

THE AEROWYN TALES

Bellarose

✦ AND THE ✦

Beast

CARLA REIGHARD

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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.”

Layne 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".