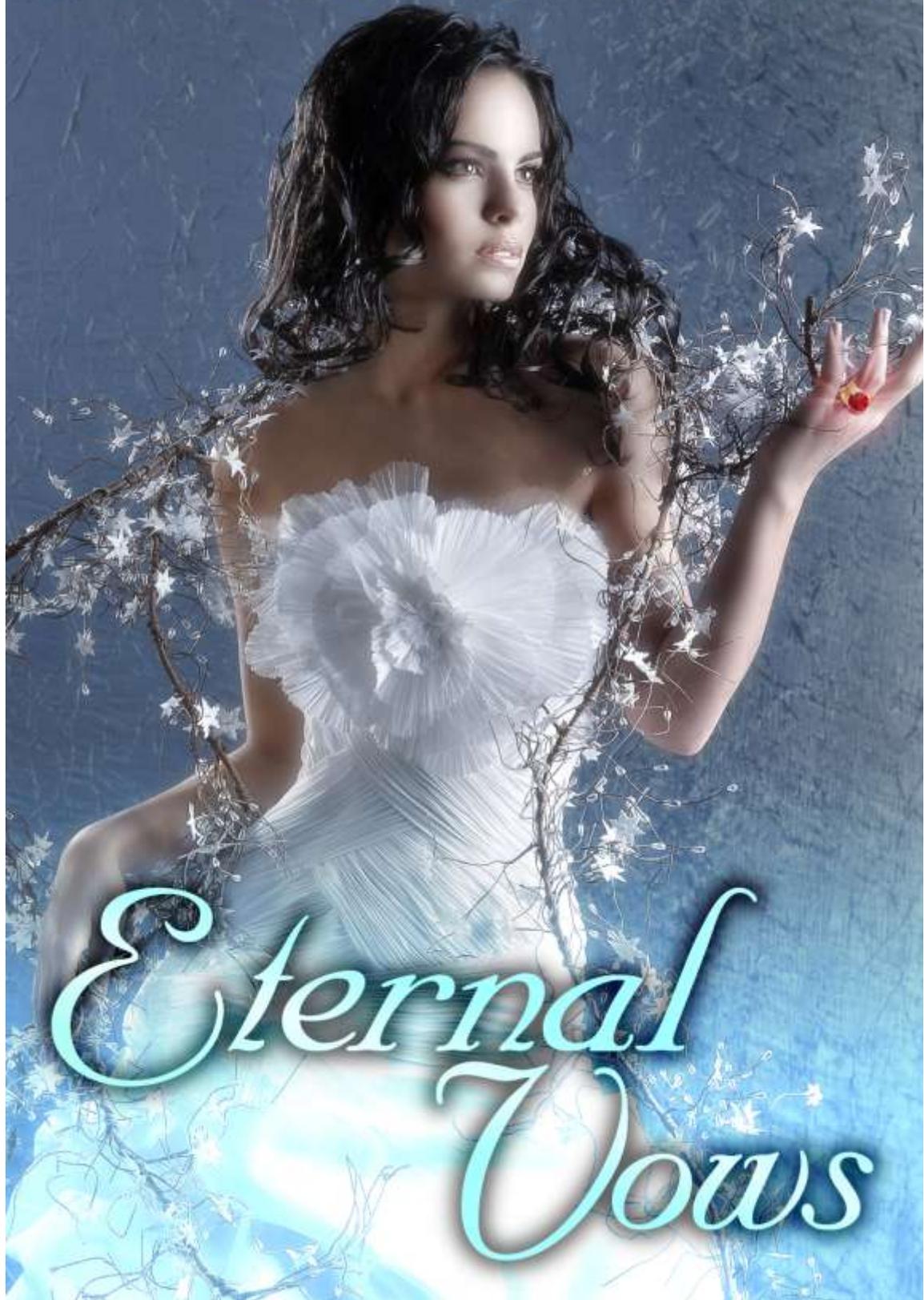


CHRISSY PEEBLES



*Eternal
Vows*

Eternal Vows

(Book 1 in The Ruby Ring Saga)

By

Chrissy Peebles

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Cover design by: Willsin Rowe

Edited by: Autumn J. Conley, autiej@gmail.com

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Chapter 1

A soft growl echoed in the darkness. Sarah snatched the thermal imaging camera from the row of equipment by the fire. Turning in a slow circle, she scanned the dark trees beyond. Nothing moved. Just as she was taking a few tentative steps through the ferns and thick brush, a branch snapped, making her jump. Another growl pierced the silence. She clutched her chest, as

if that might calm her racing heart. Five years as a Bigfoot researcher, and she was still not used to the occasional howl. Then again, no animal she had ever encountered before had made such an ominous and menacing sound.

She stopped for a moment and listened, her heart thumping hard in her eardrums. “Show yourself!” Her voice echoed from the trees with a courage she couldn’t feel. A shiver slid down her spine as she pulled her radio off her belt. “Base camp to Adam. Computer screen’s flashing like crazy. Something broke the perimeter line.”

The radio crackled and a voice answered. “Adam to base camp. What zone?”

“Zone 3. All cameras up and running, but I don’t see anything out of the ordinary. I’m getting sounds over here—some movement too. I’m gonna check it out. Over.”

“Wait...all by yourself?” Adam’s snort carried through the static. “No way. Just because you’re running this operation, that doesn’t give you permission to break protocol. Stay by the fire. We’re coming.”

“Sure, bring in the cavalry.” Sarah rolled her eyes as she picked up her infrared camera. “Listen, in the meantime, I’ll just walk around the perimeter, that’s all. Maybe I’ll see something.”

“Roger that. Just be careful.” The radio transmission ended.

She straightened and peered around in the darkness. A branch snapped behind her, followed by another. *How many creatures are there?* She switched on the walkie-talkie and moved her fingers over the buttons; she could barely see what she was doing. “Base camp to Adam. Something’s coming down the hill.”

Sarah pointed the FLIR camera straight ahead, then took a few more steps into the foliage. A red amoebic-looking blob on the scanner screen began to morph, growing larger as it took on a humanoid shape. She gasped. *Oh, this time they’ll see. This time, I’m gonna have more tangible evidence than mosquito bites and a bad case of poison ivy in places where I didn’t even know I had places.* She spoke into the radio, “Get over here NOW! I’m getting a heat signature on the thermal. Something’s moving closer...something really freaking huge!”

“We’re on our way!” said a voice over the radio. “Stay put and be careful!”

She shouted into the walkie-talkie. “Is every team still in place? Nobody was supposed to return to base camp without my permission. Do you hear me, Adam?”

Her radio crackled as Adam answered. “All teams accounted for. Nobody near base camp. Wait for a team. I repeat, wait for a team.”

Her heart rate spiked. *Could this really be that elusive creature I’ve been stalking?* “Are you kidding? This is what I came here for. It’s what *we* came for. I’ll stay within the perimeter and proceed with caution. Trust me, I’m not leaving in a Medivac.”

The red blurb disappeared from Sarah’s monitor. She held her breath, her head whipping from left to the right, ears and eyes straining to take in any tiny noise she could make out. Moonlight flooded through the trees, and a cool breeze blew across her face. Crickets sang, and mosquitoes buzzed. She held down the lever on her radio. “I’m not seeing anything. Whatever it is, it’s gone now.” *Is my mind playing tricks on me? No way. The thermal definitely picked up something. A bear? Possibly, and if it was, I probably spooked it off.* She spun in a slow circle, extending the thermal image camera; suddenly, there was a snap of another twig.

Strong arms gripped her from behind. She screamed, flailing wildly, sending her camera flying into the woodlands.

“Calm down,” a voice said, laughing. “It’s only me. Might want to warn your team that I set off some tripwires on the way here.”

“YOU!? Those growling sounds weren’t funny, you idiot! And look...you made me drop an expensive piece of equipment. Hard to believe you’re a professional, Frank.” Sarah took a slow, deep breath to calm her nerves.

He slipped off his leather jacket. “Oh, come on. I even bought a proper Indiana Jones fedora for the occasion.”

Her cheeks grew hot as she stared at the safari shirt stretching across his broad shoulders and strong chest, his sleeves rolled up at the elbow. Khaki-colored pants finished his adventurer ensemble. His brown hair hung in shaggy waves from underneath his hat. He looked really hot, but there was no way she was going to admit it. If he’d had a bullwhip, she would have wanted to strangle him with it. “You hate hats.”

“What? No I don’t. Now we match—his and hers Indy hats.” The flames leapt greedily at the logs, reflecting in his hazel eyes as he scanned her up and down with a crooked smile. “Did anybody ever tell you how sexy you look in camouflage? And boy, you have the part of big-game hunter nailed.”

“I’m not here to hunt any game and certainly not to kill anything. I just want to prove its existence.” Sarah let out a long sigh. “This is *my* expedition anyway, so what’re you doing here?” She reached down and picked up her equipment.

“I’m on assignment. Nobody wanted to write this article, but I jumped on it.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close. “One of the perks of the job is seeing you.”

“Even if you got lost trying to find me in this forest?”

“I could more easily get lost in those big brown eyes of yours.”

She flung his arm off. “You scared the crap out of me!”

“Hey, you’re lucky I didn’t show up in an ape suit.”

“You know I have a tranquilizer gun, right?”

He glanced down at her waist. “Yeah, and I love the holster. It’s so Old West.”

Sarah met his gaze. “I’d aim straight for your—”

“Cute butt?” he finished, grinning.

She shook her head. “Not quite what I had in mind.”

“Don’t you dare say heart, ‘cause you’ve already shattered mine.”

“I’m sorry, Frank.”

“Why don’t you answer my phone calls or e-mails?”

She huffed. “Don’t you have some ridiculous ghost story or urban legend you could be out debunking? Shouldn’t you be killing off the Tooth Fairy for little kids or something?”

“Why do you waste your time playing head researcher in *Planet of the Apes*?”

Glaring, she picked up the radio. “Guys, false alarm! It’s only Frank Hedford.”

Adam’s voice crackled in the speaker. “Huh? That guy from the *Daily News*?”

She glared at Frank as she spoke into the walkie-talkie. “Yeah, that’s our animal. I’ll get rid of him. Everyone back to your positions.”

“So you caught the smaller, smellier version of Bigfoot, huh?” he asked over the radio.

“Yeah, I suppose I did. We’ll be in tomorrow’s headlines—‘Bigfoot: A No Show’.”

She recognized Steven’s voice when he said, “Throw that guy out on his big furry—”

Sarah turned off the radio.

Frank smiled. “Man, it feels good to be loved. Must be that article I wrote about those guys mistaking a freaking elk for a Sasquatch. You know, I bet they could still get their story published. The supermarket tabloids would jump on a juicy tidbit like that.”

Sarah’s cheeks burned with anger. “Listen, we had two reliable eyewitnesses on that case,

and—”

“And a blurry picture that didn’t add up to squat.”

“Why is it so hard to believe that a reclusive primate that hasn’t yet been documented and studied could be out there? Are you really so shallow that you can only believe in things you’ve seen with your own eyes?”

He groaned. “Sarah, it’s a myth. You know what that is, right? Bigfoot stories have scared Boy Scouts around campfires for decades. Oh, and speaking of campfires, I’m assuming this is base camp.” He tossed his backpack next to a few logs.

“You’re not invited to this slumber party,” Sarah said.

His eyes widened. “What? No stargazing and snuggling?”

She pointed away from her camp. “You can take your sleeping bag and tent somewhere else. How did you find me and my team anyway?”

He smirked. “Your organization tried to keep this location top secret, but I’m a journalist, doll, an *investigative* reporter. Took Lois Lane a while to figure out the correlation between Clark Kent and Superman, but I’m a hundred times sharper than her.”

“Fine. So spill it. How did you find us?”

Frank peeked up at the night sky that was dotted with millions of sparkling stars. “Well, for starters, I went back and read all the newspaper reports. Isn’t this the place where your sister disappeared when she was fifteen? What was that, about ten years ago? Sabrina Cave? I knew you’d hold the expedition here because you think these alleged creatures had something to do with your sister’s disappearance. When I saw your Jeep in that caravan of vehicles over there, I knew my hunch had panned out.”

He stretched his legs and made himself comfortable on the naked ground. She sensed he wasn’t going anywhere, so she decided to join the party and dropped down next to him.

“This is a great place for an investigation. Bluff Creek is where Patterson took his famous Bigfoot video.”

“Is that what you told your team?” He snorted. “You can’t fool me. Why didn’t you elaborate on the *real* reason you picked this location? This has Liz written all over it.”

She tried to fight the quiver in her voice. “Look, I don’t care how ‘investigative’ of a reporter you think you are, mister, but my sister’s off limits. You got that? You print one word about her, and I’ll sue the living—”

His tone softened. “Now, now. Calm down. I’m sorry. Clearly, I was out of line.”

“It’s fine,” she muttered. “Just get out of here, okay?”

“You sure about that? What, are you still sore we didn’t work out?”

“Work out? Hmm.”

“You know it really hurt that you didn’t invite me to your twenty-fourth birthday party last week. Yeah, I saw the pics on Facebook before you unfriended me.”

Sarah shrugged.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “I forgive you. I have to admit, I saw fireworks the second I laid eyes on you. It was so adorable how your face lit up like a Christmas tree.”

She slapped his arm. “I’m afraid you mistook that reaction. It was fright.”

He smiled at her as he snaked his arms around her. “More like awe.”

Oh, he has some nerve, this one. “Listen, I don’t need you breathing down my neck, okay? This isn’t a joke. I take my research very seriously,” Sarah said, breaking herself free from his smothering embrace. She sat down by the fire and scanned all eight cameras. “If you don’t mind, I have work to do.”

He kicked off his leather boots and grinned. "Mind if I kick back for a while? I had to hike miles and miles through the forest to find you."

She shot him a glare. "There are some twenty-five to thirty other researchers and scientists you can bother. Take your pick of them or go out there and try your dumb luck in the woods, but just leave me alone."

He winked. "Yeah, but those other campers aren't as cute as you."

She rolled her eyes. "Oh brother. What are you up to anyway? Dreaming up articles on how to discredit my work even more?"

"I only give my honest, professional opinion. I thought that's what you loved about me. Anyway, listen, Sarah; let's not dwell on the past. We've both made mistakes. I should've taken your research more seriously."

Her eyes stayed focused on the screen, and she saw a mysterious shadow flit across it. "Whoa! Did you see that? Something just moved on Camera 2!" She leaned in, not believing what she was seeing. "Right there, left of the boulders. See it?" *Maybe this is the real deal. Hunters claimed to see this beast only yesterday, right here in this vicinity.*

"Where?" Frank asked.

She pointed to the left side of the monitor. "Look! It's right there." Her voice grew in intensity. "Something just moved on Camera 3. There...right over there. Do you see it?"

"Yes, but need I remind you that we're in the middle of the wilderness? In case you might have forgotten, plenty of squirrels, rabbits, bears, and deer live out here."

Sarah turned the knob to give more clarity to the screen. "This is me ignoring you."

"You know, I think you'd be more into me if I stunk, had long hair, and gave off pheromones like a gorilla."

"Who said you don't?" She picked up the radio, her voice urgent. "Base camp to Adam. I got a shadow on the south side of the forest, Camera 3. I need Team 7 to check it out pronto. Over."

"Roger that. What was that creepy howl?"

The radio crackled. "Amy to base camp."

"Go ahead," Sarah said.

"Bait's gone by Cameras 1 and 2."

"Any other teams experiencing anything unusual?" questioned Sarah into the radio.

"Team 6, by the river. Nothing unusual to report here."

Static crackled. "Team 3 reporting. We heard some rustling in the bushes. It stopped, but something's definitely out there. Could just be local wildlife, but we're not sure."

Another voice crackled over the walkie-talkie. "Team 9 reporting. We got some rock- and log-throwing, but it's too dark to make anything out. Thermal's not picking up anything."

"Got a visual?" Sarah asked into the mouthpiece, ignoring her uninvited guest who didn't believe it was anything more than a bear.

"No. We're moving forward."

She wasn't comfortable with their plan. For a moment, she hesitated, considering other options, even though she knew there were none. "Okay. Get a visual, but stay safe."

"This is Team 4. FLIR's lighting up like fire," Beth said. "We got a huge biped crawling low in the brush. Get over here NOW!"

"I'm on my way." Sarah's heart pounded as she put on a pair of night-vision goggles and began adjusting the straps. They weren't as helpful as actual daylight, but even with that fluorescent green hue, they sure beat tripping. Everything sharpened into focus as she blinked,

her view illuminated in neon from the high-tech gadget. She grabbed her 35 mm, the FLIR, and clipped her radio on her belt. Without another look at Frank, she darted through the giant trees, swatting away at the brush and ferns as she went.

“Wait! I’m coming!” Frank yelled.

Sarah rolled her eyes and didn’t even bother looking back at him. She raced through the trees and thickets of brush, trying not to slip on the wet leaves. Finally, she made her way into a clearing and ran in the direction of Sabrina Cave.

Out of the darkness, a voice called out her name, and a beam of light shone in her direction. “Sarah? Is that you?” Adam called out.

“Yeah.”

Adam waved a flashlight around. “Is that...why is Frank still here? I thought you got rid of that joker.”

Frank took a step forward, but Sarah jerked his arm. “Listen, buddy, we don’t have time for any nonsense. Capisce?”

“But *he* started it,” he whined, pointing at Adam.

“What are you, like five?” She then shot a glance at Adam. “Look, just don’t start your crap, okay? I didn’t invite him, but he’s here, and we don’t have time for any drama.”

“Fine,” Adam said.

“Where’re the others?” she asked between breaths.

“Rob, Beth, and the camera dude, uh, Steven, are around here somewhere,” Adam said glancing around.

Just then, a figure burst through the towering ferns. “I’m so glad you’re here! Oh, man, you should’ve seen it,” Beth shouted. “I swear I almost pissed my pants.”

“No way! You *saw* it? With your own eyes?” Sarah met her gaze, gasping for air, her mind unable to comprehend just yet. “Where?”

“Over there!” Beth pointed behind her. “It took off to the north, and we chased it into the cave.”

A cold shudder ran down Sarah’s spine as she realized someone had actually *seen* the object of her obsession. *We’re so close! We can’t afford any mistakes now.* “This is Sarah calling all members.” She cleared her throat before she continued into her radio, her voice gaining urgency with every word. “Be on alert. We’ve got a visual on something huge walking around. We believe the creature is hiding in Sabrina Cave. Keep your eyes and ears open, people. Proceed with extreme caution.”

“What’s your position?” a voice crackled back.

“I’m a half-mile north of base camp, on my way to Sabrina Cave now. All teams report to Sabrina immediately.” She tapped Adam’s arm. “Let’s go.” Sarah jumped over the logs, ferns, and rocks scattered along the forest floor, her heartbeat thudding in her ears. Just ahead, she squinted at a large black mass of rock; the cave entrance came into view. Sarah stopped and peered into the dark hole. She pinched her nose shut, trying to prevent the pungent smell from penetrating her nostrils. “Pee-yew! I think somebody forgot to take out the garbage...like all week.”

“I saw this thing on the FLIR,” Beth said. “It’s at least eight feet tall. Man, it’s huge! I wonder if it’s still in the cave.”

“Well, let’s track it!” Sarah ordered, inching closer to the jagged opening.

“Or we can just follow the stench,” Beth said. “I say we get out our tranquilizer guns, just in case it charges us.”

Sarah nodded. "Good thinking." She glanced at her cameraman, Steven, the bright camera light blinding her eyes in the blackness. "Are you getting this? Everything?"

"Yeah, man, but do you think cornering Crypto Guy is such a great idea?"

Sarah shoved her goggles to the top of her head. Glancing around, she took a few steps forward. "Look, you were hired to film this. If you can't take the heat, get out of the kitchen, and we'll find someone who can. Who knows when we'll ever get another chance to be this close again? Surely you want to be part of this."

"Yeah, sorry," Steven uttered.

Sarah turned to Adam. "Now, did we get those shrieking calls on audio?"

"Sure did," Adam said.

"Good."

Frank shook her shoulder. "Are you crazy? Messing around with the local wildlife is beyond dangerous. I'm sure it's just a bear or a big cat or—"

She brushed his hand off. "Look, Frank, you've done nothing but shoot down all my research on television, in your newspaper and magazine articles, and in your new book. If you're so sure this is fake, some kind of staged crap, or that it's just some nature show, why don't you go in and see for yourself?"

Frank took a step back. "All you've got here is a trapped wild animal. Sure, I was hoping to get my shirt ripped off when I came looking for you, but not by a bear."

Sarah ignored him and grabbed a tuft of coarse, dark hair from the cavern entrance. She squinted to get a good look at it in the darkness. "This isn't from a bear, and whatever it is, I'm going to capture the thing on film. Adam, please bag this."

"You got it, boss."

Sarah opened up the lens on her camera and adjusted the settings. "People, we're about to solve one of the biggest unsolved mysteries of the twenty-first century."

Beth kneeled, her eyes wide. "Look, Sarah. We got prints."

Large humanoid footprints were clear in the mud, and the sight of them sent a shiver down Sarah's spine. It wasn't human, ape, gorilla or chimpanzee unless they came in XXL. "Get measurements of these. Steven, swing that camera over here and get them on film."

Beth stretched out a tape measure next to one of the fresh tracks indented in the mud.

"Some tracks in the mud? C'mon, Sarah. You know as well as I do that this doesn't mean anything," Frank muttered.

Sarah shook her head. "Anyone here wear a Size 20 shoe?" The footprints appeared to be roughly nineteen inches long and eight inches wide with a long stride and five discernible toes. *Who'd go running around barefoot in ice-cold mud?* "No one step on these prints. They're the evidence we need. I'll cast them in a minute." She focused and snapped her camera. "Frank, myths don't leave tracks," she spat at him. "Wish me luck, people," she said, turning her gaze toward the cave entrance. "I'm going in."

"You're really gonna risk your life just to prove me wrong?" Frank asked.

"Well, skeptics do tend to piss me off," Sarah said. "For all these years, you've claimed my work is worthless, and that there's nothing scientific about what we're doing out here. You said that science needed to validate the existence of Bigfoot with a live or dead specimen. You said I'd need bones, teeth, or blood. But really, this has nothing to do with you. I am willing to risk my life to prove me right, and this is the perfect opportunity to get all the proof I need. I'm not waiting another second."

Frank laughed. "Do you really think tomorrow's headlines are gonna read, 'I Just Found

Bigfoot'? No way! If anything, the papers are gonna say, 'Bigfoot Researchers Torn to Shreds by Bear'."

She shrugged. "Well, you can think whatever you want, but at this point, I'll take whatever fate throws at me. I have to see for myself, one way or the other."

"All fate's going to deliver is a million stitches and a trip to the emergency room," Frank said. "These things don't exist. I've told you that how many times?"

"I don't care what you told me. Those tracks are real, that fur is real, and that's solid enough evidence for me to take a closer look."

Frank cleared his throat. "Evidence? Sure. Everything but the creature itself."

"Well, Mr. Skeptic, then go in there and prove me wrong."

He took off his hat and ran a hand through his unruly hair. "If I do this and I'm right, you owe me dinner—even if I'm in a full-body cast when that grizzly in there mauls me half to death."

"Dinner? Sure. So man up." She whipped out her tranquilizer gun and handed it to him.

He smiled, pointed the weapon with both hands, and walked through the entrance.

Sarah followed, her smile vanishing. A scream pierced the air, and it took her only a moment to realize it was her own.

Chapter 2

Sarah scrambled to her feet, staring straight ahead. Harsh and unexpected light blared through the cavern entrance, forcing her to instinctively cover her eyes. Squinting, she raced outside and looked up: no stars, no moon, no darkness. Instead, the sun shone brightly through the trees, saturating the green leaves with its golden glow. The last time she'd checked, it had been midnight. All she could assume was that she'd hit her head in the fall and passed out for a good eight hours. *Why hasn't my team come to help me?* She couldn't help but wonder. *Sure, they'd leave Frank to his own fate, but surely they'd come looking for me.* "What the heck is going on? Where is everybody?" she asked aloud to no one in particular.

Groaning, Frank approached and rubbed his head. "What happened? Did I black out or something?"

Sarah hesitated for a moment, unsure. "I think we both did. It looks like morning." She nervously fingered the black strap from her hanging 35mm Nikon. Reaching into her pocket, she let out a sigh of relief; the FLIR hadn't fallen out in whatever skirmish had happened in the dark.

"Are you okay, babe?" He put a hand on her shoulder. "You hurt?"

She swatted his hand away. "Don't call me 'babe'! I could use some Motrin, but I needed that the second you showed up. You look like crap, by the way."

"Thanks for the concern, but I'm fine. I just can't figure out how we got here and managed to miss a few hours. How's it daylight already?"

"I have absolutely no idea."

His eyes darted about nervously. "Well, in any case, let's get the heck out of here."

"Yeah, okay. Let me see if I can get a hold of my team first." She grabbed her radio from her belt and talked into the mouthpiece. "Sarah to base camp."

The device crackled, but then... nothing.

Sarah shot Frank an inquiring look, then took a deep breath. She spoke louder this time into the mouthpiece, "This is Sarah. If anybody's around, please respond."

More static was her only reply.

“Maybe they’re out of range,” Frank speculated.

Letting out a sigh, she attached the radio to her belt. “Probably. Let’s start heading back, and my team better have one heck of an excuse for deserting us like that.”

Frank started walking, crunching dry leaves under his feet. “I’m sure they do. How about some bacon and eggs? My treat.” He smiled over his shoulder.

“Today is your lucky day, mister, ‘cause I’m ready to eat a dozen eggs and an entire pig.” She cocked an eyebrow. “Where’s the closest diner?”

“Hmm. Not sure, but it’s probably a three-hour walk back to our cars. We better make that lunch.”

Startled, Sarah jumped as a shrill cry echoed nearby.

“Tell me that was some kind of bird.” Frank’s gaze settled on her, his eyes wide.

“I could, but I’d be lying. No bird I’ve ever met has made that kind of sound.” She laughed at his expression. “Come on. Please tell me your backyard’s not the only square of nature you’ve ever visited besides this one, city boy.”

Frank opened his mouth to reply when a growl cut through the silence. “You sure that’s not a bird? Some kind of eagle or vulture or something?”

She shook her head as a shiver ran down her spine. “When’s the last time you heard a bird howl like that?” The cry sounded like the Bigfoot calls she’d captured on audio six months earlier. She could have kept quiet about that so as not to worry her ill-equipped Tarzan companion, but she knew there’d be no fun in that. “Nothing like seeing your research up close and personal. On the bright side, it’ll be worth watching you crap your pants.”

A twig snapped in the trees, and Frank instinctively reached for her hand like a lost little boy wanting his mother. “We need to find cover. A bear stalking us isn’t good.”

She scanned the trees and vegetation as she whispered, “How many times do I have to tell you it’s not a freaking bear, Frank?”

“How can you know that?” He shook his head. “Never mind. Let’s just get outta here.”

“No.” She planted her feet into the ground, just in case he decided to drag her away. “You can go wherever you want, but I’m staying right here. I’m not out here for some nature hike. I want proof, and I’m going to get it.”

He glared at her. “Can’t you forget about your research for one minute? I’d prefer to live.”

No way, she thought. I’ve waited years for this moment, this one confrontation, this proof that I’m not crazy. If only my team was here to back me up, but I need to do this with or without them—for me. I have to see this for myself.

A dark, hairy outline rustled in the tall bushes.

Chills rushed over Sarah. “Whoa! That thing is less than 200 feet away. You still have the tranquilizer gun?”

Frank pulled it from the back of his hip and cocked it. “Yep, right here, but if we get arrested by Ranger Smith for giving Yogi a death sentence, don’t be surprised when I say I told you so.”

“I’m not gonna *kill* anything. Maybe you should Google ‘tranquilizer’ sometime, Mr. Investigator.”

Suddenly, an ape-like creature emerged from the foliage. It stood eight feet tall and was covered from head to toe with long brown hair, matted in places. Its powerful build, broad shoulders, and thick chest cast a shadow on the grass, making Sarah shudder. For years, she’d studied the elusive monster, and finally, she was getting her first real encounter since that fateful

day when she'd lost her sister.

"No! It just...it can't be," Frank whispered. "No way! Should I admit myself into the psyche ward now or later?"

"It exists! I knew it all along," she said. "One picture, that's all I need." With shaking hands, she brought the camera into focus.

The creature simply stared at her.

She zoomed in on its face, still wondering if her eyes were playing tricks on her. It looked like an ape with a flat, wide nose, deep-set green eyes, and a full set of lips. The lips and chin protruded into somewhat of a snout, but nothing like a bear. She snapped the photo, knowing the proof on that film would change the way the world looked at Bigfoot—and at her. *I'll never be a laughingstock again.* Zooming out, she took another photo.

"You got your picture. Now let's go!"

"Frank! Calm down. Don't make any sudden movements, or it might—" Sarah tried to warn, but the creature had already become uneasy.

Taking slow, measured steps, the primate moved in their direction.

"Crap!" Frank aimed the tranquilizer gun and fired, striking his target.

The creature jumped back and let out a long, pained howl, then lurched forward.

Sarah gasped as Frank tugged her hand. "Move it!"

Without waiting for him, she sprinted, her heart thumping like a jackhammer. *If Frank knows what's best for him, he'll freaking follow me.* As they darted between trees and splashed through a tiny stream, the air behind them filled with blood-chilling howls. She glanced over her shoulder and screamed when she realized they were being pursued by not one beast, but multiple hairy figures gathering in the distance, darting behind them.

Suddenly, Sarah's hiking boot caught on a fallen log, and she tripped and fell with a solid thud on the forest floor. Crawling through the ferns, she peeked out. She didn't see Frank anywhere. "Frank! Frank?" she whispered. "Where are you?"

She yanked off her camera and threw it next to her, then lay flat on the ground as the howls grew closer. Loud neighs and the sound of hooves echoed in the air, growing louder by the second. She took a deep breath and peeked through the ferns.

The ground thundered as scores of men on horses galloped toward her. *Whew, rescue!* Wherever they'd gotten the horses from, she only hoped they were fast enough to rescue Frank, outrun those things, and get her the heck out of the Bigfoot-infested forest. The curious, scientific part of her yearned to stay there and discover more, but without the assistance and backup of her team, she knew it just wasn't safe. *We'll just regroup and come back tomorrow,* she reasoned. *Besides, I've already got two good shots of a Sasquatch. There's no way Frank can debunk this one, especially since he's an eyewitness himself. Where the heck is he anyway?*

"Princess, I command you to come out," a man's voice said in a most demanding and condescending tone. Not only was he dressed strangely, but he had the pronunciation skills of a bad B movie actor trying to act in a Broadway play.

Princess? A nickname of some sort? They must have me mistaken for somebody else.

"We know you're here. We heard you scream," called out the same man. "I'm not going to hurt you. I am here to save your life. There were six of them closing in on you. If you don't cooperate with us and we leave, you're as good as dead, and I guarantee you'll never find your way out of these dreaded woods on your own."

Right, she thought. I found my way in here, and I can find my way out. Do they take me for some kind of idiot? Still, she knew hiking back to her vehicle by herself, unarmed, might not be

so smart with those huge creatures running around. She raised her head a notch and noticed a pair of dirty black leather boots with very unfashionable black bottoms; no member of her team would be caught dead in such an atrocious ensemble. The man, whoever he was, stood less than twenty feet away. She needed to call for help immediately. Something might've happened to Frank, and she thought maybe the poorly dressed cavalry could help her.

"Those beasts will tear you limb from limb the second we depart," continued the man. "You know how territorial the Guardians are, and you know they have the power to destroy our kind. One bite from those ferocious teeth, and that will be it for you." He paused and then continued. "It was quite the shock to see your brother alive and breathing. Your family did a fantastic job of staging his death. If you want me to keep his secret, then it's best you come out now. We both know what will happen to him if I were to speak the truth."

What was he talking about? Sarah rose from her hiding place and gazed up at the man on the dressed horse. His appearance was odd, nothing like any park ranger she'd ever seen. From his royal-blue tunic top, to the emblem of a crowned lion in the center, to his chainmail sleeves, he looked as if he'd been zapped right out of medieval Europe, or maybe that she'd accidentally stepped through some magical wardrobe. *Black satin knickers with boots up to his knees?* she wondered. *This guy is in need of some serious fashion intervention.* She scanned the rest of the group, and it came to her attention that they actually did look like knights in shining armor. For a moment, she wondered if she'd ventured onto a film set, albeit a poorly funded film, considering the D-list acting and the awful costuming. *Maybe there's some kind of Renaissance Fair nearby.*

"You must come with us, Princess," the man said. "There is no escape!"

No escape? She decided it might be a safer option to sneak back into the vegetation instead of running off with the crazy eighteenth-century cast party. Just as she was considering it, a twig snapped under her feet. The horse neighed, and the man jerked his head in Sarah's direction. *Crap! There goes that plan.*

She met his gaze and realized he had the bluest eyes and whitest smile she'd ever seen. His black hair was wavy and long, but it was worn in a masculine style. In spite of his ridiculous clothing, she'd be happy to be rescued by him anytime. *Hmm. I wonder what he's doing after work.*

"That's it, Princess. So glad you've decided to come out of hiding, as it's nice to officially meet you. Now where's your brother?" he demanded.

Princess? Brother? The handsome man had it wrong. "You must be mistaking me for somebody else. I don't have a brother. Listen, I don't know what that script of yours says, but we have to call 911! I lost my friend. We were being chased by these hairy creatures, and we somehow got separated."

"Who do you think scared them off, Your Highness?" a knight with long red hair asked.

Your Highness? Would it kill one of them to slip out of character for a second and tell me what the heck's really going on? "So you saw them?"

"Of course."

Witnesses galore! The press is gonna have a field day with this. Nobody is ever gonna call me an idiot again, she thought. *Especially Frank. Speaking of him...* "Later, I'm going to have to get a statement from every one of you, but in the meantime, could you please make that phone call? Really, this is serious. Get rescue out here right now! My friend could be hurt."

"Flushing you out was easier than I expected," the leader said.

"Well, you woulda been hiding, too, if those things were after you. Long story short, I was hunting...er, uh, not real hunting like shooting a buck or anything. I'm a researcher for The

Bigfoot Field Researchers Organization, the BFRO. Ever heard of us?" she asked, feeling like a fool for mentioning it to the gorgeous guy in front of her. She was rather sure there was no hope of getting his phone number, if there ever was in the first place, because guys usually ran the other direction when they heard what she did for a living.

A knight looked at the leader, cocking his brow. "Victor, we need to make haste. She must consult with the healer."

Yep, that's it. Either I'm nuts or they are. Victor, huh? Hmm. In Latin, that means "conqueror". Sexy. "Listen, I don't need a doctor—just a little help finding my friend."

Victor swung lithely from his horse onto the ground.

She gasped at his towering height and muscular build. *Talk about tall, dark, and handsome! Who'd of thought I'd meet this medieval hottie in the middle of some forest on a Bigfoot hunt?* She scanned the stranger and then the horsemen standing behind him. "Any of you got a cell?"

They mumbled amongst themselves, shaking their heads.

Their character acting was beginning to get on her nerves. "Fine, but can one of you give me a ride back to my Jeep? I can call for help there. I think we're parked about six miles north, near the main road."

"A cell? A Jeep? What are these strange things she speaks of?" a confused knight asked. "She is delusional, milord. She must be taken to the healer for her head wounds."

"Delusional or bewitched," said a knight with a white mustache and matching white hair tied into a ponytail.

"Yes! She is spewing out these lies to mislead us!" called out another.

"Lies? I'm not lying," Sarah said. "I know it's a long way back to my vehicle and a big favor to ask, but we'll get there in no time on one of your horses. Look, I'll even pay you to make up for your time off the set, but if you're not going to help me, then please at least get your men to start searching the area. We can cover more ground if we split up into groups and look for Frank. You three can go over that way, and I will go with Victor here to—"

A dangerous glint flickered in Victor's eyes. "How dare you command us, princess or not?"

She hesitated, taken aback by his rudeness. He looked like Prince Charming, but he sounded more like that caveman from those old dinosaur movies. "Listen, mister. I love movies and all, and if you save me some tickets, I'll be sure to come watch this little performance of yours." She tipped her hat. "I promise I'll even wear something nicer for your big opening weekend and all, but right now, we need to get moving. A man's life is at stake."

"Bark out another order like that, miss, and you'll feel the sting of a whip on your back," Victor said.

Sarah cringed. *Testy, ain't he? Pssh! Forget the phone number and the show then, buddy. How about some anger management classes? Or...* A new thought popped in her head, and she glanced around. "A-ha! I got it! I know what you're up to. Where's the hidden cameras? You almost had me fooled. Frank's in on this little *Candid Camera* act, isn't he? Ooh, I'm gonna kill him. Where have you got him stashed away?"

"You should've thought twice before you stepped onto enemy territory," he said.

"You're good," Sarah said, pointing at him. "Stepping on enemy territory is a nice touch. Did your producers put you up to this?"

Victor's face hardened into grim lines. "You're now a prisoner of war, Princess Gloria."

She stared at his stern face and stiffened. "Look...this medieval game you're playing is kind of cool and all. Love the costumes and the attitude, but I really need a phone. If you're not playing some kind of joke, then this really is an emergency."

Victor's menacing gaze ran over her inch by inch. Stepping closer, he traced a finger down the side of her cheek.

She shoved him back. "Don't you touch me!"

"How dare you?" he roared. "Are you not aware of who I am?"

Of course she had no idea, nor did she really care. "No. Who *are* you?" The situation was getting out of control. The hot guy was clearly a nutcase, and she'd come to realize that Ashton Kutcher wasn't going to be jumping out of the bushes anytime soon, announcing that she'd been punk'd by Frank. It was time to run and let them get back to their jousting, or whatever it was they did to earn their pay from the Renaissance Fair payroll office. Especially when she saw one of the knights scanning her up and down, lingering a little too long on the skin exposed where the two upper buttons had been ripped from her shirt by a rather intrusive thorny vine. *Why the heck did I let Frank have our only weapon?* She scolded herself. *What if these medieval jerks decide to take advantage of me out here?* The thought alone sent shivers through her body. *If I scream out here, who'll even hear me?* She was suddenly sickeningly reminded of every horror film she'd ever seen where stupid teenage girls wandered off alone in the wilderness, and she was none too happy to be that stupid girl. As the knights fanned out and surrounded her, her heart raced.

"Stubborn woman! You know who I am," Victor said. "Your brother might've gotten away, but I'm afraid you are in our possession, whether you like it or not. It is my duty to make you pay for warning Charles and his knights about my trap."

Mistaken identity was putting it lightly. "I don't even have a brother," Sarah said, "and I'm no rat."

"More lies!" he hissed, his blue eyes blazing. "Did you really think I would fail to find you just because they dressed you up like a man in clothes that blend with the trees? Foolish, foolish girl."

She huffed. In her line of work, she'd been called plenty of names, but she'd never been mistaken for a male. "A man? Why, because I'm wearing camouflage pants? I'm hunting a creature, not going to the opera. What'd you expect, some strapless mini-dress and stilettos?"

"Milord, with all due respect, the disguise is a rather ingenious idea, perhaps one we should replicate in the future," the blond guy behind the knight said. "Had the princess not surrendered, we would not have seen her."

"Surrender? Listen, you're making a big mistake." She suddenly remembered she'd left her pepper spray behind, and she regretted that. "I'm not a princess. I don't know what freaky game you're playing, but my friend's going to call the police. And trust me when I say he has lots of connections with the FBI. They'll be swarming the place any minute!"

Victor smiled. "Is that what you call your knights? I'm afraid we dispatched this FBI hours ago, Highness. That was how we knew they abandoned you somewhere in this forest." He knocked the fedora off her head and hastily jerked her bunned hair to a disheveled mess. Tangles of long brown hair tumbled down the middle of her back.

"I told you not to touch me!" she yelled, drawing her hand up to slap him.

He caught her wrist. "Do not ever threaten to attack me, Princess, and you must cease with giving orders to those who have you in custody." A fiery blue flame burned behind his eyes.

Loosening his grip, she yanked her hand away. She realized that smacking him wasn't going to help her one tiny bit; all things considered, running sounded like a much better option. She glanced around for the best escape route, but it was no use, for she was completely surrounded. Her mind raced, terrified to think about what they might try to do to her.

Victor tugged at her holster and pulled out her radio to examine it. “What kind of magic device is this?”

“Idiot,” Sarah whispered under her breath, rolling her eyes. “It’s a radio. I know it’s not the newest Sony type, all slick and thin and whatnot, but give me a break. Pretending you don’t know what it is, is just... lame.”

Victor raised an eyebrow. “A radio, you say? Is that a weapon of some sort?”

“No. It’s for communication.” Boy, was she getting tired of this role-playing. “You know, you talk into it, and someone else’s voice comes out.”

“Witchery,” mumbled one of the knights.

Victor held up his hand to hush the murmurs of his men and then gestured for one of his men to take it. “Take this back with us.”

A tall, muscular knight walked over to her, dangling her 35mm camera. “And what is this?” He snapped the button, and a flash of light made the knights erupt in a choir of gasps and shocked whispers.

“A weapon to blind her opponent!” one knight asked, blinking as if hundreds of white spots filled his vision, like something he’d never experienced before. “Tis surely evil magic, sir!”

Sarah sighed and pointed to the digital view screen. “Magic? Seriously? Look. There are your fine knights in all their glory. I think I’ll call this shot, *Deer in the Headlights*.”

The man gasped. “She paints a picture of us in the blink of an eye, yet she has no paint or brushes! Surely she is of an evil ilk, milord!”

“Oh please. Give me back my camera,” Sarah hissed.

Victor’s gaze narrowed. “You are brave, captured yet still forcing demands upon those who would have you in chains.”

“Fine. You can have the dang thing. But that film belongs to me!” After all she’d been through, there was no way she was going to let her evidence go, medieval army or not.

“Film? What is this you speak of?” a knight asked. He looked at Victor, who only shook his head and shrugged.

Victor ran his hands down her pant leg; she bit her lip to keep herself from kicking him hard, knowing any kind of physical assault would only make things worse. It was one girl against a platoon of nuts, and the odds didn’t look good. She was just glad he hadn’t held a knife or a sword to her throat... yet.

“What other weapons are you hiding in your man-clothes?” Searching her pocket, the man pulled out the thermal camera and dangled it. “Your knights left you with weapons we’ve never seen. Too bad you didn’t put them to good use, Princess Gloria.”

“Yeah, you wouldn’t believe how dangerous a radio and a thermal camera are. And stop calling me ‘Princess Gloria’! My name’s Sarah.” She shook her head and raised her hands in mock defense. “Tell you what. Just keep them both. I’ve no idea what game you’re playing, and I really don’t care either. All I want is to go home—with my film.” Her heart pounded, and her palms dampened. She took a few long steps backward. “But if you won’t give me the film, I still want to get out of here. So, I wish you gentlemen all the best, and I’ll just be on my merry way now, if you don’t mind.”

“I would advise you to halt,” a knight said behind her.

Crap. Her breath caught in her throat, and the same thought played in her mind. *What are these guys planning to do with me—or to me?*

Victor turned to his knights. “You captured her this morning, here, in the Forest of the Guardians. Is this the same woman who escaped from you?”

“Yes, milord,” a knight said, looking slightly embarrassed. “Without a doubt, this is the same one who escaped us.”

The others nodded in agreement, some looking at the ground in shame.

A case of mistaken identity was the last thing she needed. “They’re wrong! I can assure you they’ve never seen me before.” She laughed. “How could they? I wasn’t even here.”

Victor scoffed. “Are you suggesting that my knights are liars, Princess?”

“No, but maybe this healer of yours should get them all some bifocals. I’m a researcher leading a major expedition. I study these creatures, uh, these Guardians, as you call them, that are running around this forest. I have been trying to prove their existence for a long time, and—”

“Prove their existence? You know full well they exist! That is exactly why you entered this forbidden place. You thought we wouldn’t follow you in, but I’d risk my life to get my hands on you. After all, you are all the leverage we need to make your stubborn father see the light.”

Victor climbed up on his horse and stared down at her, casting periwinkle daggers through her. “Would you like to ride with me or one of them?” He pointed to his men. “I must warn you that my men are not as capable of keeping their hands to themselves. Has been many weeks since they have seen someone the likes of you, and men can get very lonely.”

The men exchanged glances and guffawed.

Sarah glared at them, wanting to be sick. “Well, it’s a good thing I’m wearing a chastity belt. Never leave home without it,” she said.

“I’m not here to defile you.”

She hoped he wasn’t messing with her. “That’s great to hear.”

“You shall come with me. I give you my word that your virginity, your chastity, will remain intact, milady. I cannot make the same guarantee for your life, however, for that shall depend on your father’s cooperation.”

Sarah’s heart quivered, and goose-bumps traveled to the surface of her skin. “I’m not going anywhere with any of you. You’ll have to kill me first.” She swallowed hard, wondering if she’d made a mistake of offering him that option right then and there. It might not have been her brightest idea. Shifting her legs to ease the stiffness only set off her internal alarms, and with some burst of ridiculously unfounded courage, she lurched toward the forest.

A knight locked his arms around her waist and left her feet kicking above the ground. “I believe we have a wild one here, milord,” he mumbled as he handed her up to her captor.

“I heard she was quite the feisty one,” Victor said.

“Let me go!” Sarah said.

“Listen. If you cooperate, I will keep your secret.”

“What secret?”

“That your brother is alive and well. I know you’ve never met me before, but I used to know your mother. And because of that, I will keep your secret.”

Sarah flailed, trying to escape, but Victor pulled her into his strong embrace and wrapped one arm around her waist as he turned his horse. He hauled her off as if she was merely a possession, some spoil of war, in spite of her futile attempts to squirm out of his embrace. “Calm down, Princess,” he said. “You will come with me now, and if your father values your life as a father should, he shall graciously withdraw his forces from the Tastian border. If he does not, he is a fool and will be a father no longer.”

“Frank!” Sarah yelled. “Frank, if you can hear me, call the police! I’m being kidnapped by a bunch of lunatics. I know that’s what you think I am, but I’ve found somebody even crazier than me.”

“Nobody’s going to save you now.” His long dark hair tickled her cheek as he bent to whisper in her ear. “If you know what’s good for you, you will listen and obey. This is not a game, Princess. Do you understand?”

“Milord, we must be going,” said a man with a black beard. “It is not safe out here among the Guardians.”

She nodded. “It’s not a game for you either. First-degree kidnapping is a Class A-1 felony. You’ll be thrown in a hole for twenty years, and I’m sure Bubba will love this little costume of yours!” she shouted. “You let me go right now, or you’ll be the one somebody calls ‘Princess!’”

“Enough of this nonsense.” Victor’s voice turned sharp.

Nonsense? You got that right, buddy. She wondered at what point she’d fallen head-first into the Twilight Zone. “Who *are* you anyway?”

“Don’t play the fool. You know exactly who I am.”

“Well, I’m afraid my memory’s a little fuzzy on that.” She scratched her temple. “I think I hit my head and blacked out.” It wasn’t a lie, and she wondered for a minute if she was dreaming up the whole thing. She could think of nothing better than waking up in her bed to the aroma of a piping hot cup of coffee—or those bacon and eggs Frank had promised before he took off to God-knew-where.

“Perhaps that explains all the strange babbling,” Victor said, pulling on the reins. “But no matter. We shall take you to the healer for a look. Now, tell me, is ‘911’ some secret code, a way to beckon your armies against us?”

“Something like that,” she said, sighing again. “Anyway, please refresh my memory. Who are you?”

Victor straightened in his saddle and raised his chin a notch, the slightest glint of a smile playing in his blue eyes. “I’m King Victor Fesque II. Your father, King William Jarod, is currently my chief adversary. And now, thanks to you, I have all the leverage I need.”

Sarah was sure no one was going to believe any of it. She already got enough guff for chasing eight-foot humanoids around the woods. There was no way anyone was going to find out about this little fairytale, or she’d be labeled a crackpot for life. “Please, I’m begging you to trust me. If you let me go now, I won’t say a word to anyone—not even a peep. My reputation is at stake, and that means a lot to me as a scientist.”

“Scientist?”

“Listen, uh, Your Highness, you’re making a huge mistake. You have absolutely no leverage with me, because I’m not this person you think I am! My name’s Sarah Larker. This King Gerald or whoever you’re talking about won’t even know me.”

“In spite of your lies and your demands, Highness, it is a pleasure to finally meet you in person, Princess Gloria Jarod.”

Chapter 3

Sarah jumped when something resembling a cockroach—only much bigger and grosser—scurried over her foot. Water dripped onto the dirt floor from the craggy ceiling in an annoying and never-ending rhythm. Dark, rusty, ominous chains hung from the wall; she was glad the

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