

THE AEROWYN TALES

Bellarose
— ♦ ♦ AND THE ♦ ♦ —
Beast

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Chapter 1

Bellarose

Who enjoys reading a riches to rags story? I don't. Bellarose Bonnay—Bella for short—thought as she stared down at the drained, winterized pool. She lowered herself onto the cold concrete and crossed her legs at the edge of the gray, protective tarp. Her new dismal surroundings reminded Bella that even though she loved books for escape, her own life story wouldn't be one she'd enjoy reading.

Her thick green sweater was all she needed for the unseasonably tepid Colorado December temperatures. She missed the normal blanket of snow that may have livened up the drab surroundings. Bella had planned on taking advantage of the good weather and read outside, but the hard, chilly surface added to her misery and distracted thoughts. Still, she wanted anything to escape from her new reality and the rundown meagerly furnished apartment.

Instead of a retreat, however, stale cigarette odors wafted from nearby ashtrays—another thing that cemented the truth of her dismal circumstances. The “castle” in the name Castle Creek Apartments promised luxury, but the complex was anything but luxurious.

The small two-bedroom apartment was stifling and there was nowhere else to go to enjoy her favorite past time. Bella turned another page, but she couldn't concentrate on *A Christmas Carol*. Not even her annual December favorite could drag her away from the

surroundings and its lack of Christmas cheer; the reminders of her miserable new life.

She wanted to be grateful her family wasn't homeless, but it was easier to focus on the negatives in her current state of mind. Her favorite stories were normally an escape to help move past the pity party, but she kept rereading the same sentence multiple times.

"You must be the new girl."

Bella's wandering attention jerked up to see a girl who seemed close to her own age near the gate. The girl's pretty blonde hair reminded Bella of her former friends' salon-maintained color, but the resemblance stopped there. Her friends would have mocked the worn unbranded boots and jeans this girl wore. That part, the shallow materialism, of her old life, Bella didn't miss. That was one more thing to be thankful for.

The other teen flashed perfectly straight white teeth. "I'm Elayne, but I like to be called Layney." She sat down beside Bella and crossed her legs to sit at the edge of the pool too.

Bella scooted over to avoid touching this girl who was invading her personal space.

"What's your name?"

"I'm Bellarose." She paused, and then added, "You can call me Bella."

Layne's blue eyes brightened. "Bella. That's pretty."

"Yeah, my parents wanted the French word for 'beautiful' because Mom got pregnant with me when they went to Paris. Since roses are my mom's favorite flowers, she added the rose to it."

Bella bit her lip. She didn't know anything about this girl except her name.

"Beautiful rose"? That's cool!" Layney's smile grew. "It sounds like something from a book." She nudged Bella's arm. "You like to read?"

Books were a safer topic, and Bella relaxed. “I really do. What about you?”

“I love books!” What’s that you’re reading?”

Bella closed the book to show Layney the cover.

“*A Christmas Carol*—Is that about those ghosts? I think I saw a movie about it, but I haven’t read that one yet.” Layney paused as if anticipating a response from Bella, then continued, “Since you’re new I could show you around unless you already know this part of town.”

“I don’t.” Bella didn’t want to get into the details, but she knew she needed to make new friends after her old ones ditched her.

“Where did you live before?”

Bella heaved out a huge breath. “It’s a mess.”

Layney leaned back on her hands and studied Bella. “It’s alright, you know. We’re all a bit of a mess here.”

For a moment, Bella wanted to build a wall and block Layney from seeing her heart. She was still hurting from her friends’ betrayal. But that was the problem. Bella no longer had any friends. After her supposed friends learned that she wouldn’t be attending the elite private school, they ignored her texts and calls. The sting of that rejection made Bella want to be sucked into a fantasy book world—never to return to reality.

Bella drew a deep breath. She may not want to accept this new situation, but being lonely and friendless would only make everything worse. Was she desperate enough for friendship that she would risk trusting this girl who was a little bit sketchy? Friendship was built over time and Layney was acting like they had already shared many experiences together. She didn’t have to be completely transparent, but then you get what you give.

Bella dropped her walls and let the words tumble out quickly. “My dad lost his job a few days ago.” She faced Layney. “The bank

foreclosed on our house. We lost everything. Basically, all I have left of my old life are my books, a bike, and some of my clothes.”

“I’m sorry.” Layney frowned empathetically.

“You didn’t do it. You have nothing to be sorry about.” Bella was relieved Layney didn’t criticize or reject her.

“I didn’t mean that kind of sorry.” Layney paused. “I meant that it sucks, and I feel sorry for you. Not in a pathetic-loser kind of way,” she added hastily. “I don’t want to make you feel bad. I meant it in a I’m-here-if-you-need-a-friend kind of way.”

Bella almost smiled. Layney talked like an audiobook on the fastest speed. There was relief in the fact that Layney hadn’t ditched her after hearing the uncomfortable truth. Perhaps that alone was a reason to trust this stranger.

Bella paused and looked into Layney’s eyes. “I had to leave my former school, Delacour Academy and my friends—or should I say *former* friends? They ghosted me when they found out I was poor.”

Bella slouched and tears threatened to escape, but she swallowed hard to keep them at bay.

“Ouch.” Layney winced. “They don’t sound like real friends at all. But, at least you know? Anyway, it’s Christmas break? We don’t start back up for a while. Maybe you can read a ton of books or meet some people who will be going to your new school. Will you be going to Eastlake High?”

Bella hugged the book tighter. “I think so. What a way to finish my year.”

“What grade are you in?” Layney asked.

“Twelfth.”

Layney bopped up and down. “I’m a senior, too! Really, though Eastlake isn’t bad. A few of the guys who live here go there. A couple are in our class.” Layney softened her tone. “Since you shared some of

your life story with me, I thought I would give you some of mine. It is the reason I live here. My mom died when I was a baby.”

“Now it’s my turn to say I’m sorry even though it’s not my fault.”

As Bella had thought earlier, *you get what you give*. She had shared more than she would have with this stranger and in return Layney opened Bella’s eyes to the fact that Layney understood loss too.

Layney gave a half-smile. “It’s okay. I didn’t know my mom to miss her, but it’s hard not having her around for the special stuff moms and daughters normally share. At least my dad moved us in with his aunt and she became somewhat of a mother to me. When I was too little to do things for myself, she was able to care for me when Dad was at work.”

“That’s rough. It’s hard growing up not being able to do things with your mother and now you’re stuck here.” At least Bella’s parents were alive and she felt ashamed about her pity party.

“It’s all I’ve known, but I didn’t tell you so you’d feel sorry for me.” Layney sighed. “There aren’t a lot of girls my age around here, and even if Eastlake is a decent school, I don’t hang out much there. I’m a little rusty at making friends myself, but hey, you had a book. It seemed like a sign or something.”

“True enough,” Bella said. Her grip on *A Christmas Carol* loosened.

The wind blew the last of the brown leaves off a nearby tree, and Layney caught one. She twirled it by the stem. “I thought maybe we could eventually be friends or at least hang out together.” Layney glanced up, and a grin appeared. “Besides, holiday break can be super boring. I avoid the apartment as much as I can, or my aunt will put me to work.”

“What kind of work?” The warm winter sun disappeared behind clouds and Bella shivered. “Does your aunt have an online store or something?”

“If only!” Layney grimaced. “A few years back, I made the mistake of telling my aunt I was bored, and she told me to clean the fridge and the closets.”

“Ew!” Bella’s nose wrinkled at the thought of cleaning, but a very unwelcome suspicion reared its ugly head. Would she have to learn to clean a fridge? Or worse, a *toilet*?”

Layne continued, “Anyhoo, since I don’t have school work to do, and I don’t want my aunt to put me to work, I was glad to see you.”

“You were watching me?” Bella shot a nervous look over her shoulder.

“I saw you out my front room window. And no, I’m not really spying. It faces the pool like it does in all the apartments.” Layney smiled tentatively. “I only had to look to know the new girl was here.”

Bella relaxed a little. “Fair enough.” She sighed. “The thing is I’m used to a lot of alone time. I had a large room and library in my old house. I read for hours, and no one bothered me.” Bella grasped her book tighter.

Layne winced. “I’m sorry I disturbed your solitude, but...” She raised her brows. “I know! We could go to the public library. It’s not that far from here.”

Bella scrunched her nose. “I’ve never been to a public library. The one in my former home had everything I needed or wanted.” She covered her mouth. “I sounded too snooty, didn’t I?”

“I’ll ignore it. You haven’t been poor long enough to talk like one of us.” Layney teased. “But seriously, do you want to go to the library? There’s a place we can sit and read. Then you won’t be disturbed, but

it gets me out of any chores my aunt might think of me to do.” Bella thought about it. “Is it close enough to walk?”

“You said you have a bicycle?” Layney asked.

Bella nodded.

Layney grinned widely. “Go get it and meet me here. We can easily ride our bikes to the library.”

When Bella wheeled her candy-apple red bike to the tarped pool, Layney waited with her purple rusted one. Bella’s bike sparkled like brand new compared to Layney’s—she no longer thought it lame.

Both girls wisely donned their winter coats, boots, and gloves, but Bella felt overdressed next to Layney’s worn jacket. She adjusted her trendy backpack over her shoulder and reminded herself that her new friend hadn’t seemed to mind the difference.

Layney flashed Bella a warm smile. “Nice ride!”

“Thanks.” Bella bit back a comment about how it was one of the few things her parents hadn’t bought with credit.”

“The library isn’t far from here with two wheels, but it takes a little too long to get there if you have to walk.” Layney hopped onto her white seat and motioned to Bella. “Follow me.”

Bella followed suit, though her mind was scarcely on the trip itself. Instead, she mentally contrasted Layney with her old friends, who had laughed at her “juvenile” present of a bicycle and shamed her out of riding it. Layney, though, rode through the increasing cold, pointing out local landmarks, warning her of potholes, and saying things like, “*The Dollar Store* sells the best generic macaroni and cheese. Four boxes for only a...”

When they finally reached the public library Bella was impressed by the classy tan-bricked building. As they entered through the automated doors, her eyes widened in surprise over the decorative nooks and crannies that surrounded the shelves of books. It was nothing like the

old libraries seen on movies or television. The children's section had a huge fake tree in the middle of a green carpet made to look like grass. On the branches were fairies and colorful fantasy woodland creatures. Bella was already mesmerized by the place.

Layne whispered, "Let's go over in that section to read." She pointed to a corner with soft brown leather chairs and quaint little tables.

Both girls plopped down into the seats and pulled out their own books they had brought to read. They spoke softly about the stories and then got lost among the words.

They had such a good time that day that they repeated their trek to the library three days in a row, and Bella became more comfortable around Layney. They mostly discussed books, but sometimes Layney shared details about Eastlake High and the boys in their complex who attended there.

On the third trip home from the library, Layney complained, "There are some things I don't like about public libraries." She pedaled slowly because they had to dodge a few pedestrians. "One, we can't talk at a normal volume and two, we can't snack. Whenever I read, I get snacky. Also, I wish I owned the books to read whenever I want."

Bella rode next to her once the path widened and was free from people. "I sometimes want to eat a treat, but it really doesn't bother me too much." She emitted a quiet sigh. "I wish we could keep the books also." All of Bella's favorites wouldn't fit in their apartment and she had to leave behind too many.

"Let's take a different route." Layney gestured to turn left. "I want to show you this creepy, but cool looking house."

Bella asked, "I need to get home before dark. Is it close?"

“It will only take a few extra minutes from our normal trip.” Layney pedaled a little faster and Bella kept up with her speed.

They ended up in the outskirts of town, but Gastonville was small, and true to her word, the house wasn’t that much out of their way. They rode past a few scattered homes with mailboxes, then Layney led Bella to a long, bricked driveway enclosed behind an ornate iron gate and fence. The lavish boundary encircled a yard overgrown with brown grass and shriveled flowers. Even in winter’s dormancy, the out-of-control garden was clearly dead. Bella knew neglect when she saw it. Her old home had never been so shabby.

But what made Bella’s jaw drop was the abandoned red-brick Victorian home that loomed over the decrepit yard. Peeling white gingerbread trim and faded burgundy gables stood tall against the gray winter sky. Several cracked or missing windows brought horror movies to mind.

“What do you think?” Layney asked while she got off her bike.

Bella scrunched her face. “It looks haunted.”

“I think it’s beautiful despite its eerie vibe.” Layney’s expression softened. “I pretend it’s a magical castle up on some European mountain top.” She moved off her seat and put the kickstand in place.

Bella tilted her head. For someone like Layney, the turret and decorative trim on the house might have a fairy-tale feel, but Bella had visited European castles. Comparing this house to a fortress was a stretch of the imagination.

Still, she said, “I guess if you ignore most of the disrepair, it does kind of look like a castle.”

Layney motioned, “Come on, let’s go inside.” She stood directly in front of the iron gate.

“We’ll be late getting home.” Bella had gotten off her bike and was standing while holding the handlebars.

Layne turned to face Bella. "I have a confession to make." Her lips turned up mischievously. "I've been inside many times. It has a library that's better than the public one and it's literally too magical to describe. You'll have to see to believe it, because my attempts to explain it would be impossible."

Bella put her kickstand down. "Why didn't you tell me about this place before?"

"I would have the first day we met after I discovered you liked books, but we didn't really know each other." Layney stood in front of Bella. "Think about it. A strange girl wants to take you to an abandoned house and you're supposed to trust her?"

"You have a good point." Bella agreed.

"We left the library earlier today, but I understand you want to get home." Layney looked back at the house. "What about we go inside tomorrow? Are you up for some adventure?"

Bella was curious about how the house looked inside, but wasn't that trespassing? "Who owns this place? I don't want to get into trouble."

"I heard the old lady that lived there didn't have any family and no will to deed it to." Layney got back onto her bike. "It's small-town gossip, but either way, I've been using the library inside for years and haven't been disturbed ever."

Bella hoisted herself onto the bike's seat and the girls pedaled back home. They were unusually quiet; their normal chatter was absent. They typically discussed what they had read or checked out from the library. Bella's mind whirled over the concept of more shelves to explore, but it still seemed forbidden despite what Layney had said about it.

When they reached Castle Creek, Layney suggested, "Meet me at our same time and place tomorrow?"

Bella nodded.

Layne added, "We'll go to my magical oasis." Then she winked.

Bella said tentatively, "Okay."

She wanted a library like the one she left behind in her old home. She wanted to have friends she could enjoy doing things with to replace all the things she had to give up. That didn't mean she was gullible enough to believe the abandoned house contained a library full of fantastical things. She would go tomorrow and see for herself what Layney thinks is a "magical oasis".

Chapter 2

Bellarose

A thin layer of white covered the drab parts of the Castle Creek atrium. The crisp smell of snow lingered in the cool air. It was a typical Colorado winter where one day the sun warmed you into a false sense that you could leave your coat behind only to turn into a blizzard on the same day. Thankfully, there wasn't any wind or blustering snow. It was more of a pure Christmas powder where *all is calm and all is bright*.

Layne was waiting in the designated meeting place with her rusted bicycle. Bella walked her red bike up to her. The contrast between the girl's belongings wasn't as obvious to Bella once she looked past material items and more at the girl she was beginning to view as a friend.

Bella had a thicker puffy red coat for the cooler temperatures, but Layney still wore her thinner worn army surplus jacket.

She knew Layney better, but did she dare—? “Do you want to borrow one of my thicker coats? It's colder today.”

Layne shook her head. “No, I'm fine. This is warmer than it looks.” She zipped it up and stuck on a black stocking cap that contrasted with her blonde hair.

They both put on gloves and were wearing boots, which made pedaling a bicycle a little more difficult but they were prepared for the journey.

"We may need to move slower if the paths haven't been cleared of snow." Layney's breath showed in the cold air.

Bella agreed. "It could be worse if they cleared the paths. At least snow gives a little more traction than ice. I've taken a spill on my bike in the driveway of my old house. The groundskeeper had cleared the snow, but, well, that doesn't matter." Bella blew out air and saw it float above her head. "We have time to go slower."

When they reached the Victorian home, Bella observed, "The sparkling snow takes away a little of its horror movie vibe, but not completely."

"You're funny." Layney chuckled as she opened the gate and they walked their bikes up to the stairs that led to the front door.

"I think it looks like a death trap." Bella put her kickstand down and scanned the house. "Am I going to fall through any of the floorboards?"

Layne laughed. "You're being paranoid. It's totally safe. The floors are solid. I've been on them plenty of times." She used the stairs and motioned for Bella to follow. "The place is only neglected on the outside. Inside is another story."

Layne turned the knob and the door creaked open—a perfect sound for a scary movie. Bella half-expected to see a psycho who kept his dead mom's body in the living room or maybe, since it was around the holidays, a visit from the ghost of Christmas future.

Bella whispered, "You're sure we're not trespassing?"

"I'm positive." Layney grinned but continued inside.

Bella shut the door behind her and quickly the qualms were forgotten by the extraordinary sight. No dusty cobwebs hung from the sparkling crystal chandelier. The high-vaulted foyer ceiling and white marble floors reminded Bella of her former home.

"Wow!" Bella gasped. "This is not what I expected at all!"

"I told you! It's magical! This isn't even the best part. Follow me." Layney led her down a hallway, past a formal dining room and parlor to large double doors with engravings of books carved into the wood. She shoved open the right-hand door and stepped aside.

Inside was an immense room full of tall shelves overflowing with books. Even Bella's posh home didn't have a library like this. A spiral staircase at the end of the room led to a second floor of bookshelves that encircled the library.

An aura of something other-worldly permeated the room.

"How..." Bella stepped inside. "This is massive! How does it even fit inside the house?"

Layney just grinned.

A crackle drew Bella's attention to the welcoming fireplace in the center of the library. Stunned, she took off her coat and draped it over the cozy furniture facing the fire. The chairs looked like the ones her mother had picked out for her father's office. They were plush but perfect for hunkering down to read a good book.

Embossed signs indicated literary genres, and on the other side of the room, a ladder stood propped against the shelves.

"No way." She ran over to the ladder, climbed up and down, then pushed it. "It has wheels! It's like the library in *Beauty and the Beast*."

"Exactly," Layney crossed her arms. "But look up."

When Bella craned her neck to the high domed ceiling, however, she let out a muted scream. "Is that—did I see a mermaid jump out of that ceiling?" She stared open-mouthed at the murals of fantastical creatures, then laughed. "No way! The mermaid left, and a unicorn replaced her?"

"Yes!" Layney sighed happily. "It's like the great Leonardo da Vinci himself painted those creatures except they're magical."

Both girls giggled, their eyes still on the creatures frolicking in and out of the painted ceiling.

Bella turned to Layney. "What is this place?"

"It's my secret. Well, now it's our secret." Layney smiled. "This place is literally magical."

Bella knitted her brows. "Yes, but how does a place like this even exist?"

"I don't know." Layney grabbed Bella's hand and led her to the chairs for them to sit. "When I first arrived here, it looked like a typical abandoned house with dust and cobwebs, but I began to wish for things and they appeared." Layney waved her hand like a wand. "The books and shelves were always here, but not all this other stuff like the ladder."

"I don't understand what you mean." Bella was confused.

"It's easier to show you."

Layney walked to the ladder and scooted it down to the middle section of the shelves. She climbed up a few steps and passed her hand over some spines until she pulled out a red one. She descended the ladder and walked back to hand it to Bella.

"*Christmas Home Interior Decorating?*" Bella frowned. "I don't see your point."

"Look through that book." Layney tapped it. "Find something you think would look good in this room."

Still confused, Bella played along. She turned the pages until she found a photo of trimmings that would look perfect.

"Here." She handed the book back to Layney. "These would look good."

Suddenly the room began to fill with evergreen garlands wrapped in gold, silver, and blue ribbons. The sweet scents of cinnamon, spices, and pine wafted through the room. A tall fir tree popped out of

mid-air, as she watched garlands, lights, and ornaments fly onto the tree, making it match the ones in the book.

Bella rubbed her eyes. "What is going on here?" She swallowed hard. "This is impossible!"

Layne's voice pitched higher, "Like I said before, you had to see to believe. That's not all." Her face brightened. "Are you hungry?"

"I'm not too—"

"Wouldn't a nice cup of hot chocolate filled with marshmallows and a plate of Christmas cookies hit the spot?"

"Well, yes, but—"

Two piping-hot cups of cocoa and a plate of frosted, holiday shaped treats appeared on the table in between Bella and Layne's lounge chairs.

"What?" Bella stared wide-eyed. "How are you doing that?"

"I'm not," Layne replied. "Now let's have two Christmas stockings hang from the mantelpiece with cats wearing Santa hats embroidered onto them."

Bella thought she heard a popping sound like a genie coming out from his bottle as two stockings suddenly appeared on the fireplace shelf.

She gasped and rubbed her eyes. "No way! How are you doing that?"

Layne gave a mischievous grin. "This house—or the books—are making it happen. I don't know where the magic is coming from. I only know anything in those books can become real."

"What happens if I read a book about dragons? Do they suddenly appear?"

Layne shook her head. "No, fictional books are a different magic than the non-fiction. The Christmas decoration book was non-fiction.

Bella inspected a cookie. "This wasn't in that book you handed to me."

"That's the great thing, if what I want is in one of those books,"—Layney pointed to the non-fiction section—"I say I want it, and it will appear. The treats I conjured up were inside a cookbook I found in this library, and the stockings were in a book about things you can make for cats."

Bella put the cookie down. "You're saying fiction books are different? What happens with a novel?" When Layney delayed answering by taking a sip of cocoa, Bella asked, "Do you only read nonfiction? Have you read fiction in here?"

"Of course!" Layney beamed. "That's the best part of this library, because you get to experience adventure like none you've never had before."

Bella scooted to the edge of her seat. "How?"

Layney sipped her cocoa before answering. "It's scary but exciting. I read a book about an evil fairy who changed a prince into a dragon. His soon-to-be fiancé found out and tried to save him." Layney's brows knitted. "I... I became the fiancé in the story and got turned into a dragon, but I turned back to myself at the end."

Bella arched an eyebrow. "Okay, yes, I see there are magic cookies and a Christmas tree, but..." A chill ran down Bella's back. "You can't honestly be telling me you become part of a book?"

"Yes." Layney nodded. "And no time passes in the real world. You can read a whole book in one sitting, become one of the characters, and return here seconds later at the end of the story."

Bella's mind spun. She absentmindedly picked a Christmas tree-shaped cookie and took a bite, washing it down with the cocoa while processing the information. Yes, she'd seen the decorations and the food appear, but this was ridiculous.

“Okay, I’m beginning to think this is all some elaborate hoax.” Bella set down her mug and crossed her arms. “It has to be. And, I find it hard to believe you can read a book without time passing. But the hardest part to accept is that you become one of the characters in the story.”

“As I said before, seeing is believing.”

“But what if you become a villain? Do you get to choose which character you are?”

“You’ll have to read one of those books and find out for yourself. But not today.” Layney looked at her phone, stood, and started putting on the jacket she had discarded. “Though time doesn’t pass when you’re reading, a lot of time has passed since we got here. We need to go before my dad gets home from work.”

“Wait!” Bella touched Layney’s arm. “You show me this fantastical place, and we already have to leave?”

“Yes, but we can come back.” Layney handed Bella her coat.

“When?”

“Probably tomorrow.” A worried look crossed her face. “But promise me you won’t tell anyone about this.”

“I definitely won’t.” Bella put on her coat, then pulled the long brown hair trapped inside under her collar. “No one would believe me anyway.”

“True, but also, well...” Layney pulled a necklace with a teardrop pendant from underneath the scarf at her neck. “When I first found this place and realized what it could do, I started looking for ways to protect this house’s secrets. I found a book of spells, and then this appeared around my neck. I think it gives me magical abilities when I’m inside here.”

Bella examined the dangling pendant, then narrowed her eyes at her new friend. "It doesn't look magical, and you said you weren't making this happen."

"It is, and I'm not." She drew a deep breath. "The library is, but I couldn't have anyone find out what is going on here. That's when I remembered something about vampires not being able to enter homes if they weren't invited. I wished for that, and when I left that afternoon, people who passed me, didn't notice the house at all. It doesn't even get junk mail anymore."

"I saw it."

"Yes, but I brought you here. You can see the house, but no one else can."

Bella pressed her lips together. The amazing room transformations and treats appearing from thin-air had to be a trick of her mind. Magic didn't exist in the world—or did it? Would these books transport her into the stories? She had no way of testing Layney's claim to have a spell that prevented trespassing. Bella pulled on her gloves. For now, she'd return, if only to make sure she hadn't dreamed the whole thing.

The girls rode their bikes back to the apartments in silence. The trip seemed faster, and Bella's mind dashed over the past hours.

As they walked their bikes beyond the tarped pool, Layney asked, "You want to meet tomorrow afternoon? We can go back."

Bella nodded. "Sure. After all, I want to read one of your books." She chuckled. "I'll probably be dreaming about magical libraries tonight."

"Cool. I'll see you tomorrow, then." With a wave, Layney climbed the outside steps.

Bella watched her go, then locked her bike to the rack in front of her apartment and let herself in.

The lonely, unfamiliar smell of the apartment had nothing in common with Layney's secret library. Magic or not, she had to return tomorrow to see for herself. Losing herself in a book didn't sound so awful, no matter what Layney said.

Chapter 3

Bellarose

After a sleepless night, Bella showered for rejuvenation. It was horrible sharing the space with her parents, because she had to carry a tote with her own toiletries rather than store them under the sink. The low powered water from the shower head still managed to wake her up, but she was thankful for winter break. Normally insomniac nights meant applying extra concealer for the bags under her eyes, but the more affordable generic makeup wasn't going to do the trick.

Bella's conflicting emotions bounced between guilt for not helping her parents, who were miserable, and excitement about returning to the magnificent library and its shelves of books. Poor Mom. She'd always been at home for Bella, but now she was stuck in a temporary job at the department store. And Dad? She could almost see him like he was at dinner, slouched over his chicken-rice casserole.

"My job is horrible, but it pays the bills," he'd mumbled. "I need to look for something better after Christmas."

Thinking about her parents' slumped shoulders made her own sag, but she wanted to channel Layney's gumption. Her friend had faced life without a mom. Her life wasn't at its worst, and perhaps instead of crying over things she couldn't control, she needed to figure out what she could manage.

Practical determination won over the anticipation of returning to Layney's secret library. She'd help out. With an exaggerated yawn, Bella gathered the laundry. She'd never done it before, but how hard could it be? Besides, Castle Creek's laundry facility wasn't far from her apartment, and Mom had set aside money specifically for the job on the counter.

Confident that she could easily manage the task, she held the basket of dirty clothes on her hip while shoving the coins into her pocket. Once she left the apartment, though, Layney's words from the day before echoed in her memory. Everyone had a window view to the pool area, which she had to pass on her way to the laundry room. Every window seemed to hide people, and she felt eyes watching her every step.

She'd never imagined entering a laundry facility would provide relief, but her shoulders relaxed when she closed the door. A warm clean-linen scent enveloped the room. There were only two washers, and one was filled with wet clothes. She dumped her basket in the empty machine, then stopped. The detergent! How had she forgotten detergent! A vending machine in the corner offered small boxes of powder soap, but she only had enough money for one load to wash and dry.

It was only a short trip back to the apartment but could she leave the clothes? No, it wasn't worth the risk of someone stealing them. Cursing, Bella pulled out the dirty clothes, put them in the basket, and lugged it to the apartment. Again, she felt the watchful eyes of apartment dwellers even if she couldn't see them. Holding the basket and unlocking the door was harder than she'd thought it'd be, but she managed. She set the basket and the keys on the table and turned to look for the detergent. The search wasn't long, and she cursed again. There it was. Right next to the coin jar. Why hadn't she noticed it?

She tossed the blue bottle into the basket, heaved out a huge sigh, and backed out of her apartment.

The sound of water filling the machine greeted her when she again entered the clean smelling room. Clothes sloshed around and around behind the door's glass window and the other machine was still occupied.

"Ugh! Now what do I do?"

Still unsure about leaving her clothes behind. Bella hefted the basket and trudged back to her apartment. As she reached her apartment door, though, realization smacked her. She'd left the keys on the kitchen table.

"Worst Christmas break ever."

Tears welled up, but before they fell, she remembered Mr. Fitz. The superintendent of the building probably had a master key to let her into the apartment. She balanced the heavy basket of soap and dirty clothes on her hip and walked down to Mr. Fitz's and knocked on the door.

"I'm coming. I'm coming."

After a moment, a gray-haired man opened the door. He tugged his worn-out gray cardigan sweater closer over his plaid shirt. "Yes?"

She set down her basket. "Hi, Mr. Fitz. I'm Bellarose Bonnay from apartment 6A."

"Ah, yes. Your family moved in not so long ago. I may be older than dirt, but my mind is as sharp as a tack." Mr. Fitz laughed heartily, and Bella instantly liked him.

"The thing is," she said in a rush, "I managed to lock myself out. I wanted to do laundry but the washer is being used."

He glanced down at the basket of clothes. "It's tricky learning to share a washing machine with a bunch of strangers, but soon you'll get used to it." He smiled. "Also, you'll learn to trust the people. You

could've left that basket next to the machines. I imagine it's burdensome carrying it back and forth."

"It's not too bad," Bella lied.

He chuckled, then he gave her a sheepish grin. "I confess I saw you go to the laundry room with a basket of clothes and no soap. When you returned to your apartment after only a minute, I figured you realized your mistake." He put his hands in his pockets. "My advice is, unless you like hanging out for an hour or so while your clothes get washed, it's easier to leave them behind."

She exhaled. "Did you guess about my keys, too?"

"Follow me." He stepped outside his door. "I'll get you back inside your apartment as fast as my old legs will take me."

Mr. Fitz hobbled, jingling like Santa's sleigh with his utility belt full of keys. She hefted the basket into her arms again—and admitted to herself that he was right about its weight.

He unlocked and opened the apartment door. "There you go, Miss Bonnay."

"Thank you, Mr. Fitz."

"You're welcome," he said. "Have a good day."

Bella plopped the basket on the small dining table. After her failed attempt at something as simple as laundry, everything seemed worse. Her determination was beginning to wane. The whole area, which was tinier than Bella's old bedroom, seemed to shrink. The late morning light made the thrift store avocado sofa even shabbier. The sunken-in cushions were cringe-worthy. She didn't want to be here. She really wanted to meet Layney at the pool, but something whispered that she should help her parents too.

She decided to prepare dinner. The cupboards were sparse, but the bright orange and blue box of macaroni and cheese stood out to her. Mac and cheese shouldn't be hard. Anyone could make it. She didn't

care that she had similar thoughts about the laundry. She checked the clock. If she started it now, she'd be able to meet Layney, and her parents could reheat it for dinner. Bella grinned. Pasta with powdered cheese? Not a problem.

A half an hour later, however, the smoke alarm blared, and the acrid smell of burnt cheese and noodles filled the small space. Bella put down *A Christmas Carol* and rushed to turn off the burner. Then she switched on the stove fan. She threw open the windows, but when she pulled the front door open, Layney was standing, her hand raised to knock.

"Hey girl, what's going on?" Layney sniffed the air. "Are you okay? What happened?"

Bella fanned the door open and close to air out the apartment.

"I was trying to make dinner so my mom wouldn't have to cook when she got home from work tonight."

"It's almost noon." Layney's left brow rose. "Why are you starting so early?"

Bella stepped aside to let Layney in. "I wanted to go with you to the magical library, but I wanted to help my parents out first. I didn't know if I would make it home in time."

"Oh, Bella," Layney said. For a moment, Bella thought the other girl might hug her, but she only patted her shoulder. "Magic, remember? Time is weird there. Even with the trip up and back we've got time." Layney's nose scrunched as she stepped into the apartment and headed for the kitchen. "What were you trying to make, anyway?"

Bella lifted the scorched sauce-pan. "Macaroni and cheese."

"That doesn't reheat too great. It would have been dry to eat. Tell you what! I promise to help you prepare dinner after we go to the castle today. I'm a decent cook. My aunt has chili in the crockpot, and I helped her make it." Layney looked over at the laundry Bella left out.

She bit her lower lip. "I'll help you with your laundry too. I saw you walking back and forth with your clothes."

Bella palmed her face. "I'm not keen on the idea of living in a fishbowl."

"Sorry, Although, there are perks."

"I can't think of any."

"When you're bored, you can spy on the other tenants too." Layney's smile stretched in a Cheshire cat grin. "Maybe you'll get a peek at Gerard. He's so fetch."

Bella tilted her head. "Fetch?"

"I heard that on a movie that had a bunch of stuck-up rich girls. He's fetching. You know, attractive."

"Yeah." Bella's ego prickled at the rich girl reference. "I've seen the movie. It's outdated."

Layne continued, apparently oblivious to Bella's discomfort. "Well, Gerard is hot, but he knows it. The only time his pride got put down a few notches was last summer."

"What happened?"

"He put too much soap into the washing machine." Layney chuckled. "The soap bubbles filled the laundry room and flowed into the pool. I laughed so hard I thought I would pee my pants. We were swimming with bubbles all summer."

Bella grinned. It sounded more like a TV sitcom than real life. But that brought her laundry episode to mind, and she frowned.

"I'm glad it was him and not me. I've never done laundry before and I may have repeated his mistake." She scraped the inedible pasta into the trash. "Burning dinner was bad enough. With all the nosy neighbors around, I would've become the new joke."

Layne shook her head. "No, don't worry. I'll teach you how to do laundry too. There's kind of an unwritten schedule around here. We'll figure out when your family should use the facility. It'll be okay."

Bella put the sauce pan in the sink with water to soak.

"I meant that offer. We can go to my castle now, and then I'll help you clean up and make dinner when we get back."

Bella eyed the kitchen, paused, and then faced Layney. "Okay, I'll let you help me cook tonight."

Bella grabbed her coat and followed the smiling Layney, but before the door closed, Bella checked her pocket for the key. She'd learned that lesson already.

Layne had brought her bike to Bella's apartment. Bella had her bicycle locked to a rack nearby. As they walked their bikes past the courtyard, Bella snuck a peek at the other apartments. It really was like a hotel atrium. Every apartment had one door and lone large window facing the center.

When they reached the pool area, a guy with wavy black hair strode toward them. Maybe strutted was a better word. Bella tried not to stare. She couldn't quite determine his age, but he had broad shoulders and may have been about six feet tall.

Layne whispered. "Speak of the devil, that's Gerard." She huffed. "Don't look too hard, or he may think you're in love with him."

"He's huge," Bella said softly. "How old is he?"

"He's our age." Layney continued walking. "I could introduce you."

"No thanks. He's not my type."

Layne grinned. "He's definitely my type, but he's too full of himself." They neared the exit gate. "Anyway, let's go to the castle. I want to show you how the books work."

Doubt snuck back in. It couldn't possibly be as wonderful as it had seemed yesterday, could it? Bella hesitated, then said, "I'm not sure I totally believe in magic, but I couldn't sleep last night thinking about it. Despite my former life, I haven't experienced everything extraordinary."

"You mean money can't buy everything?" Layney said tartly.

"No," Bella snapped and then frowned. "Well, it definitely can't transport people into the stories. I'm still struggling to accept that concept."

Layne's response was a wide grin. "Seeing is believing."

Bella had seen many wonders of the world, but even after visiting the pyramids in Egypt, she realized that man-made ingenuity can seem supernatural when it isn't. She hoped the library delivered on convincing her as Layney claimed it would, because that would mean she was about to plunge into a fantastical story.

Chapter 4

Bellarose

Gerard blocked their way to the exit and planted himself in front of Layney and Bella's bikes. His stunt interrupted Bella's thoughts of the possibility of physically experiencing a fairy tale.

She looked up at him and he winked. She rolled her eyes in response and Layney smirked.

Gerard asked, "Layney, who's your friend?"

"Don't play dumb." Layney looked at Bella. "You know she's the new tenant from 6A."

"I know, but what's her name?"

His cocky grin made Bella cringe. She knew his type from her former school. "*She* can speak for herself. My name is Bellarose, but most people call me Bella."

Layney added, "Bella is French for beautiful."

Gerard looked her up and down. "It suits her."

"Layney, we need to go." Bella hopped onto her bicycle. "Move, please."

Gerard refused to budge. "Don't you want to know my name?"

"Nope."

Her answer didn't faze him. He waggled his eyebrows. "Probably because you already know it."

"Yep."

Bella rode her bicycle around him, but a shorter, brown-haired boy with his nose in a book walked in front of her bike. She squeezed the hand brakes and skidded to a stop.

The boy fumbled and looked up. "Oh! Sorry, I didn't see you."

Though her heart was pounding at the near accident, she managed a smile. "*A Christmas Carol* is the best. I read it every December."

"Hey, book nerd," Gerard mocked. "You should watch where you're going or you'll end up walking into a busy street."

The boy blushed, but Layney chimed in before Gerard could say anything else. "Bella, this is Quinn. He lives in 3D and goes to our school too."

"Nice to meet you, Quinn," Bella said with a smile before giving Gerard a dirty look.

Quinn cleared his throat. "Uh, yes, nice to meet you too. Maybe we can talk sometime about this book? I mean, that's if you're into talking about—"

"Dude, you're such a nerd!" Gerard cut in. "Girls have better things to do than talk about books."

Bella scowled at Gerard. "And what would those be?"

"Don't you all like to discuss hair and makeup?" He straightened. "Also, you probably go on about how dashing handsome the young men who live here are. Layney could give you the inside scoop on all of that, FYI," he added, and his eyebrows rose, "I'm single."

"Girls are not all vapid creatures who pine over egotistical boys." Bella clenched her handlebars. "If you had any intelligence, you would put more time into reading than flirting with a girl who isn't interested in you!"

Quinn gave her a crooked smile, but Gerard glared.

Layney flinched.

Bella frowned. It wasn't the best first impression. Still, she squared her shoulders. Too bad she didn't care. She'd never been able to stand either bullies or boys who thought too highly of themselves. It didn't matter that Gerard was cute. She didn't like how he talked down to her or to Quinn.

"All things considered," Layney interrupted. "I think we better be on our way if we're going to get back before supper."

They rode away, but Bella glanced back to see if the boys were watching them. They were.

Once out of earshot, Layney said, "You shouldn't have been so mean to Gerard. He really isn't a jerk. He can be a good guy, but when a nice, shiny, new girl comes to the apartments, he over compensates."

"Being rude isn't overcompensating." Bella glanced at Layney, then swerved around a pothole. "I know you think he's fetch or gorgeous or whatever, but he shouldn't have been mean to Quinn."

"No," Layney agreed. "He shouldn't have. Perhaps he needed to be taken down a notch, but maybe not that way."

Bella snorted. "With his ego, I'm sure he'll get over it. I'm also certain he has girls who will fill his head with visions of grandeur without help from either of us."

They rode for a few minutes before she added, "And thinking that girls only talk about makeup? I like talking about books more than hair and makeup." She shot a side-look at Layney. "*This* former rich girl wasn't a shallow mean girl like the movies portray."

"Sorry. I guess I deserve that." Layney sighed.

A little out-of-breath, the girls reached the house, though getting there seemed to take less time now that Bella knew the way. For a brief moment the house looked blurry, like a mirage off in a distant desert oasis. The closer they got to the building, however, the more in focus

it became. Were her eyes playing tricks on her? Perhaps Layney did put some kind of spell on the place to keep it hidden.

"I wish Gerard was ugly," Layney said out of the blue as she pulled out the golden pendant. "I like to think I'm fairly sensible, but when he's around..." She grimaced. "What did you say a few minutes ago? Vapid. I feel vapid and superficial around Gerard."

"You aren't, though," Bella assured her. Then, she laughed. "Don't worry. I'm sure we can find a nice, juicy story about a duke or Scotland laird to get your mind off Gerard."

They walked their bikes through the iron gate and put the kick-stands down once they reached the front steps. They moved up the stairs and through the stained-glass doors. Yesterday, Bella hadn't noticed the beautiful designs. She'd been too worried about seeing a specter. Today, she noticed the glass doors' depictions of famous fairy tales but she didn't linger to examine the patterns, because she was too eager to dive into a new book. Even if they didn't actually transport her as Layney claimed, reading was an adventure. The magical library was a book worm's candy store—filled to the brim with delicious books.

Bella and Layney rushed through the beautiful halls, and when they entered the room, all the decorations Bella had wished from the holiday decor book remained. She closed her eyes and breathed in the pine, cinnamon, and wood burning scents that erased the stress of laundry, charred pasta and Gerard's egotistical comments. She hadn't hallucinated yesterday.

"Was that fire going all night?" Bella asked.

"No, I only thought of it as we entered the house to warm up this room."

The girls peeled off their jackets and set them over an expensive chair.

This year, the holidays had been hard, but here, with her new friend, in this festive library, she felt at home.

She eyed the table that had held the cookies and hot chocolate the day before. "Where are the treats? We didn't finish them yesterday."

"No, snacks don't stay like the decorations. I tested it once. I left the room for a few minutes, and when I returned, the food was gone." Layney brushed her hand over the table where the treats were. "If it stayed, it would spoil or attract mice or something. I can't come here every day."

Bella shuddered and looked at the floor for rodents. "Why can't you?"

"School, homework, and chores. You know, the normal stuff."

Bella hadn't experienced chores until recently, but she understood what Layney meant when she mentioned school and homework. That's what had kept her from regular reading for fun and was why she loved the Christmas break.

Bella couldn't stop looking at the books. "What should I read first? Hmm..." She skimmed the signs labeled Fantasy. "I know! What about that book where you became a dragon?"

Layney eyed her skeptically.

"What? I want to experience becoming a dragon."

"It was scary. Are you sure?"

Bella nodded. "You said that once the story ends, I'll return back to being me. I don't see why not."

Layney called out, "Bring me *The Scorned Fae*."

A red-covered book flew off the shelf and into Layney's hand.

Bella's eyes widened. "What?"

"If I know the title of the book, I can ask for it by name. The library will give it to me." Layney handed it to Bella. "I told you this place is magical."

"*The Scorned Fae* is an intriguing title." Bella flipped through the pages. "I think I will like this, but it isn't very long."

"It's a short story. You'll finish it quickly. Maybe when you complete it, you'll want to read another one." Layney pulled the ladder over to the fantasy section Bella was browsing. "I was planning on reading something longer." She climbed the rolling ladder. "I think the clock will stop for both of us if we're reading at the same time. Since you're the first person to be here with me, I've never tested it."

Bella tilted her head up toward Layney. "What are you going to choose?"

"I was looking for a fairy tale or something similar. I don't know." Layney scooted the ladder along the shelves, pulled out books, inspected the covers, and put them back. Finally, she selected a purple volume from the top shelf.

"How do you even know where to begin to look?"

"I've had a lot of time to peruse the shelves. I don't know every title, but I know many. That shelf is mostly fairy tales"—Layney gestured to the books—"but they aren't the familiar tales I grew up with. The stories change and twist in unexpected ways."

"That sounds even better than a prince turning into a dragon."

"While I'm still on the ladder, do you want me to find you a lengthier book?"

"Yes. I can read *The Scorned Fae* another time."

Bella slid the short story inside her jeans' back pocket. It would be a good bed-time story.

Without any hesitation, Layney grabbed a blue tome and then descended. She handed the story to Bella, and they moved to the lounge chairs in front of the crackling fireplace.

Layney eyed the empty table. "Are you hungry? Do you want anything to snack on while you read?"

"I thought I became a character in the story. How can I eat if I'm not here?"

"Well, you can stop any time you want, graze a little and start back where you left off." Layney rubbed her hand over her book. "It's a little like being in a play, except the costumes and sets are real. All you have to do is mentally concentrate on your desire to leave the story, and you're back here in reality."

Even if Layney was exaggerating, just being in this library was an escape. Bella was going to play along. She didn't want to go back to her dreary apartment.

"Okay then, I'll have a peppermint mocha latte and sugar cook—" The latte and cookies started to materialize but faded when she added, "Wait! I'd rather have gingerbread cookies."

A plate of smiling gingerbread men appeared next to a steaming mug with a candy cane hanging over the edge and a snowman-shaped mug topped with whipped cream. The cookies smelled freshly baked, and the minty coffee scent was better than anything Bella had before.

"My mom and I used to make these treats every Christmas." She picked one up. Her eyes watered. "That's not going to happen this year."

Layne didn't say anything, only took a sip.

Bella bit a small portion of the cookie. It melted into her mouth. She tried the drink, and the liquid warmed her throat. "That is the best latte I've ever had. It isn't too hot either—the perfect temperature."

"I know exactly what you mean." Layney wiped off her whipped cream mustache. "When I think of Christmas magic, this place always comes to mind." She chomped on the gingerbread man. "In the summer, I drink cold things like iced tea or soda. This time of year is more magical."

Christmas is like that for me, too.” Bella finished her cookie and swallowed more of the latte. She raised her book like she was offering a toast. “Right then. We read!”

Chapter 5

Bellarose

Bella settled back into the chair and moaned in happy anticipation. Whether or not Layney was right about the story's world becoming real, it was nice to be comfortable and have a new book. Without another glance at her new friend, Bella dove into the pages.

Prologue: Aerowyn

Timeless tales of beauties and beasts would have not been written without someone like Aerowyn the enchantress.

Exquisite and ever-changing beauty like Aerowyn's couldn't be captured in a painting. Golden hair that sparkled as diamond dust would transform into rich chestnut brown hair and then to raven locks in the blink of an eye. Humans never saw her true visage that was ever-changing.

Her eyes, too, altered with her moods. Ice blue meant she was feeling apathy, while chocolate brown reflected her warmth and graciousness. Her eyes flashed violet when they revealed her unpredictable nature, and this was when she was the most dangerous.

The enchantress's ability to morph into many different people made her more frightening than any other being in all the land. No one knew who she really was, but no matter her disguise, the one constant was the gold chain with a tear-drop shaped pendant she wore around her neck.

Though terrifying, her powers were meant to do good. Her true goal was to change unkindness and selfishness into redemption and generosity.

ity, but those who neglected the less fortunate and refused to change their ways faced condemnation.

Without Aerowyn, this story would have never been told.

Bella paused, used her fingers to mark the spot, and glanced around the library. She still sat in a completely normal, enchanted library, but that a magic library was normal nearly made her laugh. A quick glance at the other chair had her covering her mouth with her hand to keep quiet. Layney seemed transfixed by her book. Nothing was quite as irritating as having a good story interrupted. Instead of commenting, Bella drank some more of her coffee, nibbled another cookie, and dusted off her fingers before she turned the page.

The light reflected off Layney's charm and caught Bella's attention. She briefly thought of the tear-drop pendant Aerowyn wore in the prologue. She shook it off as coincidence.

She read on, and the library seemed to disappear into a château surrounded by ornate gardens, where summer had faded. The roses began their winter retreat and their petals shriveled or shed due to the cooler nightly fall temperatures. The trees turned into blazes of golds and reds that complimented the parade of carriages, bringing guests and colorfully costumed acrobats, fire eaters, and jesters.

Bella followed them into a magnificent, opulent ballroom. Men in embroidered satin coats and women with towering wigs and elaborate silk ballgowns milled about the candle-lit room.

Movement drew her attention to a small boy peeking past the long skirts and stockinged legs. His black hair was tousled, and his cheeks flushed. She couldn't help smiling. He'd probably sneaked down from his nursery the way she'd done when Mom and Dad held New Year's parties when she was small. One time, she'd felt so overwhelmed by the people and noise that she'd cried. Poor boy. Bella eased between guests, determined to help him back to his own room.

He huffed out a disappointed breath. Gerard—

Wait. How did she know his name? The ballroom lost some of its clarity before she realized she'd read it. That was right. It was in the book. Still, Gerard? Bella's forehead scrunched. That wasn't a very common name. What were the odds of that?

Even so, this wasn't so bad, not like Layney's claim that she'd been a dragon.

Bella edged closer to the boy, but he was backing out of the room. Maybe he didn't need her after all.

Then, an unusual clickety-clack sound drew her attention from the boy. An old woman dressed in a tattered, gray, hooded cloak wobbled into the ballroom, leaning heavily on a crooked walking stick. The music and conversation halted. The only sound in the room was the elderly woman's steps that echoed against the ballroom walls as the fancily dressed guests gawked at her.

A regal woman in brocade silk and a tall man pushed through the crowd.

For a moment, Bella wondered how she knew the elegant woman was Adalicia, but her confusion lifted even while Adalicia demanded, "Who let you into our home?"

"The guards did," the old woman rasped.

Adalicia addressed her husband, Garren. "You need to punish them for allowing that... thing into our estate." Her face soured as she sneered at the old woman. "This is a private party, and you are not welcome."

"I've been traveling for a long time, and I'm thirsty." The elderly woman's brows furrowed. "I'll be on my way, but could you spare me some water before I leave?"

Garren laughed. "You foolish old woman! This party is for invited guests only. Go ask in the village."

The old woman straightened, and Bella noticed a familiar gold pendant around her neck. Where had she seen it before? The thought slipped out of her head when the old woman's walking stick began to straighten and shrink. Wood became gold topped with a bejeweled sun-shaped design.

A whiff of sulfur made Bella cough.

Behind Bella, the boy yelped, and the men and women around Bella gasped as the woman's ragged clothing transformed into a sparkling lavender gown. The woman's wiry gray hair softened into a golden blonde, and her wrinkled skin flattened into smooth porcelain. Her dull gray eyes flashed into vivid violet. The young enchantress was abnormally beautiful, but somehow her face was familiar.

Bella gaped. She'd just read about—

"I am Aerowyn, the enchantress."

The guests backed away, leaving Adalicia and Garren alone with her in the center of the ballroom.

Aerowyn's words flowed like a violin's music. "I have walked the earth for centuries and have seen many humans' wretched behavior. I see how dreadfully you treat people.

The couple paled, but they didn't look repentant.

"You have set a bad example for your sons. You must change your ways, or they will repeat your sins."

Aerowyn circled her golden scepter into the air, and the odor of sulfur became stronger. A child's light footsteps tapped across the floor, and Gerard walked into the room, his little face pallid in the generous candlelight. The count and countess's eyes widened. A lump of fear formed in Bella's throat as the boy was lifted in the air and forced to join his parents. The enchantress waved her wand again, and all the party guests froze into place like statues—including Bella.

But the prologue! She'd read in the prologue that Aerowyn used her magic for good, hadn't she? Where was the good of this? Bella's palms grew clammy as air gushed out of her lungs.

Gerard grabbed onto his father's coat, and Garren boomed, "I don't know what kind of witchcraft this is"—he pointed at Aerowyn—"but you will undo it and leave."

"Garren and Adalicia," Aerowyn said coldly, "people all over France are starving, barely able to stay alive, while you throw lavish parties. You don't even treat other nobles with kindness. Your behavior is atrocious."

Adalicia raised her chin. "What business is it of yours what we do?"

Aerowyn curled up her lip. "With wealth comes responsibility. You inherited this from your family; you didn't earn it, and you definitely don't deserve it. It is my turn to stop this cycle before your sons grow up to be as arrogant and beastly as you are."

Little Gerard looked up at his father. "Père, what did she mean that people are starving?"

"Get out of our house!" Garren snarled. "Undo your evil magic and get out!"

"Very well. I'll release them when I leave." Aerowyn's eyes narrowed. "But I'm taking Gerard with me. He will be raised by a poor family. Maybe they can teach him some manners and undo your bad example."

Though something still held her frozen like a statue, Bella's heart pounded. Was Aerowyn going to take little Gerard?

The boy pulled at his mother's skirt. His voice squeaked when he said, "Mère?"

The enchantress's voice lost its melodic sound. "I've already given you many chances for redemption. I've entered your lives many times, and at every turn, you treated me deplorably. Giving me water was

your last chance for salvation.” Aerowyn stomped her foot. “You failed. Wealth is your responsibility, and power is mine. I cannot allow this cycle to continue.”

At the mention of power, Adalicia’s eyes grew wide. “No...”

“If you don’t change your ways, Gerard’s twin brother, Antoine, will grow up to be exactly like you.” Aerowyn’s lips turned downward. “And I will know if Antoine becomes selfish or arrogant. I will test him as I have tested you. He won’t be able to escape my wrath if he becomes as beastly as his parents. This is my fair and final warning. If you ignore me, Antoine and his household will suffer even greater than you will.”

Garren tried to grab Aerowyn, but she waved her scepter. He froze as well.

“I’ll erase him from everyone’s memories but yours.” The enchantress’s voice lost none of its severity as she continued. “You will miss your son until your dying day.”

Adalicia fell to the ground in front of Aerowyn, leaving her little boy standing alone. “Please forgive us. We’ll change. Don’t take Gerard away.”

“It’s too late for that, but, I will allow one thing.” Aerowyn’s violet eyes turned brown.

The skin on the back of Bella’s neck tingled.

“In your will, you may tell Gerard that you’re his parents and bequeath him half of your estate. Until that day, you will be erased from his memory. After you both die, he may know.” She stepped over Adalicia, knelt before Gerard and tucked a stray hair behind his ear. “This is my gift to you, Gerard. You will live with a humble and poor family, and that will be your chance to develop a kind heart.”

Aerowyn spun her wand, and Gerard’s body lifted into the air.

His father bellowed, “No!”

Gerard and Aerowyn disappeared into a sulfurous smelling vapor. Garren and Adalicia stared wide-eyed at the spot where their son had been. Tears welled in Adalicia's eyes, but Garren remained stoic. They said nothing.

Bella scanned the ballroom and the guests were freed from their statue-like state. The shiny floor soon filled with dancing feet and swishing gowns. Everyone, but the count and countess had returned to merriment. The enchantress warned no one would remember Gerard but his parents. Bella observed exchanged glances between the de la Roses—the unspoken conversation. They would not be able to discuss what had occurred only moments before without sounding insane.

Was the story finished? What about Gerard? This book had over a hundred pages to read, but instead of following Gerard, Bella became queasy as the cacophony of instruments turned dissonant. The pleasant strings of violins turned to screeching noises in her head.

With the threat of a migraine coming on, Bella wanted to return to the library, and then go home to sleep it off in the dark. Instead, she was sucked out of the ballroom and put into a space with no color or light.