

## ROSALINA

I HAVE TRAVELED AROUND the world. I've walked the Great Wall of China, eaten dinner at the top of the Eiffel Tower, and ridden the bullet train from Tokyo to Osaka. That's not all. I've led an army into battle on dragonback, seduced a vicious mafia boss, and journeyed back in time to fall in love with everyone from Vikings to the Knights of the Round Table. I've lived a thousand lives.

Too bad the only real one fucking sucks.

I sigh and close the book I've been reading. It's a good one, about a ghost hunter who accidentally falls in love with the spirit she's supposed to track down. Some people call these guilty pleasure reads, but why should I feel guilt for wanting to escape to somewhere else, even for a little while?

The bookstore is dead quiet today, so I've been able to sneak in a few pages... or a hundred. It's typical for autumn. Once tourist season ends, Orca Cove goes into hibernation mode. Only the regulars come around, and they don't need—or want—much from me.

I push a wayward strand of hair behind my ear, not bothering to trap it back into the messy rat's nest I've got piled on my head. Just peering out

the big windows at the front of the shop has me reaching for my sweater. Rain during fall in the Pacific Northwest is as typical as a bear shitting in the woods, but that doesn't stop the locals from complaining. Careful not to knock over the display of books I've arranged, I press my palm against the moist glass. I like the rain. It makes me feel less guilty for huddling inside, away from everything and everyone else. I'm sure if I said that to someone, they'd think it's weird. But hey, like rain in Orca Cove or bears shitting in the woods, that's to be expected.

The door jingles open and Josie and Tiffany walk in, nattering to one another. They're as typical of locals as you can get: middle-aged, wine-loving, clique-y. Wives of two of the fishing guides.

"Hello," I say, pretending to fix the display instead of staring out at the rain like a weirdo. "How are you two ladies today?"

Josie stops and puts her hands on her hips. She's gotten her hair done, short strands curling under her ears. "Rosalina, I walk past this shop every day and you're in the window every single time. Doesn't Richard give you a day off?"

Richard is my boss. And I'm sure he'd like to give me days off... permanently. But he'd never find anyone else in town who's willing to open and close nearly every day with no overtime pay.

"Oh, I ask to work this much." I stand behind the till. "Keeps me busy."

Josie and Tiffany exchange a pitying glance.

"I thought I saw your father driving into town the other day," Tiffany says slowly. "Where was he this time?"

"He just came back from Petra. In Jordan." I turn away, not wanting them to see my face flush. "He's on the road again, though."

“No faeries in Petra, then?” Josie squeaks. She’s trying to say it as a genuine question, but there’s laughter behind her words. A giddiness in getting more gossip for their little get-togethers at coffee shops and workout classes. I won’t give it to her.

“No,” I mutter. “He hasn’t found what he’s looking for yet.”

“Come on, let’s check the new magazines.” Tiffany pulls Josie to the back of the shop.

Leaning against the counter, I put my head in my hands. Maybe this’s why Richard keeps me around. When it’s not tourist season, the only way to drive business is to be the circus act for regulars to come and taunt.

I shouldn’t think that way. Josie and Tiffany are nice enough. And I’ve had plenty of friends in Orca Cove. Sure, they all moved on after graduation, going to college or making their mark in big cities. I don’t hear from them much anymore. And when I do, it’s hard to follow up their news about promotions or travel plans or whatever exciting adventure with... I’m still here. Working at the bookstore. Looking after Papa. *Right where you left me.*

I keep myself busy by grabbing a stack of freshly unboxed Home & Garden magazines and carrying them to the back of the store to show to Josie and Tiffany. Despite the long hours, I do like my job. I’m literally *surrounded* by books. How could you not love that?

The Seagull’s Gullet Book Emporium is long and thin, stuffed full of tall bookcases that turn the place into a labyrinth. Richard took it over from his parents, and I don’t think he has a love for the product, but he does have a love for bossing people around and owning a monopoly.

But I’m the one who turned this rundown, leaky, drafty, wooden shack into what it is now. Fairy lights strung along the rafters? Check. Weekly

displays of local interests? Check. Never missing the latest James Patterson? Check. Sure, a couple of my ideas have flopped. Like sitting by myself in the middle of the shop, empty chairs dragged in a circle, a steaming pot of tea left unpoured, when no one showed up for the book club I ran. Or the time Richard made me take down my display celebrating local folklore, saying I was giving his business a bad reputation.

But I keep trying. It's all I got.

That's why I'm happy to show Josie and Tiffany the new magazines.

"It's a pity. She graduated, what, eight years ago? If it weren't for her father, I bet she'd have left with all the rest of the young folk." Josie's voice drifts through the stacks. Stepping behind one of the tallest shelves, I quietly pull out a book to peer at them.

They're huddled together, pretending to look at the magazines, but instead doing what everyone in this small town does best. Gossip.

"Of course it's her father's fault," Tiffany whispers back. "She's a beauty, there's no denying. Looks like one of them old movie stars, don't you think? No wonder Lucas Poussin was all over her. Remember, Lucas?"

"How could I forget?" Josie swoons. "He was the best thing that ever happen to her. Shame he didn't take her to the city with him. Saved her life, but couldn't save her from her father's madness. Been twenty-five years of Crazy George's ramblings!"

Tiffany covers her mouth with her hand. "It was funny at first. But now it's just sad. He'd rather throw away his money and his daughter's future than accept his wife ran off."

"No, no, she was stolen by faeries! Maybe Santa's got her working away in his toyshop." Josie lets out a cackle and Tiffany swats her arm.

My face flushes and tears prick the corners of my eyes. I know the town talks. How could I not? But to hear it so plainly...

I want to storm out and scream that I've heard everything they'd said. That they have no idea what they're talking about. That Papa isn't mad. That with every trip he takes, every loan he gets to fund an excursion, he's getting closer to what he needs.

But they're not wrong about everything.

Lucas did save my life.

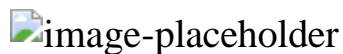
Head down, I slink to the front counter. When I hear them shuffling back, I force a smile on my face and wave them out.

A pang of guilt sits heavy in my stomach that I didn't stand up for myself. For Papa. But what's the point?

Nothing will change the fact I'm always going to be different.

Maybe they're right about him.

Maybe they're right about me.



THE SKY HAS DARKENED to a deep gray, and the streetlights turn on as I shrug on my coat and prepare to lock up.

Richard came an hour ago to do the monthly inventory. Thankfully, this is one of the only tasks he doesn't trust me with. His dirty plaid jacket hangs over the cardboard boxes as he opens the latest shipments.

"Okay, I'm heading out now," I call. "See you later, Richard."

He grunts as a response, but as I place my hand on the door, his deep voice bellows, "What the fuck are these?"

He holds up a couple of the latest romance paperbacks I ordered. With a delighted squeal, I snatch one from him. "They finally came! Our collection

has been stale, so I ordered some things to freshen it up. This one is a romance about a magical university, and this is a contemporary about a girl who pretends to be her brother to play hockey—”

“Romances?” Richard spits. “Rosalina, how many times have I told you? These don’t sell.” He slaps his forehead with a palm. “How much budget did you waste on this drivel?”

I tug the book against my chest. “It’s not drivel...”

Richard digs through the box like an angry mole. “Is this whole damn order romance? What kind of idiot are you?” He stares straight at me, his eyes squinty and dark. “They’re going back.”

“But... If you’d let me put them on display—”

“Listen, O’Connell,” my boss snarls. “You’d think for living here your whole damned life, you’d know the people in this town don’t like change. They want the authors they know. And they especially don’t want mindless, unrealistic garbage like this. The only person in this town foolish enough to eat this shit up is you.”

*You can’t talk to me like that. You wouldn’t know literature if it smashed you in the head. You’re mean and angry and look like a mole. I quit. These things and more rush through my head, but my throat is so dry, and my heart beats too fast. Then another voice joins the fray: You need this job. Papa needs the money. You’re not capable of anything else.*

Instinctively, I tug down the left sleeve of my sweater. “I-I’ll make sure to send the books back. First thing tomorrow.”

Richard sighs and rubs the bridge of his nose. “You know, I was friends with George back in the day.”

George. My father.

“I want to keep you employed for his sake. Don’t make that so hard, okay?”

I nod, taking a deep inhale to suck back my tears. “Okay.” Somewhere, I find an ounce of courage and whisper, “Before we send them back, can I buy two?”

Richard waves an idle hand. “Fine. Grab what you want. I’ll take it out of your paycheck.”

Carefully, I choose two books and tuck them into my purse. “Goodnight.”

“Goodnight, Rosalina,” he says somberly. As if dealing with me is the worst part of his day. And it probably is.

That’s what Lucas used to say.

I step outside into the rain, wishing above all else I could be anywhere but here.





# ROSALINA



DRIZZLING RAIN SPRINKLES OFF my jacket as I walk down the street and away from the store. I just want to get home, throw a microwave dinner in, and cuddle up on the couch with my ghost hunter.

Shit. There's a huge mess waiting for me. That's the way it always is. Papa's gone for months, comes home for a few days, makes an absolute wreck of the place with maps and old books and weird artifacts, and then he's gone again.

Petra was a disappointment, he said. Nothing there but dead ends. This time, he's going back into the woods. It always comes back to the woods.

Orca Cove is bordered by the Pacific Ocean on the west and Lake Villeneuve to the south. The sprawling Briarwood Forest covers the northeast. That's where the hunting guides take the tourists in peak season. But Papa says there's something else out there.

I pull my hood over my head and stare at my soggy shoes. He's got a good tent and top-of-the-line gear, but he must be cold. I packed him a bunch of dehydrated food and made sure he's got water purification tablets, but what if he forgets to use them? What if he trips and is out of service?

What if this is the time he doesn't come back?

These thoughts are useless. I've said them to Papa a hundred times. But to him, it doesn't matter. *'She's out there, Rose. I know it. I won't stop until I bring her home.'*

Every small town has their village weirdo. And Orca Cove has Crazy George, my father. The former archeologist who told the whole village his wife got stolen by faeries.

I live close to the bookstore—everything is close in Orca Cove—but I take the long way 'round. Towering pine trees line the streets, and the buildings are all designed to look like log cabins. The hub of our city, Poussin Hunting Lodge, is lit up with golden lights as people head to the pub inside for an after-work pick-me-up. I haven't stepped foot in there in ages. Too many memories.

There's only one thing that'll make me feel better after a day like today.

My feet carry me unconsciously to the street on the very edge of town, away from the houses and the downtown shops. The sky has grown darker, and there are fewer streetlamps, but I know this town like the back of my hand. Puddles splash up around my ankles as I quicken my step.

And as soon as I see it, a sense of calm fills me. It's a building with a tin roof and a cracked window and a broken door hinge and ugly olive-green paint peeling off of every wall. It's been up for sale for years and never had any takers.

But one day, it's going to be mine. I walk over to it and place my hand on the wall. I can imagine it now: unlocking the doors first thing in the morning when the mist still dances around the pines. Walking over to a beautiful long desk in the middle. I'd have a top-of-the-line computer that never crashed. On one side, there would be rows and rows and rows of

books. A huge children's section with a toy box. A section for displays. And an entire shelf just for romances.

It would be exactly what our community needs.

A library.

The vision flashes in perfect clarity before me. I'd probably be closer to my goal if I hadn't offered Papa my college fund. But our tiny house was getting foreclosed, and he was in a pit of depression not being able to follow up on a lead in the highlands of Scotland because he couldn't afford the plane ticket.

Of course, I had to give it to him.

Would I have studied English Literature like I thought? Gotten my master's degree like Lucas? Would I have stayed in a big city like one of my friends?

My reflection peers back at me from the window of my dream building: tall, messy chestnut hair, mascara smudged around my brown eyes. If I tilt my head, my image gets shattered in the cracked glass, turning my tired expression into something monstrous.

I may not have that library, but I do have something else. Down the road, a full weeping willow waves her branches in the breeze. She's lost most of her leaves now, but there's still something so elegant about her, like her branches are the skirts of a beautiful ballgown.

Classic village crazy woman. Personifying a tree. Like father, like daughter, I guess. But I like this tree better than most of the residents of Orca Cove. And besides, Papa says this was Mom's favorite tree.

That's why it was the perfect spot to build my own little library. It's one of the few things Papa's ever done for me: he made a tiny house with a glass door and propped it up on a tall wooden stake.

I decorated the outside with dried flowers. Roses, specifically. Papa would always ask me what I wanted from his travels. *You home safely. To stay and not leave me alone again*, I would think. But I never said it out loud. Instead, I would always ask him for a rose, something cheap and easy he could get. And at least that was a promise he always kept, even if sometimes it was little trinkets or jewelry rather than the real flower.

I stocked the little library with all my favorite books. I'd yet to see anyone take or leave a book yet, but—

“Wait, what?” My heart hammers against my chest. The little library... It's destroyed. Books scatter the damp ground, the pole slants, and the house is smashed onto the road. I sprint over, trying to save the books from the puddles. Then I see one wall has graffiti on it: THE FAERIES DID IT

“No, no, no.” I fall to my knees, books slipping from my hands into the mud. I worked so hard on this...

Bright headlights cut through the dark street. I shield my eyes. A noisy, rumbling truck lumbers closer. I can barely see anything with those headlights on full blast. What kind of jackass turns his brights on while going down a residential street?

But the truck... It's coming toward me. Quickly, I leap off of the street and back onto the sidewalk, the salvaged books falling from my hands into the puddles. The truck pulls up along the side of the road, then reverses to be right in front of me.

A protest dies on my lips as the tires crunch over the broken remains of my little library. What does it matter? I couldn't save it, anyway. Dried flowers shed their petals in the mud.

I blink as the truck cuts its engine. Who would stop to talk to me? Now that my eyes clear from the blinding headlights, I can make out the logo on

the door of the truck. Poussin Hunting Co. Is it one of the Poussin guides? But why?

A flush of anticipation tingles through my body. *Wait...*

Heavy boots thud on the other side. My heart hammers in my chest as I step around the truck. The drizzle finally breaks into rain and heavy drops pellet the ground, the streetlights gleaming harsh shadows off every tree.

“Rosalina O’Connell. It can’t be.”

It can’t be is right. Because standing in front of me is Lucas Poussin. My ex-boyfriend.

My throat seizes. Oh god. He looks... good. I mean, he always looks good. It’s been nearly a year since I last saw him. He always graces Orca Cove with his presence at Christmas time, but this is way too early.

Lucas runs a hand through his dark red hair. He’s wearing a leather jacket with a black shirt underneath and snug jeans. He looks more ‘city’ than the usual guys around here, but he still has that edge to him. The edge of the hunter’s son.

“Here I was, driving to your house, when I see someone splashing around in the mud. I figured it was some sort of vagabond or other undesirable, so I pulled up to send them packing. And what do I know? It’s Rosalina O’Connell herself.”

I’m completely drenched in mud, from my jacket to my black leggings. I know there are bags under my eyes, and I’m sure this rain is not doing my mascara any favors. Of course, he looks like he walked off the cover of Men’s Health.

Lucas narrows his hazel eyes at me, and I realize I haven’t said anything. Oh god. It’s my turn to say something, isn’t it? But as always, I’m completely stuck.

Cause that's what Lucas does to me. Shows up once a year and completely immobilizes me. It's like I regress to being back in high school, hanging onto his every word. The worst part is, I know it's pathetic. You'd think I was sixteen, not twenty-six.

Everyone in Orca Cove thinks Lucas is God's gift to humanity. The only time the residents thought of me as anything other than Crazy George's daughter was after the incident at the frozen lake. Back then, I was Lucas's girl.

My throat clenches as if it's all those years ago, the ice water pouring down at me. I see his hand like a beacon.

Despite myself, I know being Lucas's girl felt better than being the outcast like I am now. Being asked about Lucas was so much easier than people asking why my dad is growing fairy circles in the backyard.

But being Lucas's girl didn't feel good when he dumped me right before he left for university. Or the time he came home for Christmas, took me out to dinner, and ordered a salad for me because, *'You've packed on the freshman fifteen and aren't even in college'*. Or last winter when we went for drinks at the Lodge, and I took him home so he could fuck me. I woke up, and he was sexting some girl from his university. I pretended not to see.

He stares down at me, his eyes narrowed. And he smiles. "Babe, you must be so excited to see me."

And despite it all... I am.

He pulls me into him, and it feels so good to be wrapped up in his warmth. I inhale. He smells like cologne and leather and it's so fucking familiar, I can't help myself. "I missed you."

"I know, pumpkin." He pulls away and gives a shining grin. My chest bursts. He's smiling for *me*.

“I-I’m surprised to see you,” I somehow manage. I’m tall at 5’11, and he has one inch on me, but when he stares at me like this, I feel like I’m five years old.

“That’s what I wanted.” He grins. “I graduated in spring. Did you hear? With honors, of course.”

Yeah, I heard. The Poussins are basically royalty to Orca Cove. Everyone was talking about it.

“So you got a job for some accounting firm in the city?” I ask.

He snorts. “Yeah, I’m done with that. They had a problem with my visionary attitude. I don’t need to put myself in a cage, you know?”

“Sure,” I say. “How long are you in town for?”

He ignores my question and grips my chin. I suck in a breath, staring up at him like one of his does. “You really are startingly beautiful,” he whispers, but it’s not like he’s saying it to me. It’s like he’s saying it to himself. “Such a unique sort of beauty.”

My skin itches. I pull down on my left sleeve.

He whips away and heads to the truck. “Dinner at the Lodge tomorrow night. 7 p.m. Bring your dad if he’s not too busy, you know, catching gnomes or whatever.”

That’s... That’s it? He’s going to tell me to meet him for dinner and leave? I should tell him to fuck off. I should tell him if he wants to go to dinner with me, he’ll have to pick me up. I should tell him—

But before I get up the nerve to do anything, he’s driven away, leaving me alone in the rain with my broken library and wilted roses.





# ROSALINA



HUNDREDS OF BEASTLY EYES stare at me. And only half of them are mounted on the wall.

The Poussin Hunting Lodge is packed. *How many people did Lucas invite?* It's not just dinner with me; he's thrown a party for the whole town.

My oversized scarf, white shirt, and black leggings are underdressed compared to everyone's fancy attire. I awkwardly try to disappear into the crowd. Warmth from the large stone fireplace thaws my cold cheeks. The faint whiff of liquor and tobacco mixes with the tables full of steaming meat and pumpkin pie.

Lucas's family has owned the Hunting Lodge for generations. Part inn, part pub, part guide service. A high-beamed ceiling supports antique chandeliers, each bearing a lantern that casts the room in orangey light. Tables, chairs, benches, and the bar are all carved from dark wood. Autumn leaves and foliage decorate the hearth.

The heads of elk and deer and pelts of bears, mountain lions, and a wolf are mounted on the walls. Lucas killed the wolf nearly ten years ago. Told

me he shot it in the back of its head while it was sleeping. Its fur is still soft and dense, almost shimmering in the firelight.

Tension gnaws in my gut, and I force myself to look away. There are so many people. *A welcome home party he forgot to mention?*

The whole town is here, but of course no one tries to start a conversation with me. I spy a lot of Lucas's family, even the ones from nearby towns. Cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents. *All I've got is Papa, and that's only half the time.*

Lucas's parents have always been kind to me. But even they join in the town gossip about the crazy O'Connells. "At least you'll have lovely grandchildren," had been a condolence I'd heard directed toward Mr. and Mrs. Poussin many times.

They don't have to worry, though. Lucas made it very clear he didn't want a future when he dumped me before he left for university. I'm just his hometown hook-up now.

Finally, I spot Lucas looking down over the railing from the upper level. I weave through the crowd and rush up the stairs to him.

Lucas pulls me into a hug. An intense wave of relief rushes over my body, and I exhale between his muscular arms before he lets me go. He takes my chin and makes me look up at him. "Saw you come in. You looked positively frazzled."

*Well, it would have been nice to know there would be so many people, I think.*

Lucas drops his hand. "You would have never made it in the city. It's refreshing to remember how innocent my little pumpkin is."

"Don't call me that." I hate that nickname.

“I’ll get you a job at the front desk here. It’ll do you some good to see people from all walks of life.”

“I see different people at the bookstore,” I remind him.

“What, women and moldy oldies?” Lucas laughs. Then he grips me around the waist and pulls me against his broad chest. “I’m talking about real people. People who have seen the world.”

“I’ve been to many places too,” I say. “Well, I’ve read about them.”

“My little pumpkin.” He shakes his head, giving me a pitying look as his hand trails down my arm. His thumb brushes my left wrist.

“Wait—”

He pulls up my sleeve and blinks down at my arm.

“Oh right,” he says. “I should have remembered you’d never be able to forget me.”

He’d forgotten?

He’d forgotten.

He’d forgotten the tears that streamed down my cheeks eight years ago as I dry heaved and barely been able to breathe. He was never there when I needed him. And he was going to leave for university. Pain had clawed inside me like a caged animal. And no matter how many tears I’d cried, not a single one reached him.

I remember that night.

How he’d rolled his eyes, pacing and throwing out his hands. “What the fuck do you want from me?”

I couldn’t tell him because I didn’t know. Didn’t know why it hurt so much when he missed dates or forgot to call, and why it hurt even more when he was there. But somehow, that was more bearable.

There was more pain when he pulled out his hunting knife and ripped off the sleeve of my shirt. “Now you’ll remember,” he repeated as he dug the sharp point into my forearm, making the first rough line. “Now you’ll remember who saved your life. Now you’ll remember you don’t need to bother me with your questions.”

And I remember the blood that had fallen from my wrist and sunk into the wood of my bedroom floor. How the pathetic splatter of it is still there today.

But he had left.

And he left with his name carved into my arm and my blood on the floor.

Now, he smiles down at me. “You don’t have to look so concerned. I’m home now.”

“It’s just—” He cuts me off with a kiss. His mouth covers mine, and his tongue slips between my lips. As he moves against me, I struggle to pull my sleeve back down over my arm. A rough hand travels down my body, groping at my breast through my t-shirt, then snaking around to cup my bottom.

“I missed this ass,” he murmurs into my ear. “The city girls are so skinny. Nothing to grip.”

“Lucas.” Ice floods my body as I picture him there. How many girls had he slept with?

“Don’t be jealous, gummy bear.” He tilts his head to the side, a half-smile on his face. “You should thank those city girls. How else could I realize what I want?”

I swallow in a dry throat. “What do you want?”

“Speaking of that, we have to get down to our party.”

“Wait.” He grasps my arm and pulls me back into the crowd. “*Our party?*”

I’m not sure why, but there’s a pit in my stomach, growing and growing. A foreboding, like as soon as Lucas leads me out into the fray, something is going to happen. Something is going to change. Something that can’t be undone.

*I’m not ready. I’m so not ready.*

Lucas drops my arm, then jumps onto the table in the middle of the crowd. He gestures for them to quiet.

“Alright, folks!” his voice booms. “There’s good news and there’s bad news. What do we want first?”

The crowd vibrates with anticipation, cheering and raising their mugs of ale.

“Alright, alright.” Lucas waves his hands to settle them down. “I’ll start with the good news. I’ve officially decided to take over the Hunting Lodge from my parents!”

The surrounding crowd erupts in a cheer, and his dad wipes a tear away with a napkin.

“Expect some modern improvements, though always keeping with long-standing family traditions and values.” Lucas flashes a smile. He really is handsome, his hair glowing a burning red in the flickering light of the fire. “Now for the bad news.”

An uneasy murmur passes through the crowd. I take a step back.

“With taking on the responsibility of the lodge,” Lucas continues, “I’ve had to consider other responsibilities as well. And as of tonight, I’m officially off the market!”

A few laughs burst through the crowd, and I see a group of girls clutch at each other and start whispering. Something dangerous churns within me.

A boom radiates through the lodge as Lucas jumps down from the table to stand in front of me. Then he's not standing anymore. He's kneeling.

There's a small box in his hands, and he opens it. A diamond, square and huge, and the light of it is so bright I blink back tears.

"Break the hearts of everyone in town and be my wife, pumpkin?" Lucas smiles, eyeing the crowd.

Lucas...

Lucas is proposing to me.

I open my mouth, but no words come out.

A part of me can see it: to be his little wife in Orca Cove. Help run the lodge. Maybe feel like I belong.

I can also see the red tail of the letter S peeking out from under my sleeve.

Ice entraps my body and I feel like I'm drowning, heavy clothes pulling me deeper and deeper.

A nervous chuckle sounds through the crowd at my silence. They're staring at me as if they've proposed too. Lucas finally turns to me, surprise etched on his features. "So, what is it? Yes or yes?"

I thought I'd know my answer. Shouldn't you know the answer when someone is on their knees before you?

The door bursts open. Icy wind and dead leaves blow in, and standing there is the butcher's son, holding something clutched to his chest. He stumbles into the room. "Rosalina, I've been looking for you everywhere."

Lucas stands and pushes me behind him. "Thomas, what is the meaning of this? The lodge is closed for a private event."

Thomas's red hair is wild, his freckled face flushed. "You have to listen. I got turned around hunting in the wood today. Went off the trail mighty bad. Then I saw this. It's Mr. O'Connell's jacket."

"Papa!" I push past Lucas and snatch the jacket from Thomas. It's covered in blood.

"Rosalina," Lucas says, trying to pull me back.

I ignore him and grip Thomas on the shoulder. "Take me to where you found this. I'm going after my father."





# KELDARION



“HELLO? DOES ANYONE LIVE here? I need help!”

The voice echoes through the castle. It isn't possible. It can't be...

“I got lost and was attacked! I mean no harm. I only need a place to rest.”

*No, no, no.*

There is an intruder in the castle.

The unfamiliar voice pricks my ears and I smell this invader's stink even deep within my chambers. It can't be.

Human.

A human has found his way through the Enchanted Vale and into the Briar. My heart thuds as I look up, trying to see past the tangle of thorns overtaking the ceiling. Castletree must be very weak indeed if the Vale is now so thin as to allow humans...

“Is anyone here?” the voice cries again.

A shudder of rage courses through me, and I shake, my heavy white coat flinging off the frost that has settled during the night. Where are the other princes to deal with this insanity?

Ezryn has left to patrol the Spring Realm, provoking goblins for his own sick joy. Dayton's probably passed out in a pile of his own sick. And Farron, of course, is... occupied.

That means it's up to me to deal with this intruder. A snarl sounds deep within my chest. My paws shatter the ice that covers the floor as I stalk toward the door. A human in the castle. It isn't possible.

I fling open the door with my snout and see Astrid sitting there. She hops back, immediately shrinking down from the rage in my eyes.

"Master, there's... There's a human in the castle," she peeps.

I ignore her, that icy growl rumbling through my chest again. Humans. Idiotic creatures with mayfly lives. Is the Vale truly so weak now?

The thought—this urgent reminder—of the dying magic makes my muscles stiffen with each step. Maybe the end has finally come. Maybe we will be freed from our misery once and for all.

A strangled howl sounds from the dungeon tower. He's worked up too. This human's scent will stink up the castle for days.

Whispers and gasps echo as I enter the main causeway. The servants flit around, hiding in door frames and scuttling into different rooms. Are they afraid of the human... or of me?

Ice trails from my paws with each step and I look down, stiffening at my reflection. The hideous, horrific beast stares back at me. With a roar, I scratch the image with my claws. How dare this human force me out of my wing during the night? Why would he brave the Briar and dare come into my castle? To laugh at the beast?

"Hello?" the voice echoes again and now I'm running through the hallways until I skid to a stop on the ramparts, looking down into the great hall.

There he is.

The invader.

He's a tall man, in his extended years, with brown hair flecked with gray. He carries his weight in his rotund belly, but otherwise looks sturdy enough. Soaked clothing sticks to his skin, and his sack drips water all over my floor.

I always forget how pathetic humans are until I look at them.

I could kill him and be done with it. But Ez wouldn't like that. He's got a soft spot for the pathetic things in life.

Maybe that's why he's got a soft spot for me.

"A wayward traveler, Master," a voice says from behind me, and I don't bother turning to know it's Marigold. "He looks soaked to the bone. Should I set him up with some tea and a fresh cloak—"

"No," I snarl. "He's not to stay. He's lucky not to die for trespassing."

Marigold sighs. "Yes, Master."

I grit my fangs, inhaling the thick air of the castle, heady and moist. Only a stupid human. Nothing more than that. I will deal with it, return to my chambers, and it will be nothing more than a disturbing occurrence. The tree... The damned tree. It will destroy Farron to hear the Vale is so weak—

"I was chased by goblins," the human cries as he wanders through the great hall. Orange light from the fireplace dances over his skin. "I'm looking for my wife."

"He'll die if you send him back out there, Master," Marigold whispers. "Look at him. Could have been a looker if he weren't so drenched. Sad little mite."

"Goblins are a consequence of trespassing in the Briar," I growl. Sometimes I wish Marigold feared me as the others did. I must deal with

this intruder before the servants' soft hearts and softer heads have them throwing him dinner and a dance.

I take a step back toward the shadows. A few harsh words uttered from the dark will have the short-lived being scurrying back out into the fray. I don't need to show myself to own dominion of my castle.

As I open my mouth to bellow down to the wretched interloper, he walks toward the fireplace and reaches a hand toward the thick, black thorn bushes that lace through the stone wall and creep over the mantle.

"Fascinating," he whispers.

I watch with morbid curiosity, saliva dripping down my fangs, as he traces his hands along the spiny branches. Yes, peasant, not even our castle is safe from the Briar. And you will learn soon this is no sanctuary—

"Roses," he mutters. And he sees them, tucked within the brambles. Some of the last blooming remains of Castletree. The few resilient survivors who would not be so easily smothered by thorn and root. The last symbols of hope that our home may yet withstand a little longer. That there may be hope for the cursed souls who reside here.

"A rose," the human says again and reaches his hands into the brambles. "A rose for my Rose. I promised her, after all."

My pupils dilate as the scene plays out before me: this human daring to take a piece of the last life of our hallowed tree. He plucks the rose from its stem and delicately pulls it back through the brambles. Then he steps into the light of the fire and admires it. A blood-red bloom.

"Oh dear," Marigold whispers.

All the mercy and curiosity drain out of me. He... He stole it. He took life from Castletree.

I had wanted to offer forgiveness. I had wanted to show humanity. But he lost that right when he stole from the House of the Queen. Now, the man within me lets loose the reins of control and frees the beast.

With a snarl, I leap over the side of the railing, landing with a boom in the shadows of the great hall. The man jumps, the rose falling from his grasp. “Who goes there?”

I prowl to the other side, staying deep within the shadows. He blanches, trying to track my movements in the dark.

“I am the master of this castle,” I rumble, “and you are a trespasser and a thief. Do you know the punishment for thieves in the Enchanted Vale?”

The man blinks, and some of the fear dissipates from his expression. “I’m here. I made it. Please help me. I’m looking for my wife—”

“Help you?” My voice bellows like the depths of an icy chasm. “How dare a criminal ask for help? You have wandered into magic beyond your comprehension. Leave now, and be grateful you return with your life, however short it may be.”

But the human falls to his knees. “Please, sir. The rose was but a humble gift for my daughter. I’ve been searching for this realm for twenty-five years. My wife is here somewhere and—”

There is a part of me, deep within, that respects the courage of this pitiful human. But it is clear he has no idea what he has done. He does not understand the true meaning of fear.

And so, with slow, deliberate steps, I walk into the light.

The man falls backwards, eyes wide and glassy, mouth cast in a horrified O. He scrambles away but I descend faster, lurching toward him, pinning him on both sides with my massive paws. Baring my fangs, I am about to roar for him to leave when a light catches my gaze. A crystallized rose

made of moonstone hangs from a chain around his neck, the intricate metalwork glittering in the firelight.

I pull back. Stare at the human.

And with twenty-five years' worth of wrath and suffering, I straighten to my full height and say, "You want to stay in the Enchanted Vale? Then stay you shall."

I snatch his coat in my jaws and haul him up the stairs. To the dungeon.



