

## Chapter 1

It's become very clear to Eugene that Rapunzel has little to no understanding of amorous affection.

She knows that if she holds Eugene's hand when she's scared he'll rub his thumb across her knuckles and she'll be filled with strength enough to clench her jaw and be brave. She knows from her mother – from Gothel – that you hug someone to say that you love them even though they're plain looking or silly or ask ridiculous questions. She knows that both Gothel back in the tower and now the king and queen kiss her cheek or her forehead to wish her sweet dreams. And she knows from a few stories she read (before Gothel had the inclination to read them more closely) that you should kiss someone on the lips when the sight of them makes your heart pound and your neck feel warm. She knows that when she kisses Eugene it feels like there's this warm joy inside her heart and it bubbles up out to her arms like fireflies dancing on her skin.

Rapunzel kisses like a child would kiss. She puckers her lips and presses them against Eugene's. She'll hold them there for a moment, then pull back and smile. There's usually a smacking noise at the end - mwah - one that really has no necessity to be there, one that she picked up long ago from Gothel. Her kisses are short and simple. They make Eugene feel like he's being tickled just beneath his skin. He knows that they shouldn't really leave him breathless, but they usually do. He knows that they always leave him wanting more.

Rapunzel thinks it's a nice feeling and she enjoys it. But it never occurs to her that there might be something more to it than that.

Eugene knows there's more to it. He knows that there is much, much more and he knows that it's fantastic, and he has this idea that with Rapunzel it would be even more fantastic than usual, but he doesn't know why he thinks that. He also knows that Rapunzel has no idea that there's a whole other world of sensation, and she is perfectly content to leave things as they are. The knowledge of these contradictory facts and the knowledge that there is very little he can do to make them meet somewhere in the middle is driving him crazy.

He could sit her down and explain it to her. He could explain it the same way he explained what a cup cake was, or why you would want to drink a beer even though it tastes "nasty," or why people stare at her when she splashes around in the fountain. He could explain it the way he explained more complex, abstract concepts like honor and moral relativism and unconditional love. The part of his brain controlled by Flynn Rider tells him that he could explain it quite easily by pressing her against a wall and kissing her soundly until she understood.

But that seems wrong, and he can't bring himself to do it, and he can't figure out why.

Maybe it's because she's so innocent. She's so sweet and perfect and he can't bring himself to sully that. It's one of the things that makes her the way she is. It's one of the things he likes about her. But on the other hand *she's so innocent*. Isn't it his job as the dashing, roguish vagabond to steal that innocence away, to fully embrace that part of her, to wrap himself up in it and breathe it in as she gasps and whispers his name in a way she's never whispered anything before?

It could be because she's a princess and if her father found out then his life would be forfeit. But wouldn't it be worth it? And didn't it seem like the king kind of liked him? And would it really have stopped him from trying a month ago? No. That would have been the part that made it dangerous and exciting. He'd had multiple experiences where he met a girl's father as the man barged into the room, shouting and cursing. The girl would yell, "Daddy, no!" and Flynn would grab one boot, pull up his pants, and escape out the nearest window. Good times.

Good times that he does not want to repeat with Rapunzel.

It could be because he actually cares about this girl and he wants to do right by her and he wants to protect her from everyone out there who would do such unspeakable things to her, even if he's included in that group. But that's just stupid. That would imply that he's falling for her and that kind of thing just doesn't happen to Flynn Rider.

He catches himself staring at her during dinner with an absent smile on his face. She's enthusiastically telling her father of her latest discovery that feral cats have claws and are easily startled. She grins and shoves back her sleeve to show off three thin lines that run the length of her forearm. The king laughs and Eugene realizes that he's been staring. He averts his eyes and takes a sip of whatever it is that's being served tonight. When he looks up again he sees the queen watching him. The corner of her mouth quirks and there's far too much understanding in her eyes for Eugene's liking.

The next day Rapunzel's wearing nothing but her corset and her petticoats as she explains to him that she and Pascal can't figure out how the clasps on her dress work. Scowling down at the green, velvet monstrosity that's laid out across her bed, she crosses her arms just below her chest, forcing her breasts to bunch and swell upwards. She pops out a hip and Eugene's fingers twitch at the thought of how that hip would feel if he grasped it.

He clears his throat and easily demonstrates how to latch the hooks and eyes that run down the dress' back. Of course he knows how they work. Buttons, clasps, zippers, ties, you name it and he has at one point figured out how to work it. Most likely he did it while drunk and in the dark.

Rapunzel tries it once and then excitedly practices on three more, her thin fingers running

up the hooks like the wings of a moth. With a bit of difficulty, she pulls them all open again, and in a flurry of spinning fabric, she grabs up the dress and throws it over her head. For a moment she's completely obscured in a mass of green, then one hand appears followed by another. She pulls her head out and shoves the dress down to rest on her hips.

She grins up at Eugene, looking far too proud of herself considering that her many layers of skirts are all crumpled together so that the floor length dress barely reaches her knees. "I just learned to do that," she says. "I never used to be able to put a dress on over my head."

Eugene has to help her straighten her skirts, and before he knows it, he's on his knees in front of her, reaching under her dress to smooth one layer of netting after another. He's helped with this kind of thing before - usually after a fling in a broom closet. Usually the girl whose dress he's straightening tries to muffle her giggles and Eugene doesn't help at all by trailing little kisses along her thigh. He notes that Rapunzel has very nice thighs, but he resists the temptation to touch them.

She grins at him as he stands. It's not a come-hither grin or a grin flushed from the tingling proximity of his warm hands. It's a grin of gratitude for a job well done and a grin of triumph for their conquest over the dress.

He takes her by the shoulders and turns her around to provide assistance when it becomes clear that, even though she now knows how they work, she still can't fix all the latches on her back by herself. He marks the elegant column of her neck. It would be so easy to bury his face against the junction of her throat and shoulder or her jaw just below her ear, breathe her in, fill himself with her scent - warm and earthy and womanly. He imagines that if he runs the pads of his fingers along the bare curve of her shoulder blade, he'll be able to feel her shiver. He'll be able to hear her breath catch.

He pulls himself together and buttons up her dress.

A week later the door to his bedroom creaks open in the middle of the night and he sits up, alert in the dark. He's generally a light sleeper, having been on the run and having spent time with people who would stab him in the back just as fast as he would turn on them. Since he moved into the palace the guards have taken to patrolling regularly past his room. Their armor makes them clank as they walk and it wakes him up every time. But this intrusion on his sleep is different.

"Who's there?"

"It's just me."

"Goldie?"

She pads across the floor and slips under the blankets to snuggle up close to him, her skin cold from the evening chill. She presses her face against his bare chest and leaves a damp streak of tears against his flesh. Without thinking, he wraps his arms around her to comfort and warm her through her thin nightgown. The silk bunches as he caresses her back.

"What are you doing here?"

"I had a dream." Her voice is like a whisper, and she sniffs as she holds him tighter.

He's starting to feel a bit more awake now, and starting to realize that there's a certain danger to her being here. Regardless of that, he can't turn her away when she's in need.

"Tell me," he murmurs.

She shivers and hesitates. "I was someplace strange. It was all white. A bright white that stung my eyes. So white that I couldn't tell where the walls were or the ceiling or where they met the floor. There was just nothing. Nothing at all. And I called out for my mother, but she wasn't there. I called out for you, but you... you weren't there either. No one was. Not anyone, and I was all alone."

She didn't specify if his absence was because he was dead or because he had abandoned her. He has a feeling she knows which one it was. Either way it couldn't be pleasant.

"The place was big. It was so big. I felt like I would fly apart so that little pieces of me could fill the space. I was too small and I wanted to be in my tower. My tower would hold me together. It would hold me in. Like a hug."

Eugene's arms tighten around her.

"And then there wasn't a floor anymore. Nothing looked different. Nothing changed. But I was falling. I was falling and falling and I knew that if I had my hair I could throw it and catch myself on something, but I reached for it and it was gone too."

She had lost everything, and it was all his fault. He hadn't asked her what she wanted. He had just ripped everything away. Something tightens inside his chest.

"I'm sorry." He truly is, but the words seem empty.

She pushes closer against him. Her skin has begun to warm.

"For what it's worth," he says, resting his cheek against her hair, "I know it's a bad trade off, but I'm here for you. I'm here and I'm not going anywhere."

She pulls back and looks up at him, her eyes dancing with tears and starlight in the dark.  
"Promise?"

"Promise."

"Oh!" She shifts upwards and presses her lips to his. He feels that familiar tingle in his arms and the warm coals that light just beneath his navel. But then she's pulled away again to smile, and she shifts back to tuck her head under his chin.

For a moment he stares, blinking at the far wall in the blackness. It takes a moment for him to realize he's not breathing. He swallows and he feels the thick knot of his Adam's apple grind against her temple. The warmth in his navel smolders.

"Uh, Rapunzel?"

She shifts again, giving him a look of curiosity, a look of innocence.

He's going to do it. As much as he fights it and as much as one look from her can turn him into a fumbling idiot, there's no denying that he *wants* her in a way that makes him think that he's never really understood what it was to want before.

He runs a hand up her spine, over the back of her neck, up to cup the base of her skull and tangle his fingers in her hair. Her face is so small, so delicate that he can reach his thumb to her lips in a caress that tingles with anticipation. Her eyes widen, then flutter, and she purses her lips against the calloused digit.

He holds her tight as he lowers his head to hers. He holds her because after a moment she'll try to pull away, and for this to work he has to hold her still, keep her close. He swears he'll let her go if she struggles. He swears. He'll count to three and he'll release her. He will.

He presses his lips to hers and he pushes away the lightheadedness that follows. He has to be careful, gentle. Controlled. Two heartbeats and she pulls back, only to be held firm by the strong hand against her neck. She sucks in a breath through her nose, causing her chest to swell against his own. But she goes along with it and stays still, waiting and wondering what he's up to and why they're still pressed together like this.

He starts slow, a subtle puckering of his lips, a purposeful movement of his jaw. She's never felt such a thing before, and she quickly mimics him, deciding she likes the caress and the tension in her back and the shallowness of her breath.

His tongue drags across her lower lip. It's firm and damp and it sends a jolt through her so strong that she gasps and jerks away.

The room is deathly still as she stares up at him in shock, one hand covering her mouth. He's trying to control his breathing, he's trying to control the lust burning in his eyes.

"I-" He can't find the words to apologize. He can't clear his throat enough to speak. He's crossed the line, and he knows it, and he's sorry. God, he's sorry.

But the guilt dissipates as he watches her test her lips with the tips of her fingers. It's a tender caress that has him fascinated. The tip of her tongue appears, tentative, enticing as it traces the trail he so recently marked. He thinks his heart may have stopped as he's never in his life seen anything so painfully seductive.

She has that look in her eyes that she gets when she gathers her courage, when she tries something new, when she feels a thrill of novelty, and Eugene holds very, very still as she leans into him and, in hesitant imitation, draws her tongue across his lips.

A deep groan is ripped from his throat. All his logic and reason disappear. There's only her, and open mouth kisses, and hot breath, and the weight of her as she wraps her arms around his neck and pulls a leg around his waist. He grabs her tight, just wanting to feel her, to be closer to her. Closer. Closer. These aren't the cool and experienced movements of Flynn, but the passionate groping of Eugene. And he doesn't care.

And suddenly she gets it. It's like the shock she felt when she realized she was the princess - more pleasant, but just as terrifying. The way Eugene looks at her. The meaning of the smolder. The sensation she gets when his hand brushes her skin and when his touch lingers. She understands that now. It's all just leading up to this. To this magnetic feeling in her stomach that begs for her to press against him and has her digging her fingers into the muscles of his back. The feeling that she's on fire as he sucks and nibbles at her neck and runs a hand up her thigh, bunching up her nightgown. The writhing longing as he strokes her back and her side and her waist. The frustration that makes her want to whimper, that coils and tightens in her stomach, because he's not touching her enough and if he shifted just an inch more she knows - *she knows!* - it will feel *wonderful!* And after too many frantic heartbeats, his touch finally, determinately slips that last inch-

"Eep!"

She jerks away as a shock snaps through her, her entire body going rigid, her eyes going wide, and he freezes knowing that he didn't cross the line before, but he's definitely crossed it now.

Everything comes to a screeching halt as reality and consequences settle over him like a suffocating fog. He tries not to pant. He tries not to let her feel how strongly his heart is pounding, but her hand is splayed against his chest to keep him away and there's not a

chance she can't feel it. He tries not to let the shock and fear and disappointment show on his face.

"I'm sorry," he gasps.

"No, I'm sorry," she whispers.

"Don't be."

For the first time she blushes, and he sighs, the burst of warm air causing her hair to flutter. Cautiously, he pulls her close again, tucking her head under his chin, placing his hands unobtrusively against her back. He works at slowing his breathing. He works at showing her that this is a comforting embrace, and not one of desire, but the tension in his arms and the stiffness of her spine prove that that's a lie.

Eugene lies awake and curses himself for taking advantage. He curses himself because now he wants more.

In his arms Rapunzel can't even think of sleep. Her mind is racing with thoughts of fear and love, of sensation and desire.

## **Chapter 2**

Eugene and Rapunzel avoid each other over the next few days.

She's avoiding him because every time she sees him, she blushes so badly that she's sure that everyone will know exactly what happened, and she has a suspicion that that would be a bad thing. Eugene is also pretty sure that with the tint of her cheeks everyone in the castle will know something's up, but unlike Rapunzel, he thinks that people will assume much more than the truth.

He's avoiding her because everything she does nowadays makes his blood rush from his head to leave him dizzy and winded and warm. One morning he came across her in the gardens where she had bent to smell a flower. Her ass was tilted towards him, looking perfectly squeezable, and she was humming with pleasure, and Eugene turned on his heel and marched in the other direction. At dinner one night she was presented with a chocolate mousse, and unfortunately (or fortunately, depending on what time of night it is when Eugene thinks about it later) she guessed that she should eat it with her fingers, sucking each digit clean, closing her eyes, and moaning. It was just too much, and he had to excuse himself on the pretext of feeling sick. He went out and took a long walk in the rain.

His reactions are embarrassing and he hopes to God that no one can tell. For this reason he's avoiding the queen as much as possible too. He's absolutely sure at this point that she can read him like a book. He feels really guilty about the whole thing, and he's convinced that Rapunzel must be mad at him for his actions. That's why she's avoiding him. Of course this isn't true at all, but even if there was someone who could tell him that, he most likely wouldn't listen.

He feels especially guilty when he wakes in the night, covered in cold sweat and shaking after dreaming about her.

He dreams that he's rescued her – really rescued her, not her rescuing herself or her rescuing him – and she's just so grateful that she wants to give him something special, she wants to reward him, and she lies back in the grass, open, inviting, perfectly beautiful and in awe of his prowess as a fighter and a protector. She moves beneath him, all the softness of her body molding to fit against him, her rhythm perfectly following his own, and she's warm and wet and tight and welcoming. The sweat on her skin is slick and salty. She purrs, her face buried in his shoulder. "Please, Eugene. More. More." He dreams of how her face would look as she calls out his name, head thrown back, spine arched, lips parted in ecstasy.

He dreams that they're in her tower and he's bound to a chair by her blond hair. She gives him that devilish look that doesn't grace her face nearly often enough - the one she wears when she figures something out and then sets her wicked mind to using the new information mischievously. But in the dream, the look is just sinful, and he'd be rooted in place even without his bonds. She walks towards him, her hips swaying and hypnotizing. She easily slips into his lap to straddle him with a sigh, and slides forward slowly to rub against the entire length of his thighs and finally press against his chest so he can feel the fullness of her breasts. He would do anything for her. Anything at all.

She's leaning so as to be just tantalizingly out of reach of his mouth, and his arms jerk against his restraints wanting to hold her. Fingernails drag across his skin, over his scalp, to fist in his hair and pull his head back so she's just out of reach. She lingers for a moment, her lips just a breath away from his. She smiles seductively and yanks his head back to expose his throat and slowly – so painfully slowly – she drags her lips over his pulse point. She breathes hotly against his ear, whispering that she wants him, torturing him with kisses and touches.

He wakes up panting, and after several deep gasps, he runs a hand through his damp hair and curses.

As it happens, the only person who he can talk to – and he uses the term "person" loosely –

is the horse. The horse. The one that hates him. Which is weird because horses don't have feelings so they shouldn't be capable of hatred, and horses can't understand speech so there's no point talking to them. He finds himself sitting on the short wall near the stables after one of his many trips to get some fresh air when Maximus appears.

The horse glares at him.

"Hey," says Eugene.

*I hate you,* says the horse.

"Riiiiight." He scratches his head and looks up at the sky in an act of forced casualness. His eyes dart back to the horse.

*Glare.*

Eugene sighs. "Look, pal, I'm really not in the mood for this today. I get it. You don't like me because you have no sense of style and no sense of humor. I'm sure It's not your fault, and we can blame it on upbringing. You don't like me. I'm not too fond of you. So can you just spit at me like usual, or whatever you're going to do, and go away?"

The horse narrows his eyes, as if trying to decide what to make of this. He shakes his head with a snort, and sits down. Eugene's never seen a horse sit before. He thinks that Maximus might be broken.

*Stare.*

"What?"

*Stare.*

"Quit being nosy."

*Snort. Eye roll.*

"There's no way I'm talking about this with you of all people."

*Eyebrow lift.* And since when do horses have eyebrows?

"It's nothing, alright? I'm just a little... frustrated."

Maximus jerks his head towards the castle. *With your new life?* he asks.

"No. But that's not going so great either."

The horse cocks his head to the side. *What is it then?*

Eugene rubs the bridge of his nose, squeezes his eyes shut, and admits it. "It's Goldie."

The horse blinks at him. *Why?*

"She's just... I'm just...frustrated, you know?"

*Blink*

"...Sexually."

*Glare.*

Instead of fearing for his life like he should, Eugene's face splits into a grin. "Hey! Someone around here knows what I'm talking about! Finally. I was starting to wonder. So you got yourself a little filly somewhere, eh, buddy?"

*Glare.*

Eugene holds up his hands in a pacifying manner. "Not my business. Got it."

*Snort.*

Maximus bats his eyelashes to get the conversation back on track.

"Oh right, Blondie. She's just..." He takes a deep, preparatory breath. "She's driving me crazy. You know when you've got an itch you can't scratch and that itch just gets sexier and sexier until you find yourself talking to a horse?"

*No.*

"Well, it's not fun. Let me tell you. And usually I'm not one for self control, especially if I'm in as bad a dry spell as I am right now-"

*Glare.*

"- but there's something about her that's different. It's like when she's around all my mojo is just sucked away."

*Good.*

"I think I might... I don't know I think I like her a little too much."

*Eyebrow lift.*

"A little too much for my own good."

*Eye roll.*

"And her own good too."

*Damned straight,* Maximus says with an enthusiastic nod.

"Thanks, buddy."

*Anytime.*

"I just think that... I'm no good for her. I'm going to hurt her."

*That's for sure.*

Eugene frowns and lowers his head in a sulk. "It might be better for everyone if I just leave."

Maximus rears up and shoves him, making him tumble backwards off the wall to land awkwardly on his shoulder on the ground. The horse glares over the wall at him and shakes his head with something between irritation and pity.

*Idiot.*

Maximus walks off, leaving Eugene in the dirt to question his sanity.

As it happens, Rapunzel seeks advice from a very similar source: a chameleon. It turns out that Pascal doesn't have any suggestions about the tightening of her chest and the flutter of her heart, unless it means that she's ill, which might very well be the case because she seems to have a fever.

Something happened to her and she doesn't quite know what it is. She feels like she's so close to understanding it – so close she can taste it. But she's still not there, just like how Eugene was close to touching that spot on her stomach and she knew he was close to something but she didn't know what. The thought of it has her blushing again. She tentatively presses her hand over the spot he touched. It's sensitive, ticklish almost, but it doesn't make her jump, it doesn't make her gasp, it doesn't send thrills through her body.

Strange.

That thrill was terrifying. But it was also wonderful. Maybe now that she's expecting it once, it won't be so shocking in the future. Maybe if they kissed again, she wouldn't have to stop him because she got so frightened. She wants to keep going because she can remember how good it felt and she wants to be able to feel it again, to feel it more. It was good, but scary - just like how talking to Eugene and finding out what's going on will be good, but the knowledge might be frightening. Just like how every new experience she has is like a double edged sword of thrilling joy and thrilling horror.

She wants to keep going to prove she can. Sometimes she just becomes overwhelmed by sensation. It's happened pretty frequently lately. Everything's just too much too fast. She can't take it all in. Sometimes when more than one person is talking or when there is music in the background, she can't understand what people are saying. Once she went into a fabric store and the vibrancy of the colors made her so weak she had to sit down. Once she went to the castle kitchens and the aroma of so many different kinds of baking bread made her cry. Feeling the texture of flower petals or drinking a new kind of tea sometimes makes her tremble. There's too many different things to sense and there's just so much of it. Lately she has been swinging dangerously back and forth between being overly excited and threatening to weep.

Obviously she will have to overcome her sensory overload problems if she wants to feel Eugene touch her again. Maybe they can just take it very slow. She doesn't want to rely on it, but maybe he'll be patient with her and let her cry if she gets overwhelmed. He's been pretty good about letting her cry other times. He's really good at comforting people, even though it seems like he wouldn't be. And he was kind to her the other night when she made him stop.

When Pascal proves to be ignorant of the subject as well, she does the next best thing to asking a reptile: she goes to the library to do some research. Unfortunately, she has no idea where to look or even what to look for. She ruffles through the K volume of the encyclopedia and does not learn anything new about kissing. She reads the entry on hugging in the H volume and doesn't learn anything there either. T for touching is likewise unhelpful, and "feeling tingly" in the Fs doesn't have an entry at all. She makes a frustrated noise and looks down at Pascal for assistance. His eyes roam over the page again, just to see if the entry has appeared in the last few seconds. He looks back up at her and shrugs.

There's no help for it. She's going to have to ask Eugene what this thing that's happening to her is called so she can find a book about it. Or maybe she should just force him to tell her what's going on. He seems to know, and he has been so good at helping her understand other things. He helped her walk in heels that first time when her balance was already off

because she had just lost twenty-five dragging pounds off the back of her head, and for the first time she had something on her feet that were more substantial than warm socks in winter. He showed her how to pick a lock, and he told her not to tell anyone that he had taught her, and she had kept that promise. He had even explained more delicate things like why she shouldn't mold a snowman out of her mashed potatoes at dinner. Surely he could help her with this.

But then it hits her. There's someone else she can go to. Someone who's protective enough not to take advantage. Someone candid enough to give her a straight answer. Someone who wouldn't feel embarrassed or confined by modesty. The person who already explained to her that although Tor was a great guy, she should probably steer clear of him because of his opium habit. They then explained what an opiate was.

She gasps and claps her hands together. "I've got it, Pascal!"

She runs from the library, not even bothering to re-shelve the encyclopedias, and searches high and low until she finally finds Eugene lying on his back, staring up at the sky, hidden behind a low wall.

"Eugene!"

"Goldie! How'd you find me?"

"That's not important," she says, her face lit with excitement and triumph. "Can you take me to the Snuggly Duckling? I want to talk to the guys."

### **Chapter 3**

Rapunzel is too excited about getting answers to remember to be embarrassed walking next to Eugene. She likes walking with him, and being with him, and holding his hand – none of which she's done in the last few days. She decides that that's a shame, and she's glad she'll know what's happening so things will stop being so complicated and confusing and they can go back to having fun together. Maybe having fun together in the future will involve more kissing. She hopes so. She grins and slips her hand into his. He gives her a reassuring squeeze, feeling immediately more at ease.

Upon entering the Snuggly Duckling, she is instantly greeted with a rowdy cheer, and whisked away so she can hug everyone. She loves the Snuggly Duckling and they love her back. It's so good to have friends! Yay!

The tavern thugs really don't give a shit about Eugene's presence, so he slides up to the bar and orders two mugs of beer and a glass of water. It might turn out that Blondie won't drink

her beer, but that just means two for him. The bar tender growls at him and Eugene flashes his most winning smile. This earns him another growl.

Collecting his drinks, he takes a moment to spot Rapunzel (still doing fine) and slips around to an empty booth along the wall. It's under a window, but the glass is so grimy that the light that comes in makes the room look even more distasteful. After a moment, she appears again on the beefy arm of Hookhand, who has gallantly offered to escort her to the bench next to Eugene.

The big man leers at him as he flops onto the bench across the table with a thump. "How's it feel being a kept man, Rider?"

"Better than you're going to feel if you keep asking stupid questions."

Hookhand lets out a bark of laughter, lifts the ale in his hook in salute, and downs half of it. Smacking his lips, he turns to Rapunzel. "What brings you here, girlie?"

Rapunzel grins. "I wanted to ask you about something I don't understand."

"I can try. Not the most eloquent of pretty faces, you know." He leers at Eugene again. Eugene glares back. "What's it that interests you?"

"Kissing!"

Eugene's head snaps towards her. "What?"

Hookhand beams. "Rider's not doing a good enough job explaining it to ya?"

From the table behind them Big Nose shouts, "I'll help!" and dashes over to their table, each of his footsteps causing the floor to tremble. He shoves Hookhand over and squeezes his way into the booth. Crammed side by side, they look simply too big to be allowed.

"Soooo, girlie. What exactly is it ya need? A demonstration from a real man, maybe?"

This cannot be happening to Eugene. He's starting to feel numb and clammy. He would make a break for it, but sitting in the booth like this Rapunzel has him trapped against the wall. He considers slipping under the table, but his pride won't let him. Damned pride. "Rapunzel, we should talk about this someplace else."

"Shut it, Rider," Big Nose shouts. "The lady asked *us*." Eugene doesn't comment that she actually only asked Hookhand. He doesn't think that having only one of the thugs around would make much of a difference in terms of how horribly this is going to go.

"Yeah, and you've had your shot," Hookhand adds.

"Seriously, Rapunzel. Someplace else."

"Quiet. Let her talk. Go on, sweetheart."

"Well," she says, wrapping her hands delicately around her mug and looking up at the ceiling in thought. "I'm not really sure how to ask."

"Straight out's always best, I say!"

"Ok. Well, when I was kissing Eugene the other day, I started to feel all tingly."

"Oh hell." This cannot be happening to Eugene.

The thugs are so pleased they look like they might explode. "Tingly, you say! Then what happened?" No. Definitely not happening.

"Then I started to think – and I don't really know why I think it – but there might be something more than kissing. Something better." She grins and blushes at the thought, her shoulders squeezing together, lifting with glee. "Do you know anything about that?"

The grins slip off both the thugs' faces as they stare at her. Eugene rests his elbow on the table and covers his face in his hand. Maybe if he hides everyone will forget this happened. Maybe the floor will swallow him whole.

The thugs look at each other in confusion, then turn back to the princess. "Girlie," Hookhand starts, leaning forward slightly, his voice slow and low and serious. "Are you saying that you don't know?"

"Don't know what?"

Big Nose's mouth drops open. "My God. But you're eighteen. *Eighteen!*"

"Didn't your ma ever explain it?"

Eugene snorts. Lucky Gothel, who didn't have to give the birds and the bees talk because there was no chance (in her mind) that her daughter would ever meet a romantic partner. Rapunzel shakes her head.

"Ouch, Rider," Hookhand says, a look of pity on his face. "I'm sorry, kid."

"Yeah. That's gotta be rough."

Eugene doesn't move. He's still hiding. A massive hand reaches across and pats him on the shoulder, although it feels more like he's being beaten with a bath mat.

"What's wrong?" Rapunzel asks with concern. "You're all acting like someone's died."

"Something has died," Hookhand says knowingly. "Something in Rider's pants."

Rapunzel looks down at Eugene's lap in horror as if expecting to see the outline of a deceased squirrel or a dead dove. Not seeing anything of the sort, she gives him a confused look, puts a comforting hand on his leg (not that she's checking for dead things under the fabric of his pants or anything), then turns back to the thugs. Eugene shoots them a glare between two fingers before burrowing back in his hiding spot. No sarcastic comment can make this better. He takes Rapunzel's hand in his own. That makes it a little better.

Hookhand sighs and crosses his arms over his chest, leaning back to give Rapunzel a thoughtful look. "Why haven't you asked Rider about this? He's an experienced man whore, and I'm sure he's the one with the most interest in you knowing."

Rapunzel doesn't know what a man whore is. She files the term away to look it up later in the encyclopedia. "I think he's embarrassed."

The thugs both look at Eugene, his face still hidden behind his hand, the grimace of his mouth just barely visible. "I can see that."

"Why don't you ask yer ma?"

"Well," she shifts uncomfortably, "sometimes I ask her things and then she looks... sad. Not all the time. Sometimes she looks shocked. I don't know. I just thought that this might be a little different than other things and that I should ask someone I'm close to."

It's like a stone has dropped in Eugene's stomach, and at the silence across the table he can tell the thugs are feeling the same kind of discomfort. Rapunzel's relationship with her new mother is fine, all things considered, but it's still stressed. Unlike her new found relationship with her father, her mother is taking over the place of someone else. In Eugene's humble but biased opinion, the queen is a way better person to be related to than Gothel, but Rapunzel loved the old witch regardless of what she did or how things turned out. And the queen is kind and clever and understanding – understanding that the daughter she lost has in many ways grown up without her.

"Alright," Hookhand says slowly. "We'll see what we can do."

"Really?" she asks, trying not to let the excitement show too much. Everyone seems so

sober. She wonders why, but then again she's going to find out really soon and that will be great.

"You see," Big Nose says, "when two people love each other very much-

Hookhand punches him in the arm. "Quit being an idiot. The girl wants the truth."

"It is the truth!" Big Nose punches him back. "Whatever beau the princess finds should love her or he's going to have to answer to me!"

"Yes, of course, that's true for *her* but not for most people."

"There's no point in making it too complicated for her."

Hookhand grunts and begrudgingly admits, "Fine. You've got a point there."

"Good." Big Nose turns back to Rapunzel. "When a man loves you very much-

"Yeah, that's better."

"-he'll try to kiss you."

"And you should punch the bastard because he's not good enough for you!"

"That's not helpful, Vladamir. Go away."

Vladamir snorts and continues walking past.

Big Nose clears his throat and continues. "He'll kiss you and then... uh... kiss some more."

Rapunzel nods enthusiastically. She knew this part. "With tongues," she squeals.

This isn't happening to Eugene.

"Right," Big Nose says. Having overcome his initial shock, he's back to trying not to laugh at the poor sap across from him who roped himself into being the princess' boyfriend. "Then the next step is touching above the waist."

"I wouldn't call it a step. It's not like you do one thing, and then move on to the next. Not unless you're really boring."

"It can be boring?" Rapunzel asks, her eyes wide. She can't imagine that being possible.

## Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

