longer than she had. She was only seven.

“What’s that smell?” her mother called out, pulling Snow from her thoughts.

Snow flattened herself to the castle garden’s wall so she wouldn’t be seen and tried to stay quiet.

“Smells delicious and sweet . . . Could there be a goose in the garden with me?”

Snow giggled. “Mother, geese don’t stay at the castle in the winter! They fly south. Everyone knows that.”

“Everyone also knows that if you talk during hide-and-seek, you can be found faster.” Her mother rounded a bend and pointed to her. “I’ve found you!”

Maybe she was biased, but Snow thought her mother was the most wonderful person in the world. Father said she looked just like her, and if that was true, Snow was pleased. Her mother had kind eyes the color of chestnuts and ebony hair, which, today, was pulled back in a loose chignon. She had removed her favorite crown—Mother didn’t often wear it during games in the garden, especially in the winter months—but she’d need to place it on her head when they went back inside in a few moments. Her mother had to get ready for the castle’s annual masquerade ball. Snow hated that she was too young to attend and had to take her supper in her room with her nursemaid. She so wished she could go to the party. She preferred her mother’s company to anyone else’s.

“I’m going to get you!” her mother sang, pulling up the fur-trimmed hood on her red velvet cloak. Snow particularly liked the gold buttons on this cloak. She would play with them when she was standing close to her mother during

processions through the village streets. It loosened the buttons and drove their tailor mad, but it made Snow feel safe and warm, like her mother did. She rarely ever wanted to leave her side—except during games of hide-and-seek.

“But you haven’t caught me yet!” Snow cried, and she took off through the garden’s maze of bushes. Her mother started to laugh.

Snow wasn’t sure which way to turn. Every path looked the same. The high, neatly trimmed green hedges blocked all but the view of the gray, snowy sky. Most of the flowers had been pruned for the season, leaving much of the normally beautiful grounds bare and Snow’s position in the gardens more visible than usual. If Snow kept weaving around the corners, she knew she would reach the center of the maze and her mother’s beloved aviary. The two-story wrought iron dome looked like a giant birdcage. It was her mother’s pride and joy and the first thing she had commissioned when she became queen. She’d always had a love of birds. Snow’s mother kept several species inside the netted walls, and she patiently explained each bird’s nature to Snow in detail. The two had spent countless hours watching the aviary, with Snow naming all of the creatures inside it. Her favorite was Snowball, a small white canary.

As Snow rounded the turn and spotted the dome in front of her, Snowball fluttered to a perch and spotted her,

tweeting loudly and giving away Snow's position. That was okay. Sometimes Mother catching her was half the fun.

"Here I come!" called Mother.

Snow giggled even harder, her breath leaving smoky rings in the cold air. She could hear her mother's footsteps growing closer, so she rounded the aviary fast to hide on the opposite side. But she wasn't being careful—her mother always told her to be careful—and she felt herself begin to slip on a patch of ice. Soon Snow was falling, sliding out of control into a rosebush.

"Ouch!" she cried as she pulled herself free of the thorny branch that was pricking through her cloak and into her right hand. Snow saw the blood trickle down her pale white palm and began to cry.

"Snow!" her mother said, drawing down close to her. "Are you okay? Where are you hurt?" She leaned in and Snow's vision began to blur, as if the snow was falling harder now. Even through the haze, Snow could still see her mother's dark eyes peering at her intently. "It's all right, Snow. Everything is going to be all right." She took Snow's injured hand, pulled an embroidered handkerchief from her pocket and dabbed it into the snow, and then pressed it against her daughter's wound. It cooled the burn from the cut. She wrapped the handkerchief tightly around Snow's hand. "There. All better. We can clean you up when we get you inside."

Snow pouted. "I hate roses! They hurt!"

Her mother smiled, her image softening along with the sound of her voice. She seemed so far away. "They can, yes, when you get nicked by a thorn." She plucked a single red rose off the bush. It was petrified from the snow and frozen, but still perfectly preserved and almost crimson in color. Snow peered at it closely. "But you shouldn't be afraid to hold on to something beautiful, even if there are thorns in your path. If you want something, sometimes you have to take risks. And when you do"—she handed Snow the rose—"you reap wonderful rewards."

"You shouldn't be here, Your Majesty."

Snow looked up. Her mother's sister and lady-in-waiting, her aunt Ingrid, was staring at them sharply. Almost angrily. Somehow, Snow knew this look well. "You're already late."

Seventeen-year-old Snow awoke with a start, gasping for air as she sat up in bed. "Mother!" she cried out.

But there was no one there to hear her.

There never was. Not anymore.

Instead, Snow was greeted by the sound of silence.

As she wiped the sweat from her brow, she wondered: had this been another dream turned nightmare, or was it a true memory? She had them more frequently now. It had been more than ten years since she'd seen her mother's face; sometimes she wasn't sure.

She hardly ever saw Aunt Ingrid these days. No one in the castle did. Her aunt had become all but a recluse, letting very few into her inner circle. Her niece, whom she was begrudgingly raising, was not one of them.

Aunt Ingrid always looked the same in dreams, maybe because on the rare occasion Snow crossed her aunt's path in the castle, she always had on some slight variation of the same gown. Although they were mostly similar in cut, she wore only the most beautifully tailored dresses, with the finest fabric their kingdom could offer, and only in shades of purple. The castle was indeed drafty, which could have been why Aunt Ingrid was never seen without a dark-hued cape that she coiled around her body like a snake. Snow couldn't recall the last time she'd seen her aunt's hair (she couldn't even remember the color) because Ingrid always covered her head with a tight-fitting headdress accentuated by her crown.

Snow, on the other hand, couldn't remember the last time she'd been given something new to wear. Not that she minded that much—who even saw her?—but it would have been nice to have a gown that didn't tug at her arms or end at her calves. She had two dresses she rotated, and both were covered in patches. She'd mended her burgundy skirt, which she had made from old curtains, more times than she could remember. She didn't even have any fabric left over to

patch it anymore, so her skirt had become a rainbow of colors with beige and white patches covering the holes where the dress had torn on the stone steps or a rosebush.

*Roses.* What was the bit about the roses in her dream?

She couldn't remember. The dream was already beginning to fade. All she could picture was her mother's serene face. Maybe it was best to leave the memory alone. She had a lot to do today.

Snow pulled herself out of bed and went to the large window in her room, drawing open the heavy curtains. She'd resisted using the drapes to make a warm cape for herself so far, but if the next winter was as bad as the last one, she might have to resort to it. She let the bright light of day in and looked out at the grounds below.

Summer was in full bloom, giving the aging castle a glow it needed badly. While there was no denying that the castle's exterior had deteriorated in the last ten years, she felt a sense of pride as she looked out at the garden and her mother's beloved aviary. She had pruned the bushes, giving them a neat shape, as well as overturned and weeded the flower beds. Fresh blooms hung from silver canisters on the brick walls, making the garden come alive. It didn't hurt that she'd been slowly cutting back the ivy that threatened to take over the entire castle. She could only reach so high, but at ground level the stone was clearly visible again, even

if it did need a good scrubbing. (She'd add that to her list.) She could only imagine how the facade looked outside the castle gates. Her aunt forbade Snow from leaving the castle's grounds. She said it was for Snow's safety, but it made her feel like a prisoner. At least she could still come and go in the gardens as she pleased.

Being in the open air rather than cooped up in this castle was her own personal form of heaven. She wasn't supposed to speak to the few guards her aunt still kept in employment, but at least when she passed another human being on her walk through the castle to the garden each day she didn't feel quite so alone. Her aunt hadn't let her make a public appearance in years (though there rarely *were* appearances these days, even for Queen Ingrid), and the castle seldom saw visitors. She sometimes wondered if the kingdom even knew there *was* a princess anymore. But there was no one to ask.

Snow tried to stay busy keeping up the castle. When she had too much time on her hands, she began to think a lot about all she'd lost over the last ten years. Her beloved mother, Queen Katherine, had fallen ill so quickly Snow never had the chance to go to her bedside to say goodbye. Her father had been too distraught to comfort her, instead turning to Aunt Ingrid, whom he soon married. Snow could still hear the whispers about the union, which seemed more

like it was done out of necessity than love. She assumed her father had wanted her to have a mother, and Ingrid had appeared to be the next best thing. But she wasn't. Snow noticed her father never again smiled the way he had when her mother was alive.

Perhaps that was the true reason her father had run off only a few months later: he'd had a broken heart. At least, that's what she told herself. It was too hard to believe what Aunt Ingrid told everyone—that her father had lost his mind. Aunt Ingrid said that without Katherine around to help him govern the kingdom, King Georg had become overcome with grief. Snow once heard her aunt tell the court that Georg spoke to Katherine as if she were still alive, frightening guards, servants, and even his own daughter. But Snow didn't remember him doing that.

Her last memory of her father was in the aviary. She had snuck out there to take care of her mother's birds. Sensing someone's presence, she'd turned around to find the king watching her with tears in his eyes.

"You remind me so much of your mother," he'd said hoarsely. He reached out and gently stroked her hair. "I'm so sorry she isn't here to see you grow up."

"It's not your fault, Papa," Snow had said, and this only made him cry harder. He knelt down, grasping her shoulders and looking her in the eye.

“Don’t make the same mistakes I did, Snow,” he said. “Don’t be fooled by love. It only comes once. Trust your instincts. Trust your people. Trust what you’ve learned from your mother, most of all. Let her spirit guide you when you rule.” He cupped her face in his hands. “You will make a remarkable queen someday. Don’t let anyone make you lose your way.”

“I won’t, Papa,” she remembered saying, but his words had frightened her. They felt like goodbye.

The next morning, he was gone.

She hadn’t realized it at first. It wasn’t until she got dressed and headed to her father’s chambers to have breakfast with him as they always did that she heard people talking about the king’s sudden disappearance. Queen Ingrid—recently coronated—had been pulled into “urgent business” and hadn’t found Snow to tell her herself. Instead, Snow had heard the news from two gossiping guards.

“Queen says he’s a madman. That we’re better off without him. Hasn’t been the same since Queen Katherine died,” one said. “What king runs off and abandons his daughter?”

“What king abandons his own people?” the other replied.

Snow didn’t know the answer to that. All she knew was that she’d never felt more alone. After Father had gone, Aunt Ingrid seemed to disappear, too. The new queen didn’t have

time to have breakfast with Snow, let alone study birds in the aviary. She was too busy meeting with her newly appointed court, a group of people Snow had never seen before. Everyone her father had worked with had been dismissed, and the smaller staff of advisors had been handpicked by Ingrid. Even so, Snow heard the whispers about her aunt’s new nickname: the “Evil Queen,” they called her, when she wasn’t within earshot. Other than meeting with them, the queen rarely took appointments or met with visiting royals. After a couple of years, her aunt stopped letting anyone new into the castle. The rumor was that she was fearful of traitors, which seemed to prove true when most of the staff were dismissed except for a select few.

A vain woman, Queen Ingrid couldn’t do without her personal tailor, Margaret; the ever-present guards; or a small group of cooks; but she certainly didn’t hire anyone to care for Snow. Instead, Snow had raised herself, growing up mostly alone in her big, empty room that reminded her of a tomb. Being alone with her thoughts could have driven her mad. But she kept her mind busy by making mental lists of things to do to get her through each day.

Today was no exception. Turning away from the window, Snow removed her dressing gown, then washed up at her water basin, which she had filled at the wishing well the day before. She put on her gown with the patched-up tan

skirt and smoothed out the creases on her white-and-brown blouse that almost matched. She slipped into her clogs, which she had recently cleaned. Looking in her freshly shined mirror—she'd tidied up her room yesterday, as she did every week—she put on the blue headband she'd made from scraps her aunt's tailor had left for garbage. Satisfied, Snow went to her wardrobe.

It was almost bare. The few dresses hanging on the rack she had outgrown years before, but she kept them both for sentimental reasons and in case she ever needed to use the fabric for patches or material. She hated the thought of cutting up her history—there was her seventh birthday dress, and the gown she'd worn to a meeting with her father and the visiting king of Prunham—though sometimes it was necessary. For now, the dresses served as reminders of a different life, as well as a wonderful hiding spot. Snow pulled back her birthday dress and glanced at the portrait hidden behind it.

Her mother's and father's faces stared back at her. So did a younger version of her own. The portrait had been commissioned right before her mother had taken ill. It had been the family's first time sitting for an official painting since Snow was a baby. It had hung in the castle barely more than a few weeks before the king had ordered it taken down. Her aunt claimed he'd done so because it was too

painful for him to see the former queen's face every day, but Snow felt differently. Any chance she had to see her parents she took.

*Morning, Mother. Morning, Father.*

Snow had her mother's face, but her father's eyes, while bluish gray, were the same shape as her own. They looked kind, which was how she tried to be, even when it was difficult. She lightly touched one finger against the coarse painting. *Father, why did you leave me?* she wondered, trying not to let bitter feelings well up inside her. Knowing she wouldn't get an answer, she tucked the portrait away again.

Snow went to her room's double doors and opened them quietly. As there was every morning, a tray of breads and fruit awaited her. Snow suspected this was the work of the remaining servants, and she appreciated the gesture more than she could say. Breakfast was always left in front of her room, but dinner was more unpredictable, everyone busy with the queen's most lavish meal. Snow didn't mind going down to the kitchen to get something for herself. Tucked back in the kitchen, away from prying eyes, the main cook, Mrs. Kindred, didn't ignore Snow the way others in the castle did. For just a few moments a day, it meant she had someone to converse with.

"Please, sir, I haven't eaten in two days."

Snow was picking up the tray when she heard the plea.

Startled, she ducked into the shadows of her doorway to eavesdrop.

“If they didn’t leave you food, then you get no food.”

She knew that voice. It was Brutus, one of her aunt’s faithful guards. Snow didn’t recognize the other voice.

“But they promised with this post I would be fed two meals a day. It’s not for me, sir. I bring most of it home to my wife and child. We can’t go a third day without food.”

“Your job is to guard these halls, not grumble about grub.”

“But—” the guard started to say just as Brutus interrupted him.

“Are you questioning the queen’s judgment? You know what happened to the boy in your position before you, do you not?” Snow peered through the shadows as Brutus got in the young man’s face. “He was never seen again. Some say he was turned into one of the snakes slithering through the grass on the grounds. I wonder what would become of your family if you weren’t here.”

“No!” The man’s voice was urgent. “Don’t bother the queen. I’ll wait for food to be delivered . . . whenever that might be.”

Snow audibly inhaled. She’d heard the chef and other servants talk about how her aunt practiced witchcraft. “It’s how she stays looking so young,” some said. “It’s why no one questions her decisions—they’re afraid she’ll turn them

into a toad or an insect or worse,” said others. They talked about a chamber where the queen spent most of her time talking to someone—even though no one else was ever seen coming or going from the room. Snow wasn’t sure what to think, but she knew people who crossed the queen disappeared. And she knew the queen’s very presence struck fear through everyone in the castle. Brutus’s role as her henchman could be equally frightful.

“Smart boy,” Brutus said, and headed down the hallway toward Snow, a playful grin on his lips.

Snow pressed herself against the cool wall to make sure he didn’t see her. When he was out of sight, she peeked again to look at the guard. He was young and very thin. Not much older than she. And he had a family he was feeding on meals that weren’t arriving. She looked down at the warm bread and the fruit on her breakfast tray.

Her belly was still full from the night before. She could make it until dinner without anything more. Looking both ways to make sure the hall was clear before stepping out of the shadows, Snow walked swiftly toward the guard, her eyes cast downward. The guard looked surprised when she placed her tray at his feet.

“Your Highness,” he said, struggling for words. “But that’s *your* meal.”

Snow was too shy to speak. Instead, she waved the food away and pushed the tray closer to his boots. With a small

nod and smile, she hurried back to the safety of her chambers before anyone could see them conversing and tell the queen, but not before she heard him speak softly.

“Thank you, kind princess. Thank you.”

She didn't feel much like a princess these days, but she was proud to help anyone when she could. Back in her chambers, Snow prepared to go about her day. Since the court wasn't meeting with her aunt, she knew it was safe to mop the castle foyer. It had been looking a little muddy when she'd walked through yesterday. There were also several stained glass windows on the second floor that she hadn't had a chance to clean recently. And there was a rug she wanted to scrub near the throne room. She hated getting too close to her aunt's quarters, but that rug was the first thing visitors saw when they came to meet with her, however rare that might be. What people thought of the castle was one of the few things about the kingdom Snow could control, and she took pride in the work . . . even on days when her back began to ache from scrubbing tiles or her hands grew callused from all the pruning she did in the garden. She tried to break up her day between indoor and outdoor activities when the weather allowed it. Today was a fine day, so she hoped to get out to the garden as soon as possible. She wanted to gather flowers to make bouquets for the castle vases. There wouldn't be many who had the

opportunity to see the flowers, but at least the servants' day would be brightened.

She gathered her cleaning supplies and was heading down the hall when she heard footsteps. Once more, she instinctively moved into the shadows to stay unseen. It was the queen's seamstress, Margaret, as well as Margaret's apprentice: a daughter about the same age as Snow. Snow had overheard them talking on their many trips to the castle and knew the daughter's name was Anne, but the two had never spoken.

“I told you: I don't know why we were summoned,” Snow heard Margaret say as she wheeled a cart with spools of fabric and sewing materials down the hall. With every turn, the cart made a clicking sound that echoed through the corridor. “I'm sure it's nothing to worry about.”

“What if she changed her mind again?” Anne prodded, her brown eyes holding a world of worry. She pushed a stray strand of hair off her tan face. “We can't afford to throw out any more fabric, Mother. The queen won't let us sell the discarded gowns to anyone and she won't let us keep them. One day she wants all purple, the next black, and the following blue. The Evil Queen can't decide!”

“Don't you dare call her that! Hold your tongue!” Margaret looked around worriedly and Snow pushed herself farther into the shadows. “Do you know how fortunate

we are to have this position? She is the queen, and as you well know, she can do whatever she pleases—including doing away with us.”

Anne hung her head, staring down at the basketful of spools in her arms. “I’m sorry, Mother. It just feels so wasteful! Her tariffs and rules mean so many go hungry. If we could give the unwanted clothes to those in need . . .”

It pained Snow to hear the subjects talk like this. She was forbidden to spend time outside the castle, so she didn’t know for sure, but she sensed that most of the people were struggling. She hated feeling like her life was frozen in time. She’d have given anything to help the people, but she knew her aunt would never entertain her concerns.

Margaret stopped the cart. “Enough now! I mean it!” Anne grew quiet. “I am grooming you to take over this position when I am too old to thread a needle. Do you want the job to go to someone else?”

“Honestly?” Anne started to say, and Snow couldn’t help laughing.

Anne seemed like a funny girl, one Snow wished she could spend time with. But that was out of the question.

“What was that sound?” Anne said in alarm, and Snow grew quiet. Anne was looking in her direction.

“See what I mean?” Margaret hissed. “She is always watching, girl. Always! Enough griping. Whatever the

queen doesn’t want today, you put with the rest of the waste we leave behind.”

Anne sighed. “Yes, Mother.”

*More rags!* Snow thought. She wondered what the queen would think if she knew her unwanted clothes were being torn up and used for cleaning. (The staff joked that the castle had the finest cleaning rags in the land.)

Snow watched them both continue down the hall and waited till they turned into the queen’s corridor before she stepped into the light again. Then she heard movement and froze, turning around slowly. Anne had come back around the corner and was looking right at her. The two stared at one another for a moment. Snow wasn’t sure what to do, so she stood there, still as a statue. Then Anne smiled and did something surprising—she curtsied in Snow’s direction.

“Have a good day, Princess,” she said. And then she was gone.

Snow grabbed her cleaning supplies and disappeared before Anne could return again. As lovely as it was to be acknowledged, she knew she couldn’t respond. Not there, out in the open. Not without the queen hearing about it and punishing Snow—or worse, Anne, for “endangering the princess” with her company. She walked down the hall in the other direction, taking the stairs down two levels, past the banquet hall, the dining area, and the empty living

quarters, and heading straight to the doors that led out to her mother's garden.

Blue. It always amazed her how blue the sky was on a cloudless day. Was it always this color, or was it just more stunning because it had been so long since she'd seen it? It had rained the last three days, forcing her to stay indoors, which was painful. The sun made her more grateful today. Her mother was very much on her mind after last night's dream, and being in the gardens near the aviary always made her feel closer to her.

She looked down at the stone steps beneath her feet. Moss had started to creep up the walkway and was turning the white stone green. She would start there. With a sigh, she dropped to her knees, wet her sponge, and began to scrub, humming a tune to herself as she worked. A few moments later, a group of white birds landed on the steps to watch her. "Hello there!" she said and removed some birdseed from her pocket, laying it on the steps for them to eat. When they were finished, they stayed to watch her work. She didn't mind. It helped to have company, even if they couldn't talk. She found herself talking to *them* sometimes. True, some might call her mad for conversing with animals, but who was paying attention?

The moss began to vanish under her scrubbing, and the steps looked almost new again. Pleased, she went to the well

to get a fresh bucket of water. Perhaps if she finished with this in a timely manner, she could visit the aviary. The birds followed, watching as she hoisted water from the well, and she couldn't help smiling.

"Do you want to hear a secret?" she asked the birds. "This is a magic wishing well. Let's make a wish."

Her mother had been the one to tell her the well had the power to grant wishes. "What do you wish for?" her mother would ask, and Snow could recall closing her eyes and thinking really hard. "I wish," she'd say . . . and then she'd ask for the thing she wanted most in the world at that moment. One time it was a pony. Other times a doll or a tiara that looked like her mother's crown. All her wishes were granted within days of asking for them at the well. She was old enough now to know her father and mother had made her wishes come true, but still, she loved the idea of the well being magical. She hadn't made a wish since she was a child, but the movement felt so natural she couldn't resist doing it again now. Snow closed her eyes. "I wish . . ."

What did she wish for?

She no longer needed a pony or a doll. What she needed was her parents' love, but no well could turn back time and change her fate. She had accepted her mundane, solitary life and made the best of it . . . but she couldn't help wishing there was someone to share her days with.

“I wish for love,” Snow announced, the statement simple and profound at the same time.

She opened her eyes and looked into the cavernous well.

No love—true or otherwise—was waiting at the bottom.

One could always dream. And she was still outside, enjoying the beautiful day. It made her want to sing. She thought of her mother and hummed one of her favorite tunes—one she’d said she sang to Snow’s father when they were courting. The birds stayed near to listen to Snow’s melodic voice.

She was so caught up in the music that she didn’t notice the boy till he was in front of her, seeming to appear from thin air.