

## *Chapter One*



### *Birthday*



orey was impossible to live with for most of the year, but when his birthday rolled around... it became so much worse. This was going to be his 15<sup>th</sup> birthday, and he talked about it incessantly for more than a month beforehand.

“Hey, Jasen!” he said one morning before school. “Got a joke for you. Ready?”

I sighed heavily as I poured milk into my morning cereal. “Alright.”

Corey snatched the box of cereal and started to pour his own, spilling it over the top of the bowl and onto the counter. “Okay. Here goes... Knock-Knock.”

“Who’s there?” I asked.

“Thirty.” Corey grinned.

“Thirty who?”

“Thirty more days ‘til my birthday. Hope you got me something good.” Corey laughed and laughed as if this was very witty, then started digging into his cereal.

He did the same thing every morning for a month, and each morning he laughed like it was the funniest thing he had ever heard.

When I had turned seventeen in July, Corey's present to me had been a crumpled half-sheet of notebook paper with the words “I.O.U. one present. From: Your brother Corey” scrawled across the front in purple crayon. I had considered just giving it back to him on his own birthday and telling him we were even.

Turned out, though, that I had already found a pretty cool present for Corey. What I was more worried about at that time was finding the right present for my girlfriend, who had a birthday just two weeks after Corey's. That one made me so nervous that I was having trouble sleeping at night. It was a big problem since Elayne was not only a princess who already had just about anything a person could need... but also that this was officially her first birthday in more than thirteen hundred years.

No pressure. No pressure at all.

I felt like I really needed to do something extra-special, but at the moment I was completely without ideas and the date was fast approaching.

“You broke an ancient curse, bro.” Corey told me one day. “You defeated a terrifying fairy queen and even tangled with a dragon for her. You think she's really going to care if you buy her a box of chocolates or not?”

I knew that Corey was trying to make me feel better, but what he said actually made it much, much worse. It was true... no ordinary gift would do. It had to be something... extraordinary.

I was still mulling it over when the morning of Corey's birthday finally arrived.

It was a Wednesday... a school day. When I came downstairs for breakfast, still wearing an old tee-shirt and Snoopy pajama bottoms, I found the kitchen crowded and bustling with activity. Grandpa was there, clean-shaven and already dressed. He was setting the table with the help of his wife Liz (who was actually a fairy queen named Bridgette... but on mornings like this, when she looked altogether normal, that was something I could almost forget). Grandpa looked up at me and smiled "Mornin' sleepy head. We've got company for breakfast today."

I rubbed my eyes tiredly and looked around. Over by the stove, Emily stood flipping some pancakes. Her long dark-brown hair was pulled back into a ponytail. A year younger than Corey, the two of them had been officially dating now since last fall. She turned and looked at me with a crooked grin, her cheeks red from the heat of the stove. "Hey Jasen." she said as she turned another pancake. "Nice pajamas."

I smiled and rubbed my hand through my tangle of dirty-blond hair. I was almost to the bottom step when I saw the last guest in our kitchen. She stood up from where she had been hidden from view behind the refrigerator door. It was Elayne. Her long blonde hair fell in soft rings around her shoulders. Although she was dressed in "regular" clothes, she looked every bit a radiant princess. When she saw me, her blue eyes lit into a beautiful smile.

I froze, my hand still caught in my tangle of messy hair. "Elayne! What are you doing here?"

The surprise on my face made her stifle a laugh and I could feel embarrassed heat rising in my cheeks. (*Man, oh, man! Why hadn't I at least gotten dressed before coming downstairs this morning?*)

"I'm here for Corey's birthday." Elayne said, pulling a pitcher of orange juice from the fridge.

"That's today?" I asked.

Emily, putting the last of the pancakes on a plate by the stove, let out a loud snort. "Yeah, RIGHT! As if he hasn't reminded us every moment of every day for a month!"

Elayne's eyes playfully darted to my tattered slippers with my toes poking out the fronts and I saw her smile widen.

"I'm just going to run up and get dressed real quick..." I started to say, but at that moment Corey came down the stairs behind me.

"Do I smell pancakes?" he called loudly.

Corey, of course, looked completely prepared. He was fully dressed and cleaned up, and it even looked like he'd made an effort to comb his mop of hair, which usually fell in a tangle over his eyes. As he stepped past me at the bottom of the stairs, he made a big show of looking surprised. "Wow!" he said loudly. "What's all this?"

Emily rolled her eyes. "Oh, brother," she mumbled. "Whatta ham."

Corey smiled broadly, looking at the big breakfast set out on the table. Liz stood with a gentle smile. "Happy Birthday, young Corey." she said.

Again, Corey managed a surprised, wide-eyed look. "Birthday? Wow, is that *today*? I had completely forgotten!"



Breakfast was delicious. Although I was still self-conscious about my messy hair and pajamas, I managed to relax and finally enjoy it. Elayne sat beside me, casting secret smiles at me when nobody was looking. When we were through eating, she moved her hand over to mine and held it beneath the table, and any embarrassment I had felt about my messy hair and tattered slippers completely melted away.

After breakfast, Liz produced two small, ornate boxes. (*Whether she had them hidden in her pocket or just conjured them out of thin air, I decided I didn't want to know.*) Each

box was covered with blue-green gemstones and had delicate silver lines etched across the top. She handed one box to Corey and the other one to me. "I have a gift for you both," she said in her calm, even voice.

Corey took his box and looked over at mine. "Hey!" he said. "How come Jasen gets a present on my birthday?"

"It is something each of you should have. You may consider it a birthday present, but it is more than that."

Corey and I opened our boxes together. Inside, sitting on a plush blue-green cushion, was a beautiful ring made of fine-crafted silver with a small blue stone in the center. Along the edges wove the same carefully crafted pattern that covered the box. I recognized it as the symbol for water. When I looked over at Corey, I saw that his box held a ring identical to mine.

"Wow." I said. "This is beautiful, Bridgette." I had forgotten to call her Liz, but nobody seemed to take notice.

"Nice." Corey said. "I don't wear rings, though. They make my fingers itch."

Liz turned her solemn eyes to Corey. "You will wear this one." she said.

Corey blinked, obviously not sure how to respond to that.

"It is the royal ring of the Sylphs." Liz continued. "It is a symbol that you are royalty among my tribe and it is a sign of honor and respect among all fairies."

Corey blinked again. "Oh, well... okay then."

I looked up at Liz. "Thank you. This means a lot."

Emily leaned over and whispered to Corey quickly. "It's the ring of a royal prince, you moron. Tell her thank you!"

Corey looked up at Liz. "Oh, right! Thanks!" he said quickly. "Love it! Great gift."

We continued around the table, giving our gifts to Corey and watching the clock, knowing that we were going to be late for school. If it was okay with Grandpa, though, it was more than fine with us.

Elayne was next. She gave Corey his gift in a small pouch. He opened it excitedly, then looked confused, holding up a

small, glassy yellow stone. "Oh, look!" Corey began hesitantly. "Elayne got me a... marble?" He turned the pouch over, looking for more. "Er... are there more? Hard to play a game of marbles with just one."

Elayne laughed and told him to hold it up and look inside. When he did, we could all see a four-leaf clover inside the tiny yellow ball.

When Liz saw the gift, she nodded approvingly. "An excellent gift, Princess Elayne."

Corey seemed to like it, too. "Hey, yeah! Good luck charm. Nice!"

"Four-leaf clovers are more than good luck, Corey." Elayne said. "They allow you to see spirits and fairies that may have otherwise been hidden and unseen."

Corey rolled the tiny ball around his palm. "Well, very cool. Thanks."

I was next. I tossed Corey the gift that had been hiding under my bed all of these months. It was a small green glass bottle with a cork in the top of it. "Here you go. Happy birthday. I got it at a marketplace near Elayne's castle."

Corey looked at the vial with a grin, shaking it lightly. "Very cool! Magic potion, right? What's this one do?"

"It's pixie dust." I said.

Corey furrowed his eyebrows. "Pixie dust..." then he snapped his fingers. "Oh! Like Tinkerbell, right?" he looked at the vial again. "So, what? Thank happy thoughts and I can fly like Peter Pan?"

"Actually, real pixie dust makes you invisible." I said.

Corey's grin widened. "Cool present, bro! Thanks! Hey, maybe I can use this to get out of my science test next week in Mrs. Phee's class! One minute I'm at my desk and the next minute everyone's all like 'Hey! Where did Corey go?'"

Emily shook her head. "You're not doing that."

He turned to her. "And what did *you* get me for my birthday?"

Emily's eyes darted to the others at the table and her cheeks flushed pink. She handed him a small wrapped box and cleared her throat, trying not to look embarrassed.

Corey opened it and pulled out a small golden locket. Inside was a tiny picture of Emily and him smiling together. Corey squinted at the picture with a grin. "Hey, that's from homecoming last year, right?"

Emily's smile lit up. "You remember?"

Corey snorted. "Hard to forget. We got attacked by an evil fairy queen halfway through it."

Emily frowned. "That's all you remember about that night?"

Corey pretended to look confused. "I remember that the punch that the lunch ladies made was pretty good."

Emily narrowed her eyes at him.

He held up his hands. "Just kidding! I remember it was our first date. Don't give me the scary mean squinty look! It was a joke."

"It's time for you kids to be getting to school, anyway." Grandpa said suddenly, clapping his hands together.

Corey, Emily, and I all groaned together. We had hoped we could have gotten a little more time out of Grandpa before he noticed how late it was.

Grandpa smiled. "I do have my gift to give, though, before you go."

Corey's eyes lit up. "More presents?"

"Just one." Grandpa said with a small, secret smile that looked a lot like the one Liz always wore. "It's out in the driveway."

Corey shot up out of his chair so quickly that it clattered loudly against the wall behind him and Emily had to catch it before it fell to the floor. "A car?" Corey stammered. "You got me a car?"

"Not exactly..." Grandpa began, but before he could say any more, Corey was across the kitchen and had thrown open

the door. The rest of us pushed our chairs out and shuffled out of the kitchen to follow.

The October air was already chilly, and I think that I felt it more than anyone since I was wearing only my tee-shirt and pajama bottoms. Out in the driveway sat the light-blue Grand Marquis that Grandpa had given me the year before. Beside it, covered with dents and peeling paint, stood a bright yellow motorcycle. I recognized it as a motocross bike, the kind they used for riding through the mud and pulling off stunts. This one looked like it was twenty years old and falling apart, but Corey stood beside it open-mouthed and staring with a look of pure adoration.

Grandpa chuckled at Corey's expression. "You like it?" he asked.

Corey was still speechless for a few moments, but finally answered breathlessly. "Like it? Are you kidding? It's *awesome!*"

"Well, I knew you were turning fifteen and getting your learner's license this year. I'm sorry I couldn't afford another car, but I thought that..."

Grandpa never got to finish. Corey cut him off with a big, smothering hug. Over his shoulder, I saw Grandpa smile happily to himself.

As I went back inside to get dressed, I smiled to myself, too. Now that Corey's birthday had finally arrived, I wouldn't have to hear his lame knock-knock joke anymore... at least not until next year.



## *Chapter Two*



### *The Moonlit Clearing*



For a very long time, I had looked forward to my senior year at Jacob's Rest High School. The tiny town nestled in the Catskill mountains had been a boring place to grow up for most of my life, and I had often dreamed about finishing school and moving out... starting out with college, probably in a big city, and moving on to bigger and better things from there.

During my second-to-last year, though, so much had changed. My eyes had been opened to a whole new world (literally-- a whole different world separate from ours) that I had never known existed. Now, my plans for beyond high school weren't so clear anymore. Going to live in a big city didn't seem quite as exciting as it once did.

During the school days, I found my thoughts drifting often. I wondered what Elayne was doing in her castle, where she

was taught daily by scholars and tutors, learning subjects like the history of her world, the laws of social order, and how to read and write in the languages of the twelve fairy tribes. On the other hand, I sat in keyboarding class learning how to keep my fingers from wandering off of the home keys while I typed words like “fluffernut” and “fatterboodle” over and over again.

Occasionally, I would look up from the computer screen at the cracked plaster ceiling of my classroom. Many of the ceilings on the second floor of the school were still cracked like that, even though they had mostly fixed the roof during the summer. Their official explanation for the school roof collapsing was the weight of the snow from the big snowstorm we had last year. Corey, Emily, and I knew better, though. We knew that the roof had actually been crushed under the massive weight of the dragon Grendesh during our final showdown with Sidhera. It was there that we had finally broken Sidhera's spell on Elayne. Sleeping Beauty's legendary curse broken by true-love's kiss...

The bell rang, breaking me out of my reverie. When I looked away from the cracked ceiling and back at my computer screen, I saw that my fingers had been typing out “*kiss, kiss, kiss, kiss*” over and over again. Chad Wright, the football player who sat beside me, glanced at my screen and gave me a look like I was crazy before he got up and walked away. I quickly cleared off my screen and gathered my books.

As I was passing through the classroom door, I felt my shoe stick to the floor just inside the threshold. When I lifted my foot up, I found long, gooey tendrils of neon-green bubble gum stuck to the bottom of my shoe. Someone must've been trying to spit it into the nearby trashcan and missed. I did my best to scrape it off, but that only seemed to make it worse. I ended up just leaving it, and as I ran down the hallway to get to my next class, my shoes made a sticky popping sound with every other step.



After school, I was anxious to go visit Elayne, but Corey wanted to try out his new motorcycle first. While Emily and I sat on the hood of my car and watched, Corey straddled the cracked leather seat and strapped on a worn helmet.

“How do I look?” he asked. “Pretty cool, right?”

Emily rolled her eyes. “Yeah, yeah. Real cool, hotshot. Now start that thing up and give it a try. I want to get to the moonlit clearing before the sun goes down.”

Corey savored the moment, though, running his hands over the chrome handlebars as if they were made of gold. “Alright,” he said finally. “Ready?”

“We’re ready!” I laughed. “C’mon! Fire it up and do a few laps around the block so we can go!”

With a big grin, Corey kick-started the bike and it gunned to life. It sputtered and shook for a moment, finally coughing up a big plume of blackish smoke before settling into an uneven idle. The sound of the old engine was loud enough to shake my teeth, and Corey threw back his head and howled with delight. Beside me, Emily started laughing.

As if he was about to put on a show for an audience of thousands, he waved to an invisible crowd and gripped the handlebars. “Here we go!” he yelled over the sound of the engine. He set his feet down, changed the gear, and pulled the throttle. The bike sprang forward like a wild animal, its front tire jumping high into the air. Corey was thrown backwards, arms sprawling, and landed hard on his back. The bike went almost twenty feet down the driveway without him before finally clattering to its side against the birdbath in the yard, where the engine went suddenly silent.

Emily and I shot up and ran over to Corey. I was already thinking that I would have to run inside and dial 911 for an ambulance. Emily moved even faster, and she was kneeling

beside Corey in an instant, worry etched into the freckles of her face.

Corey lay there in his helmet, wide-eyed with shock. Even as Emily was kneeling over him, though, I saw the grin reappear on his face. "That..." he began, still staring up at the fading cloud of exhaust fumes... "was FREAKING AWESOME!"



Corey was still thrumming with adrenaline as we walked through the woods a half hour later. "So awesome!" he kept chanting. "So freaking awesome!" Every once in awhile he would hold his hands out like he was holding invisible handlebars and he would make a sputtering sound like an engine with his lips.

"You sure he's okay?" Emily asked, watching him sideways as we walked through the trees. "You don't think he hit his head too hard, do you?"

Corey was now pretending to ride a motorcycle in circles around the base of a big tree.

"Nah." I said. "He's always like this."

"I've got to be back for dinner tonight." Emily continued. "My parents got really mad last time I was late."

"Shouldn't be a problem." I said. "We'll stay at the castle for an hour or so, then head back."

"Did you see the way that bike moved?" Corey shouted. "It was like a lightning bolt! Man, the speed on that thing!"

"Right Corey. A big, sputtering lightning bolt with peeling yellow paint and a cracked leather seat. Now if you can just stay on it for more than a half a second, it would be even more impressive..." I turned back to Emily. "Hey... listen, I meant to ask you something. Elayne said that she had something really important to talk to me about. You wouldn't happen to know anything about that would you?"

Emily turned her eyes away and acted suddenly very interested in her shoes as they crunched through the fallen leaves beneath us.

"What?" I asked, "You do know something about it, don't you? What is it?"

Emily kept her gaze firmly down. "I can't say." she said quickly.

"I think I'm going to get some flames painted on the side of it. What do you think?" Corey called as he jumped up to snatch a leaf off an overhanging branch.

I ignored him, suddenly very worried at Emily's silence. "Is it bad?" I asked. I felt a lump rise in my throat. "Is she..." I found it suddenly hard to swallow. "Is she going to break up with me?"

Emily held up her hands. "Jasen, I'm not allowed to say, alright? It's something private between you and Elayne."

"If it's private then how come she told you?" I asked.

Emily looked at me sideways. "Duh... cause I'm her best friend."

I began to protest, but Corey started up again. "I should get some really cool sunglasses!" he said suddenly. "All great bikers have really cool sunglasses!"

"We're here." Emily said, sounding relieved for an excuse to avoid our conversation. I looked ahead and saw the charred remains of a huge tree stump.

I decided to drop the subject, but my mind was racing now. *Was it true? Was Elayne going to break up with me?*

I felt a pit of dread form in my stomach. Suddenly, I wasn't so sure I wanted to go to the castle anymore.

But ahead of me, Corey had already taken a running leap into the air and disappeared from sight near the blackened stump. Emily quickened her step and a moment later, she, too, had disappeared into thin air.

I stopped, honestly considering just turning around now and running back home. All of a sudden I didn't want to hear what Elayne had to say to me. I wasn't sure I could take it.

A moment later, Corey's head appeared, floating in midair as he peeked out through the invisible curtain. "Hey, bro! You comin'?"

With a growing sense of unease, I started forward again and took a step across the threshold.

I stepped out of the cool October air and into the warm night of the moonlit clearing. In my next step, the crunchy forest leaves beneath my feet were replaced by thick, springy grass. The sunlight pouring through the branches overhead became the light from a huge full moon that sat forever resting against the treetops above.

The calm forever-night of the moonlit clearing had always been a special place for the four of us. It was the place between our world and Elayne's, hidden behind an invisible curtain. Often, we would meet Elayne here... sometimes for a picnic on the soft grass, or sometimes just to sit and talk beneath the warm night sky. It was a place of good memories for me.

Well, mostly good, anyway.

Here and there, scattered around the edges of the clearing, you could still see big chunks of broken stone and splintered wood... sometimes even glistening shards of colored glass, scattered like jewels in the grass. They were all that remained of the little stone chapel that had once sat on the edge of the clearing. The little building where we had first found Elayne, sleeping an enchanted sleep.

Now, there was only a slab of a stone wall sitting far back in the shadows where the back of the chapel had once stood. Behind it, the trees closed in densely into dark forest. In the center of the wall was an elaborately carved wooden door with a gold handle. The door to Elayne's world.

Corey ran up to the door as we had so many times in the past year. Without hesitation, he pushed it open and sunlight came pouring through from beyond. A bright green hillside could be seen, and a warm summer breeze blew through the doorway and ruffled Corey's hair.

Emily, perhaps trying to avoid more of my questions, hurried to catch up with Corey and a moment later they were both through the door. I took off my winter coat and laid it on the thick grass of the moonlit clearing. It was spring on the other side of that doorway and I knew I wouldn't need it. The seasons in Elayne's world were flipped from ours. Fall here, spring there. When we had gone to visit her on the hottest day in July, we had gotten snowed in for a week at the castle during a surprise blizzard. It was just one of the many odd and magical things we had grown accustomed to this past year.



Still fighting the dread in my stomach, I took a deep breath and stepped through the doorway.

I had to raise my hand to shield my eyes from the bright sun here. Even then, it took a moment to adjust.

I now stood on a grassy hilltop, set among rolling green fields beneath a bright blue sky. A warm breeze combed through the tall grass around me and moved across the distant hills like waves on an ocean. Behind me, the wooden doorway stood open in the face of a big stone wall.

Emily and Corey had already moved ahead to the other stone building on the hillside. It was a stable house, with two fierce-looking royal guards posted out front. When they saw us emerge from the doorway, one of them banged an armored

fist against the door of the stable house to signal someone inside.

Immediately, a man came out and ran to us, smiling. He was dressed in bright wool clothing and had a long, thin nose. "Hello Lady Emily! Masters Corey and Jasen! How nice to see you all today!"

It was Keafer, the stable master. He took care of the horses here and got them ready for us whenever we visited. The king and queen had built this stable house after our adventure last year. Elayne's castle (which was formally called "The Castle of Lions" by the people in the kingdom) was a three-hour walk from this hillside, but only twenty minutes by horseback. It made our visits with Elayne much easier.

"How is Reese?" Emily asked Keafer immediately, referring to the horse she usually rode. Emily had grown up on a horse farm and loved horses. Corey, on the other hand, was the exact opposite. Even though we had been doing this for a long time now, horses still really creeped him out.

"Oh, Reese is doing just fine, Lady Emily." Keafer said quickly as he moved with her towards the stable. "I think he just had a summer cold. He seemed to sleep much better last night..."

As they disappeared into the stable to get our horses, I stood on the hilltop and looked out at the distant horizon to where I could just make out the four yellow pennants flying from the towers of the castle miles away.

Even then, I couldn't shake the growing feeling that something bad was about to happen. I felt like there were storm clouds gathering darkly overhead, but when I looked back at the sky again, there was nothing but clear blue for as far as I could see.

## *Chapter Three*



### *The Red Room*

**B**y the time we made it to the castle, I was almost sick with worry. In fact, I almost forgot to speed up as we crossed the drawbridge over the castle moat. When I was about halfway across the massive wooden bridge, a giant tentacle shot out from the dark waters beneath. It slammed down with a wet thud behind me, grabbing at my horse's legs. My horse jumped into a gallop and ran the rest of the way across as the huge tentacle slithered back into the water below.

Instead of trying to help out, the guards were laughing as I passed them.

"That monster truly hates you, Sir Jasen." one of them said. "In all my years, I've never seen it attack someone unprovoked, and yet it grabs at you every time you cross."

I stepped off my saddle and handed the reins to a waiting stable boy as Emily and Corey pulled up beside me.

Emily was also obviously trying not to laugh at my startled expression. "I thought he would have forgiven you by now," she said. "I guess that giant, man-eating leviathans really hold a grudge!"

"He's definitely after you." Corey laughed. "Hey! Maybe you can get him to swallow a big ticking clock like the alligator that was always after Captain Hook."

Emily giggled, handing over her horse to another waiting boy. "It might just be playing with you, Jasen. It probably just enjoys giving you a scare."

I rolled my eyes. "Yeah, right. Ha-ha. What a kidder. Like that time it almost ate me--- TWICE. Funny stuff. Good times."

Emily and Corey really cracked up laughing then, although I hardly saw anything funny about it. A moment later, I noticed that the guards standing around us all suddenly straightened to rigid attention.

A gentle voice called from behind us. "What's so funny? What did I miss?"

We turned to see Elayne standing there watching us curiously, a smile tickling her lips. When I saw her, I instantly felt the dread return. *She's going to break up with me.* I thought. *What other 'important thing' could there be for her to talk to me about?* I wished now that the leviathan in the moat actually had gotten me this time and dragged me under. At least I wouldn't have to face having my heart broken.

Emily looked at Elayne, then back at me again quickly. The smile dropped from her face and she took Corey's arm. "Um... hey, Corey. Let's head up to Elayne's suite and wait for them there."

"What? No way. I was hoping to head to the kitchen to see if they still had some of that pudding that they made last week."

“The plum pudding?” Elayne asked. “I believe they do, Corey. Tell the head cook that I sent you.”

“We’re outta here.” Corey said and they started down a side corridor. Before they disappeared, I saw Emily look back and exchange a significant look with Elayne. I couldn’t tell what it meant, but it made me even more nervous about what was coming.

Elayne turned back to me. Her face was pale and she looked very nervous all of the sudden.

“Hi.” she said. I saw that her hands were clenched awkwardly in front of her as she stood facing me.

“Hi.” I said back, feeling the stares of the guards all around us.

“We... um. We need to talk about something.” Elayne said carefully. Her blue eyes darted to the ground and she chewed on the corner of her lip nervously.

I swallowed a lump in my throat. “I know.” I said, my voice cracking a little.

Elayne’s eyes widened. “You know?”

“No.” I said quickly. “I mean, I don’t KNOW. I just know that you wanted to talk, but I don’t know what it’s about.”

“Oh.” Elayne said, and her eyes darted around nervously, as if she, too, were suddenly aware of the guards all around us. “Well, um... let’s go someplace where we can talk.”

I swallowed hard. “Lead the way.”



Elayne led me through a side passage that I had never been down before. It took us to a wide hall with a huge marble staircase. Up the stairs and around several other side passages, we arrived finally at a gilded gold door with three huge guards standing at attention outside. When Elayne approached, the one closest to the door pulled an iron key from his belt and unlocked the heavy door, then stepped aside and pulled it open

for us. Feeling more nervous and wary by the moment, I stepped inside behind her.

Everything was red.

The walls were painted a bright, crimson red and the high ceilings were painted a lighter shade of red. The floor was covered in a red carpet so thick that my shoes almost disappeared into it.

In the center of this room stood a marble pedestal in the shape of a huge lion. Sitting on top of the pedestal was a glass case. There was nothing else in the whole room.

Elayne led me through the thick carpet and stopped beside the glass case. Inside the case was a red cushion, and upon it sat a delicate silver-leaf crown. I recognized it immediately as the one Elayne's mother often wore when she had to greet guests in the throne room.



Elayne, looking paler than ever, wouldn't even meet my eyes now. I had never, in all of the time I had known her, seen her so nervous. It made the pit of dread in my stomach even worse to see her like that.

The huge door slammed closed behind us, making us both jump. The heavy air of the room closed immediately around

us. In the sudden silence, my own fast heartbeat sounded very loud in my ears.

Elayne, standing with one foot digging nervously in the thick carpet, seemed suddenly too nervous to speak. The awkward silence stretched out to a long minute. Finally, I cleared my throat and turned to the crown beneath the glass beside us.

“That looks like your mom’s.” I said.

Elayne, seeming stunned that I broke the silence, looked up at me, then averted her eyes quickly to the crown. “Oh! Yes. It is. The Crown of Lions.” Elayne cleared her throat and seemed to turn her attention wholly to the crown, thankful for the distraction. She started reciting as if reading from a history book. “It was crafted by dwarves thousands of years ago and has been worn by the rulers of this world ever since. It is imbued with the magic of all twelve fairy tribes. First worn by the goblin queen Kara Mia in the year 131 B.E.”

Still nervous, I swallowed to keep my throat from going dry. “It’s magic?” I asked.

Elayne nodded. “Yes. One ruler passes it down to the next in a coronation ceremony. Once crowned, the subjects of the kingdom are magically bound to obey the wearer.”

Momentarily forgetting my nervousness, I was startled to hear what Elayne was saying. “Whoa... what? What do you mean ‘bound to obey’? You mean that it forces everyone around them to do whatever they say?”

Elayne shook her head. “Not exactly, no. It’s complicated. People can’t be forced to do something they wouldn’t normally do. It just makes them... want to follow.”

I looked closely at the crown behind the glass. “So the people of this world are all under this crown’s spell? Whoever wears the crown they have to follow?”

Elayne nodded hesitantly, confused by my shock. “That’s right, but don’t make it sound like a bad thing. This crown is the reason our kingdom has been at peace for thousands of years. No one has ever tried to overthrow the monarchy.”

“Because they’re under a spell!” I said. “That doesn’t seem right. Sometimes the monarchy needs to be overthrown.”

Elayne looked startled by this. “Jasen!”

“Seriously. You read the history books in my world. Some of the greatest nations in my world have come about by overthrowing a bad ruler.”

Elayne shook her head, looking confused by my sudden anger. “Jasen, it is a great responsibility to carry. My mother would never abuse its power.”

I looked at the crown, realizing now why they needed so many guards outside the door. “So what if someone had got hold of this crown and put it on? What would happen? Would they be able to control everyone in the kingdom?”

Elayne shook her head. “No, Jasen. The magic can only be passed willingly from one ruler to another through a coronation ceremony. When my mother was seventeen, she was coronated with this crown by her mother, so now the power is hers. It will remain with her until my mother places it on the head of the next ruler of the kingdom. The crown by itself does nothing. If someone came in here and put it on, it would not work for them. The magic is in my mother right now and the crown is a way to pass it to the next person.”

I looked at the crown again, still very creeped out by the idea that it could control so many people. “Okay...”

Elayne, wringing her hands in front of her, continued nervously. “So, as I was saying, the eldest daughter of the king and queen is coronated on her seventeenth birthday.” Here, Elayne paused, looking at me significantly.

My mind was still buzzing nervously, and I realized that she was looking at me expectantly. “What?” I asked, confused.

Elayne’s eyes darted to the red carpet, then back up at me. “Jasen, I’m trying to tell you that I will be crowned in fourteen days, on the day I become seventeen.”

I looked up at her and the nervousness that I had been feeling before was suddenly forgotten. "You... you're what? You're going to be queen?"

Elayne's blue eyes watched mine closely. She still bit her lip nervously, and nodded.

"Wow! Well that's... wow."

Elayne closed her eyes. "And there's something else." she said, keeping her eyes closed as if too terrified to look at me.

*Here it comes. I thought. The breakup.*

*But... of course, right? What did I expect, after all? She's going to be queen. She can't be going out with a nobody like me.* There was no other way. I swallowed hard. *Don't cry, Jasen. DO NOT CRY.*

"On the day of the coronation ceremony," Elayne said, "I have to announce my intentions to betroth." Elayne's eyes locked on mine suddenly and she watched me, terrified.

I felt like I had just missed something. "What? Say again?"

Elayne's blue eyes watched mine steadily. "I'm supposed to choose a husband." she said carefully. "I have to announce who I intend to marry, and I have to be married within one year of the coronation."

I felt like I had just been punched in the stomach. Not only was she breaking up with me, but she already had someone else lined up. Despite trying my best to hold it in, I couldn't help my voice cracking when I finally spoke again. "Who?" I asked. "Who is he?"

Elayne's intent gaze faltered for a moment, then her eyes widened. "No! Jasen! You misunderstand. It is you. It is you that I want to name."

In the silence of the big empty red room, I felt my heartbeat stop for a moment. It took a long time for the spinning emotions in my head to slow down enough for me to realize what Elayne was saying.

"Are you... are you asking me to marry you?" I said in a small voice.

Elayne rushed to answer. "It is just an announcement of intention," she quickly explained. "We would not have to actually get married for another year."

I probably should have hidden my shock and disbelief a little better, but my mind was numb at that moment. Without realizing it, I had started pacing the thick red carpet and running my hands nervously through my hair.

Elayne stood in silence, rooted to the spot and watching me closely. It was several minutes later when she finally burst out "Jasen, if you do not say something soon, I'm going to explode!"

It was then that I turned my attention back to Elayne and saw how terrified she looked. I realized that as shocking as this had been to hear, it must have been absolutely terrifying for her to tell me. I stopped pacing and moved over to her. "I'm sorry," I said. "This is all just so..."

"What?" Elayne asked quickly, her eyes still watching mine. "Tell me what you're thinking." Elayne waited for me to finish my sentence, but I didn't know how to.

"You don't have to answer right now." Elayne said at last. For some reason, she seemed suddenly as if she was about to cry herself. "Just think about it," she said. "Just... if you do decide to accept, we will need to talk to my parents. There would be lots that would need to be done before you can take the throne."

I looked up at Elayne sharply. "What? What throne?"

Elayne hesitated. "Well... I mean... if you do decide to accept, then you would be king by my side, of course."

"What?" I almost shouted, and Elayne flinched a bit. Remembering the guards just outside the door, I lowered my voice to normal again before continuing. "*King*? Are you crazy? I'm not even from here. I hardly know anything about this world, and you want me to be king?"

Elayne took my hand in hers and looked at me steadily. "Jasen, it's alright. I've thought about this and talked with my

parents about it. They know you and trust you. They think that you would be an excellent king... and so do I.”

But I was near panic now. “Elayne! I’m... I’m not even through high school yet! I haven’t even decided what I want to do *after* high school. You’re asking me to change my whole life here.”

Elayne lowered her hands from mine and her eyes looked stricken.

As much as it hurt me to see that look in Elayne’s eyes, I found that I couldn’t stop now. “I can’t, Elayne. I’m sorry. I’m not the guy for this. I’m just... I’m nobody. I’m not a king. I would mess it all up.”

This time, a tear did escape from the corner of Elayne’s blue eyes as she looked at me. “Jasen...”


“No.” I said firmly, suddenly wanting to get away. I seemed to be sinking in the thick red carpet at my feet. The blood red walls of the room seemed to be closing in on me.

I turned and ran to the heavy door and banged on it. “Let me out!” I yelled to the guards outside.

“Jasen! Stop. Please...” Elayne was crying behind me, but at that moment the door opened and I could feel a rush of fresh air from outside. I pushed past the guards and into the corridor.

I started out walking fast, then sped up to a run. I wasn’t sure where I was running to, but I knew that I had to get away.

## *Chapter Four*



### *Sudden Storm*



That evening, I lay in my room as the sun's fading light filtered through my window. The grey October day had given way to the shadows of dusk, and now I could just make out the familiar shapes of my room. The desk in the corner that had once belonged to my father. The old radio that Grandpa had pulled out of the attic for me when I was ten (it only got two stations... and one of those was full of static... but I loved it anyway). The bookcase against the wall that was so full that books were stacked in it sideways and overflowed into piles on the hardwood floor around it.

I heard the slosh of running water as the radiator heater along the baseboard filled to start heating my room. As it heated up, I heard the familiar pops and plinks of metal that

reminded me of so many cold nights sitting and watching the snow pile up outside.

All of my life, my world had seemed so small. There had been times that I would imagine that there was only my small, comfortable room, with nothing else beyond. Things had gotten so... complicated now.

I heard Elayne's cries in my mind over and over again, and it twisted my gut to remember them. I had run because it had all been so suddenly overwhelming. It had been too much to take in at once.

I had imagined my adult life before, but it had never been anything very clear or certain. I had once thought I might like to be a writer. Maybe write for a small newspaper somewhere. Other times, I thought I could maybe be a college professor at some big university. I had never been sure what exactly my future held for me, but I had always thought that my uncertainty was fine. I had plenty of time to decide what I wanted to do with my life. What was important, though, was that I could be anything I wanted.

Now, I felt caught in a huge trap. I loved Elayne. I was sure of that without any doubt. I had never stopped to consider, though, how that would fit in with my life plans. Even now, it was all still sort of new and magical. She was a princess... but until just then I had never realized what that truly meant. I had never considered how that title would shape Elayne's life, and possibly mine with it.

I was sick about the way I had run out of that red room. I had faced a dragon and more for Elayne and had never considered running from any of it. Somehow, though, those things seemed less scary than any of this.

As the darkness came, there was a quiet knock on my door. Without waiting for me to answer, the door opened on squeaky hinges and Corey stuck his head in carefully.

"Jasen?" he called into the darkened room.

"Yeah, I'm here." I answered sullenly.

Corey pushed the door open some more and flicked on the light switch, making me squint into the sudden brightness.

"You just disappeared, bro." Corey said, still speaking in a quiet tone that was so unlike him. "I was wondering where you'd run off to."

I sighed as Corey stepped over to the bed beside me. "Sorry. I had to get out of there."

Corey sat down and looked at me carefully. "Yeah... I heard what happened. Elayne was in pretty bad shape when we left. She had locked herself in her room and wouldn't stop crying."

My stomach cringed and I put my pillow over my head. "Unghh! I hate myself."

"No, man. Don't. I know where you're coming from. I would have run screaming from the castle, too."

"I wasn't screaming." I said.

"No, I know. I mean I would have, though. I would have been running and screaming all the way home. Then, I would have locked myself in my room and kept on screaming. It would have been a scream-fest. All night."

I clenched my fists. "It just caught me by surprise. Did you know? Did Emily tell you about this beforehand?"

Corey snorted. "Ha! There's no way Emily would have trusted me with a secret that big."

"I just wish I had reacted differently." I said. "Now everything is all messed up."

Corey scratched his mop of blonde hair (which had returned to its normal tangled mess since this morning). "Well... now that you've had some time to soak it all in, do you feel any different about it?"

"Which part?" I asked. "The part about getting married next year or the part about becoming king for the rest of my life?"

Corey shrugged. "Both. Either."

I sighed. "I don't know. The getting married part isn't so

bad. I know that mom and dad were only eighteen when they got married. I know I love Elayne and I thought that maybe someday we probably would, but..."

"But not so soon." Corey finished for me.

"Right. Exactly."

"And... the other thing? Being king and ruling the kingdom?"

I let out a deep breath. "THAT is the part that makes me want to hide under my bed until it all goes away."

Corey grinned. "I did that for a big math test one time. Didn't work. The teacher just made me take it when I came in the next day."

I laughed. "Yeah, well... good lesson, there, I guess. Math test, becoming king... those are almost the same thing."

Corey grabbed a nearby pillow and smacked me on the side of the head with it, then got up and started to leave again.

When he was almost to the door, I called after him. "Hey, Corey!"

He turned in the doorway and looked back at me.

"Knock-knock." I said.

He grinned a bit. "Who's there?"

"Three hundred and sixty-five." I said.

"Three sixty-five who?"

"Three hundred and sixty-five days until your next birthday." I smiled.

Corey chuckled and disappeared out my bedroom door.

*And fourteen more days until Elayne's birthday... and coronation.* I thought to myself. Two weeks to decide what I wanted for the rest of my life.



The next day was one of those grey, cloudless days that hinted at the approaching cold of the New York winter. I sat beneath the cracked ceilings of my classrooms, looking out the

windows at the chilly wind combing leaves from the trees outside. I was lost in my own faraway thoughts, interrupted only by the bell that ended each class period to send me shuffling to the next.

After school, Corey and Emily were silent on the drive home. They had said nothing more to me about what had happened yesterday at the castle, and I was thankful for that. After I dropped them off at Emily's house, I drove to the place that would lead to the shortest path to the invisible curtain. I left the car parked on the gravel shoulder of the road near the woods and started walking before I could begin to have second thoughts.

I still wasn't completely sure what I was going to tell Elayne. I just knew that I had to talk with her. I had to let her know that I still loved her, no matter what. The thought of her hurt was almost more than I could bear.

When I stepped through the doorway from the moonlit clearing into Elayne's world, I was startled by the sudden flash of lightening and boom of thunder. A strong gust of wind grabbed the heavy wooden door from my grasp and threw it with a loud bang back against the stone wall. Fat raindrops pounded the stone and soaked me instantly.

Giles appeared from the gloom, struggling to hold a tarp over me to keep me dry. "Sir Jasen!" he shouted over the rain and wind. "Good to see you. As you can see, we're having some unpleasant weather today. If you can wait a little while in the stable house, I can have the carriage hooked up for you to carry you to the castle."

I shook my head, flinching as lightening flashed close by. "I don't want to wait." I said. "I'll just take my horse. I don't care if I get wet or not."

Giles looked shocked. "But... Sir! It's miles in the pouring rain and..." he trailed off.

*And you're not such a great rider* I finished for him silently. I knew it may have sounded crazy, but at that moment I only wanted to get to Elayne as fast as possible.

Without another word, Giles disappeared into the stable to saddle up my horse. Thunder boomed so suddenly and loudly overhead that I saw one of the guards flinch before straightening back up again.

I looked out towards the castle, hoping to catch a glimpse of the distant towers, but all I could see was pouring rain beneath black clouds.



My horse seemed more terrified than I was to be running through the torrential storm. She ran at an unsteady gallop the whole way, cringing several times when lightening would flash nearby or thunder shook the air. When we finally hit the big wooden drawbridge, she must have been excited to see the end in sight, because she ran full-speed across it. I was already through the portcullis and into the main courtyard when I heard the heavy “thump” of the leviathan’s tentacle grabbing at me from the moat. This time, we were well out of reach.



I was soaked. I grabbed a handful of my thick hair and wrung out the rainwater, watching it splatter to the cobbled stone at my feet. The clothes I had worn to school were

plastered to my body. When I took a step, I realized that even my shoes were full of water.

In front of me appeared a tall, thin man dressed in a blue coat. I recognized him as Dwayne, one of the castle workers. He instantly produced a towel for me, which I took thankfully and dried my face. He made a small bow and gestured towards a side corridor. "If you come this way, Master Jasen, I have some dry clothes awaiting you."

I almost said no, since my need to see Elayne was still stirring so strongly inside of me, but when I took another step and water sloshed out of the tops of my shoes, I decided that it probably would be best to get dry first. I followed Dwayne's direction down the corridor.

As I walked down the hallway, my mind was still a confused mess of emotions and I tried to decide what exactly I was going to say when I saw Elayne. I still was not ready for the responsibilities of being married or (especially) being king, but I wanted to let her know that I was sorry for the way I reacted yesterday.



When I looked up, I was at the door Dwayne had pointed to. As I opened it to go inside and change, another woman was coming up the hallway from the opposite direction. She was a large woman, dressed in a maidservant's uniform. She had an

uneven tangle of wiry black hair on her head and a fat, pasty white face with a large black mole on one cheek. Just as she was about to pass, the woman looked up and saw me. There was an instant when something like surprise flashed over her face, then her eyes locked on mine and she scowled. In the second that it took for her to walk past, I felt such a wave of hatred and anger pass from her that I stood stunned for a moment.

She never slowed down, though. A moment later, she had passed and I was left with nothing but an uneasy prickle on the back of my neck and the thought of her hateful eyes glaring at me. I turned to watch her, but she was already far along the corridor and she did not turn back.



“I love you Elayne, but I’ve decided that I can’t marry you. I can’t be king.”

Those were the words I had decided upon as I finished changing my clothes. Although I had considered this for a long time and thought it to be a good decision, I saw that my hands were shaking as I tried to brush back my wet hair in the big jeweled mirror.

I took a deep breath and found that my stomach was even more nervous than it had been the day before.

*“Maybe it wouldn’t be so bad.”* another part of me answered. *“I mean, after all... who doesn’t want to be a king? Aren’t you crazy for not wanting that?”*

I took another heavy breath and started pulling on the soft leather shoes that Dwayne had laid out for me.

I had one shoe on when I first heard the noises from the hallway outside. Banging and yelling, then the heavy clanking of armored guards running. I froze, listening. In all of my time at the castle, I had never seen any guard run for anything. The

guards always stood there, looking mean and scary... but they never ran.

I pulled open the door and stuck my head out in the corridor. I heard more yelling and shouting. When I looked to the left, I saw a big group of huge guards running down a side passage. Their swords were drawn and their commander was barking orders at them as they ran.

As I started to step out into the hallway, another group of guards came sprinting up the narrow corridor and I had to dive back into the room to avoid being trampled. I heard the grind of machinery and the walls and floor around me started to shake. There was a huge echoing "boom!" that sounded like thunder and I realized that it was the sound of the huge castle drawbridge being closed.

Seconds later, Dwayne came running up the hallway, his face white with terror. I grabbed his blue coat as he ran past. "What's happening?" I yelled. "Where are all of the guards running to?"

Dwayne, who was usually calm and mannered, looked at me wide-eyed.

"It's the princess!" he cried. "She's been attacked!"