

Enchanted Castle

A Novelette

By Chrissy Peebles

Book 1 in *The Enchanted Castle Series*

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Dedications:

This is dedicated to my wonderful God and Jesus.

To Alex, Faith, and Matthew

To Patrick Griffith, my cover artist, who makes me the coolest covers.

To my editor, Autumn Conley. You rock!

A special thanks to my critique partner, Jayde Scott. Thank you for your precious time, commitment, and dedication. I couldn't have done it without you. Your magic fingers make my work sparkle...

Episode 1

Sometimes, what seems to be one's salvation turns out to be one's doom. When the brochure for Mount Park Manor arrived in our mailbox, it seemed like the perfect opportunity for a fresh start, a place to step away from things and forget about my past. The very next day, I mailed the card back with "Yes" marked in a big red checkmark. About a week or two later, Mom drove me three hours away to take the entrance exam. I was ecstatic when I received the letter telling me I'd been accepted. Two months later, when it was time to leave New Orleans behind, I didn't cry. I didn't even look back. I was just relieved to be given a chance at a new life.

The ten-minute wait for the black limousine that would take me from Glasgow Airport to Mount Park Manor gave me a good picture of what to expect; it was a boring place in the boring Scottish countryside, with lots of boring people around me, but I was prepared to blend right in.

As we drove out of the gray city, past green fields that stretched for miles on both sides of the road. We were immersed in semidarkness that wasn't natural for that time of day, at least not where I came from. I heaved a big sigh and sank into the soft leather seats, stretching my tired legs after the nine-hour flight. I closed my eyes and did a quick mental check, making sure I had everything right, going over my cover story as to why I would have left one of the most beautiful cities behind. And, of course, there were all those made-up childhood memories of a loving family I'd never had.

It was September, a few weeks after the beginning of the new school year, when I arrived at Mount Park Manor, with my suitcase in tow. We'd moved at least twenty times in my young life, so I was used to not possessing much. It didn't bother me at all, because settling down—in New Orleans, Scotland, or anywhere else—was something I never expected to do. It's not that I wanted to live a rootless, nomadic life, but it was a necessity. Wherever I went, no one seemed to get me. Heck, my own parents didn't get me, and they'd always preferred to abandon me with some nanny or at a stuffy boarding school while they traveled the globe. After the last incident at my previous temporary school, I no longer felt a need to be understood. I had a new mantra, *The less attention people pay me, the better*, and I was becoming really good at blending in.

The car rolled through the high gates at a leisurely speed. I peered through the rain-stained windows at the imposing building in front of me. I'd assumed we'd be staying in an old house, just a mansion, but as I peered at the four- or five-story building with all those arched windows and tiny towers, I realized I'd be spending the next school year in a magnificent castle. I smiled at the thought of cliques that wouldn't pay me any attention in such huge, enchanting surroundings, and I hoped I could just blend right in to the ancient woodwork.

The door creaked as I entered, and I expected hundreds of eyes to gawk at me as soon as I stepped inside. But to my surprise, the hall—a large, open space with a candelabra and a red rug covering most of the marble floor—was entirely empty, devoid of life, but soft voices and short laughter carried over from upstairs. I peered down at the layout map they'd sent with my enrollment papers and headed up the broad staircase.

My room was situated on the second floor, tenth door to the right. The lights were already on, so I stepped in and stopped midstride, at a loss for words. *Whoa!* Was the only word that came to mind as I looked around at my accommodations. The place definitely had some gothic vibes

going on. For one thing, there was no delicate floral wallpaper—only old Tuscany brick walls, like something out of Dracula’s castle.

My gaze moved up to the arched stone windows and vaulted ceiling, but only long enough to realize that I was still standing in the doorway, gaping like an idiot. The last thing I wanted to do was draw attention to myself, good or bad. I knew gossip would only lead to lots of unwelcome interest in me, so I softly closed the door behind me and set my bags down next to the king-sized antique bed, carved from dark wood, with a matching bedside table. I spun in a circle as I took in the luxurious tapestries hanging from the walls and red and gold drapes adorning the windows.

While I came from a huge house in New Orleans and was used to the overpriced stuff my parents liked to call antiques, I had never seen such opulence, not even in a museum. Much to my chagrin, I found myself strolling around the room, touching this and that, until I stopped in front of a huge mirror to regard my blonde hair that was falling into my hazel eyes and the dark circles under my eyes; I couldn’t blame them on jetlag, because that under-eye luggage had been there for at least the last few weeks. I ran a hand through my hair and pinched my cheeks to give them a bit of color. Just then, I noticed two black suitcases, situated across the thick rug and fabric wingback chairs on the far right of the room.

As far as I remembered, I only had one suitcase, and it was certainly not beat up like those two. *Am I in the wrong room?* I wondered. Frowning, I inched to inspect the name tags.

Suddenly, the door burst open, and a tall guy walked in.

Startled, I jumped a step back and pressed my hand against my heart.

“Whoa! My first day here, and already I’m a lucky guy,” he said with a grin.

I blinked, stunned and taken aback at the sound of his deep, melodious voice. I cleared my throat as I tried to look away from his impossibly blue eyes, framed by long lashes. He was clad in tight blue jeans and a shirt that hugged his muscles, but what really stood out was the cord necklace he wore around his neck. “I-I’m pretty sure I was assigned this room, so…”

He ran a hand through his messy black hair and rubbed his half-open eyes, visibly amused. “I dunno. Sounds like a farfetched explanation. Maybe we’re just supposed to share.”

“I think you need to find *your* room,” I said rigidly.

He walked past me and reached for his suitcases. I heaved a big sigh of relief, thinking he’d be out the door in no time, but to my surprise, the guy just tossed his bags on the bed and starting unzipping them.

“Wh-what are you doing?” I whispered, mortified.

He ignored my question and continued rummaging through his things. I didn’t want to look, but I couldn’t help but sneak a peek. He seemed to have an affinity for well-worn blue jeans and torso-hugging shirts. “I’m Hunter, by the way,” he said, holding out his hand.

I peered down at the tan skin and the silver ring on his index finger but didn’t touch it. “Zoey… and please get out of my room.”

“Ain’t happening, beautiful. I’m pretty sure this is *my* room, and even if it’s not, I was here first.” He threw the cover back on his suitcase, but didn’t zip it up.

“Ain’t?” I snorted. “Isn’t this school supposed to be for the *crème de la crème*, the cream of the crop?”

He peeked up, his eyes twinkling. “Heh. Have you met any of the characters in this place? They searched high and low across the United States to… find *us*.” He laughed.

“Yes, because they saw talent in us.” I wasn’t on the honor roll or anything like that, but the teachers and school officials had always said I had potential, that they saw something special in me.

Hunter snorted. “Talent, huh? My rap sheet is a mile long. Most schools wanna expel me, not enroll me.”

“Why are you here then?” I asked, trying not to stare into those mesmerizing eyes.

“I dunno. What do you think?” He laughed softly. “It’s Scotland though. Would you turn down spending your senior year of high school in a place like this? It’s like... freedom.”

Fair enough, I thought, though it was a bit ironic. He was here for freedom while I was running away from my problems—far away to another country, as if even that could bury the pain.

Hunter pointed at my neck. “Love the necklace. Hey...wait! You must be that gypsy girl everyone’s talking about. Your mom, Madam Destiny or something, does readings on TV, right? Think she’d do one for me? I need to know whether I’ll pass math this time.”

I could feel the heat rise in my cheeks. *Great. He had to bring up my mother. She’s so...* The truth is, it was difficult to describe my mom. She wore long, ruffled, flowing skirts, large hoop earrings, beaded jewelry, gold bangle bracelets, and scarves in vibrant and obnoxious colors. She completed the gaudy, hippie street fair costume with a large opal ring to complete the look. Yes, my mother was a typical gypsy, complete with sandals that she even wore in the winter.

He cleared his throat. “Well?”

“Well what?”

“Do you think *you* could give me a reading?”

I shook my head grimly. “I’m *not* like my mom.” I didn’t have a psychic bone in my body, and I didn’t really believe in all of that even think that stuff was for real. It was entertainment, and my mom made a fantastic living off of it. “I don’t believe in that crap. Now, can you please get out?”

He just sat on the edge of the bed, smiling at me and revealing a row of perfectly white teeth. “Hey, Zoey...” He moistened his lips and cocked his head to the side.

I peered from his shimmering eyes to his flushed cheeks, and the perfect shape of his lips. My heart began to beat a little bit faster. I had never been around someone so unbelievably hot. I’d read about guys like him in books and seen them in movies, but such chance encounters with hunks never happened to me. *This can’t be happening, a guy who looks like that sitting in my bedroom in a freaking castle*, I told myself, but I couldn’t let him know how shocked I was. “What?” I said, irritated that the guy would have any effect on me.

“Am I gonna pass math or what?”

He was irritating me, so I saw no harm in returning the favor. “Give me your palm, and we’ll see,” I said, trying to sound serious.

He played along and stretched out his hand.

“Hmm...” I said, wrinkling my brow, as if I saw anything other than a strong hand that made mine burn with hotness as soon as he touched it. “See the top line in your hand, the one that goes from your middle or index finger toward your pinky?” I asked.

“Yeah.”

I’d seen Mom do readings a million times, so it wasn’t that hard to pull off an Oscar-worthy performance. “I need to see where the heart line starts. If it’s under your index finger, it means you’re happy with your love life.”

He grinned. “Really? I’m anxious to hear this one.”

I ran my fingers across the lines in his hand, and a cold chill ran through my body. Flashes of light dotted my vision; a loud *crack* echoed in my ears, a gunshot; Hunter clutched his heart as

he collapsed to the ground; I hugged him, weeping, as if I'd known him 100 years. "You killed him," I shouted up at someone I couldn't see. "Why? Why did you have to do it?"

"Zoey?" Hunter said, breaking into my thoughts. "Are you okay?"

I snapped out of it and peered around the room, confused. Everything was just the same as before, with no trace of blood or gore. "Yeah, I just..." My tongue stuck to the back of my throat, and I was unable to complete the sentence. There was nothing I could tell him anyway. I didn't want him to think I was crazy, some weird chick with an overactive imagination. I dropped his hand as I felt the blood drain from my face. "You're fine. You'll have a happy life, with 2.5 kids and a white picket fence."

"What about my love life though? Because I think it's dramatically improved within the last hour."

My cheeks burned, and I didn't know what to say.

Fortunately for me, we were interrupted by the door creaking open. A tall lady with her red hair wrapped in a tight bun walked in. "Mr. Connors, please return to your room immediately."

I peered at her, taking in all the details, from her frown to the way her hand clasped the door frame, as though she could tear it in tiny pieces any minute. I swallowed hard. "He thinks this is his room."

"This is the girls' section of the castle. Clearly, this room belongs to Zoey Sanders." She checked her list. "You're in room 2c. Now, Mr. Connors, please leave."

He shot me a smile, then grabbed his suitcases.

The woman blocked his path. "Shoes, Mr. Connors... now."

"She's just jealous I wasn't talking to her about my love life," Hunter whispered in my ear, then grabbed his Nike tennis shoes from under the bed.

I held back a smile, knowing it wouldn't help my case if I burst out into laughter.

"Mr. Connors, you'll be washing the dishes tonight after supper."

"What? No way!" Hunter said. "That's so not fair." Of course we'd have to revert to hand-washing and drying the dishes, since the Maytag Man wasn't around in the Middle Ages to install a dishwasher, but Hunter looked as if he'd been sentenced to being locked up in a dark dungeon with rats biting his toes.

"Ma'am, it really was an innocent mistake," I said, trying to plead his case for him. "I mean, who wouldn't get lost in this huge place?"

"Miss Sanders, I run this house. Since you choose to question my authority, you'll be joining Hunter for kitchen duty tonight after supper."

"Yes, ma'am," I conceded, my heart thrumming. It wasn't that dirty dishes were all that exciting, but if I was going to be stuck in the castle kitchen with a guy who looked like that, I'd happily scrub for hours.

The school matron placed her hands on her hips and glared at Hunter, as if to stop him from saying what he was about to blurt out. "No backtalk, young man, or you'll be doing the dishes all week."

He shot her a lazy smile, and I couldn't help being turned on by his cockiness.

I looked up at the woman. "We're sorry, miss. It won't happen again," I said, remembering my mother's sage advice to refer to teachers by "miss," "madam," or "sir." I'd considered "sir" briefly, but I thought she might take offense to that.

The matron heaved an exaggerated sigh. "I'm letting you off easy because you're new, but the next time you disobey the rules or take a sassy tongue with me, there will be stiff penalties to pay."

Hunter glanced over his shoulder at me with that easygoing grin. “Sorry we started off on the wrong foot—a barefoot, to be exact, but don’t worry. This is gonna be an awesome year. It has to! We’re in Scotland! It was nice meeting you, Zoey.”

I liked the way he said my name. “Nice meeting you too.”

“Maybe we can play cards later tonight.”

“Cards?”

He winked. “You know...*tarot* cards.”

I laughed, wondering how someone could be so good at breaking the ice with a complete stranger. The castle was supposed to be my getaway from the reality back at home. I hoped Hunter and all the gothic charm of the place might be just the distraction I needed from the pain that threatened to consume me every waking hour—and often in my dreams. Fate had thrown me into a real-life castle, into some kind of modern-day, twisted fairytale, but I couldn’t have been happier to escape my own dreadful reality, if only for a year.

* * *

The teachers purposely separated me from Hunter during dinner, so I had no way to make any kind of small talk with him until we ended up on kitchen patrol. I swished hot water around a giant pot and scrubbed away, trying to get the stuck-on noodles off. Washing dishes wasn’t my favorite thing to do, but getting to know Hunter a little better was awesome and well worth the greasy water and sticky suds. He blew some bubbles in the air, and I laughed and swatted at them playfully, like I was four years old. He was up to his elbows in suds, singing and swaying to a hit song I’d heard on the radio earlier, and boy, did he have a fantastic voice. I caught on to the lyrics quickly and started to sing with him. I grinned as he smiled widely.

“Somebody please call my Fairy Godmother so I don’t have to clean all these dishes,” a voice with a Southern accent echoed across the kitchen.

“Personally, I’d just settle for a dishwasher.” Hunter laughed.

I turned and saw a thin girl with her dyed blonde hair tied up in a ponytail—or at least I assumed it was dyed because it was so platinum blonde. It was gorgeous, unlike my own dry, frizzy bird’s nest of a do.

She held out her hand for a shake. “Pamela Joy, but you can call me Pam.”

“Uh...” I quickly wiped my hands on my clothes so I could shake her hand. “I’m Zoey.”

“Zoey, huh? My best friend has a Chihuahua named that.”

“Um...”

“Don’t worry. It’s not a bad thing. The Chihuahua is cute,” she said with a laugh. “Nice to meet you.”

“A pleasure,” I said.

Hunter turned to meet her gaze. “Hunter, and it’s nice to officially meet you. You were sitting at the table behind me.”

“Yeah, I heard you cracking all those jokes about the school food. Is that why you’re here? Were the powers-that-be offended that you were insulting their not-so-good eats?”

I cut in. “Nope. He’s here because he’s a squatter.”

“A what?”

“He tried to steal *my* room.”

Pam cocked a brow.

“I tried to tell the teacher it was a huge mistake and misunderstanding, but all that did was get me assigned to kitchen duty.”

Hunter chuckled. "Yeah, what she said. But what about you, Pam? To what do we owe the pleasure of your company on kitchen patrol?"

Pam rolled her eyes playfully. "I guess you could say I'm misunderstood. I didn't know I wasn't supposed to nibble on the M&Ms sitting on the coffee table. C'mon! I was starving after that long flight. The least they could have done was put out some chips or something."

We all laughed.

Pam glanced at my teardrop-shaped pendant. "Cool necklace." She peered closer. "Ooh...I love how it reflects the light, like it's glowing or something."

"Yeah, it's super neat," Hunter said, smiling. For a moment, I thought his eyes seemed to wander a bit lower than my pendant, but I couldn't be sure.

"Thanks," I said. "It's an old heirloom that's been in my family for generations."

Pam let out a small giggle. "Super neat? What, did you take a time machine out of the seventies to come here, Greg Brady? Personally, I think it's groovy."

Hunter threw a soapy rag at her, and she caught it with one hand, and suds began to drip down her arm. She shot him a huge grin.

"Awesome reflexes," he said.

For some reason, I felt slightly jealous about their obvious flirting, but I knew I had no right to and didn't say anything about it. If I was going to have any friends in the place, they would be the closest thing to it, and I didn't want to mess that up.

"I have lots of brothers," she said with a smirk, rolling up her sleeves. She looked around at the Leaning Tower of Dishes and declared, "Man, this is gonna be a long night. I despise dishes."

"You and me both," Hunter complained.

Overhead, the lights flickered, prompting me to drop the wet sponge in my hand and look around. A black shadow, like a human shape in a black cloak, fell in front of me, not more than twenty feet away. My heart raced. "What the heck is that?" I yelled. It glided across the room, and when the lights flickered once more, it disappeared.

"What's what?" Pam asked, glancing around.

"I don't see anything," Hunter said.

"I saw something," I whispered, wiping my wet hands across my pants once again. I wondered if my eyes were playing tricks on me or if I was just suffering from a really bad case of jetlag and fatigue. I scanned the huge kitchen but saw nothing else out of the ordinary.

"It's probably just the electricity," Pam said. "This is an old place. I wonder if their Wi-Fi sucks too."

I nodded in reluctant resignation to logical explanations. "Probably."

"Just think," she said, "we're standing in the exact place where peasants made meals for the great king and queen hundreds of years ago. This castle's bound to have a few kinks in the plumbing and wiring here and there."

Hunter's gaze met mine. He didn't seem as if he wanted to drop the subject or explain it away like Pam had tried to do. "What did you see?"

I didn't even want to think about ghosts, because I'd never been one to believe in that kind of thing, but I could have sworn some phantasmal Grim Reaper or something had just paid us a little visit. I shrugged in false denial. "Nothing—just shadows playing tricks on me," I said.

Pam flicked water at me. "Well, c'mon, you two. These dishes aren't gonna wash themselves."

“Maybe they would,” I said, “if we could get a hold of that pesky Fairy Godmother of yours. Can’t you text her or something?” I suggested with a smile.

She laughed. “You’re right. I’m gonna have to fire that woman.”

I grabbed the rag out of her hands while Hunter sprayed her, then me. I pushed the wet hair out of my eyes. “Hey! Payback time, mister!” I scooped up a handful of bubbles and plopped them on his head.

He retaliated by splashing me back, and within minutes, I was soaked and he had a soapy Santa Clause—without the bowlful-of-jelly physique, of course, because everything about his figure was perfect.

Apart from getting scared to death, washing dishes had never been so much fun.

* * *

I changed into my nightgown and brushed my teeth. Jumping into bed felt wonderful. I turned off my bedside light, crawled into the soft covers, and drifted off to Dreamland.

A while later, with a huge effort, I pried my eyes open and scanned the room. My mind felt as though it was engulfed in a fog, and instrumental music, some distinctive melody with a particular musical structure and harmonic elements, echoed from the walls. I rubbed my eyes and sat up groggily, wondering why anyone would be having a classical music festival so late at night. I remembered going to bed, but my bedroom was simply gone, and I found myself standing in a large concert hall with marble floors and a glorious grand piano in the middle of the room.

As the fog lifted, I could make out tiny streams of moonlight creeping through a large bay window on my left. The branched candelabras cast a golden glow on the beautiful instrument before me. My fingers danced back and forth over the keys in an organized rhythmic pattern, gliding over the ivories as if I’d played a million times before. *How did I get here? What’s going on?* My brain had a thousand questions, yet I couldn’t focus on anything but the piano in front of me. I tried to stop my fingers from moving, but music continued to pour from my finger-play. It was such a beautiful tune. I had never learned the chords needed to create such beautiful music, and I couldn’t have even picked out “Mary Had a Little Lamb” on the piano to save my life. Yet there I was, playing like Chopin.

“Well-composed, spellbinding, and beautifully haunting. It’s extraordinary, isn’t it?” said a male voice in a Scottish accent, jerking me out of my confused thoughts.

I glanced up at a strikingly handsome, well-groomed man in his early twenties, dressed in cutaway tailored coat, over a waist-length satin waistcoat and dark breeches. He was wearing a brocade vest covered with a robin’s egg-blue coat, tan knickers, and white hose. His necktie was quite outdated and looked more like a wide scarf trimmed with lace.

With a grand movement, I played the last note, and then the music melted into an eerie quiet. Somewhere in the room, I could hear a clock ticking. I shuddered, pulling my white silk robe around me, and tied it tightly around my waist. “Who are you?” I asked in an accusatory tone. Part of me knew he was the reason I was there, but none of it made much sense. “How did I get here?”

He smiled. “How nice of you to wake up and join us.”

“Us?” I peered around me, more confused than before, because I only saw him. “What do you mean?” I pointed to the piano and behind it, into the corners that weren’t illuminated by the candelabras, but all I could make out was darkness.

“You must only close your eyes. When you do, if only for a minute, it shall be morning, and all will be back to normal, as you know it, milady.”

“But I-I don’t understand,” I whispered.

He gazed deeply into my eyes. “Victoria, you must hold the connection.”

“What?” I shook my head. “I’m not Victoria. My name is—”

“I’m not talking to you, Zoey.” His sharp tone and the fact that he somehow knew me took me by surprise.

“But you’re looking at me...and how do you know my name?”

“Reestablish the connection,” he ordered to some unseen entity, ignoring my question.

I opened my mouth to ask again what he was talking about, when a cold gush of air traveled up my body, making me shiver. For a moment, I closed my eyes to escape the freezing sensation, but when I opened them again, there was only darkness.

At the shrill sound of my alarm clock, I bolted up and peered at my bedside table. It was six a.m. Streams of sunlight hit my face through the window, and I blinked. I jumped out of bed, threw on my slippers, grabbed my robe, and wrapped it around me. I had no idea how I’d gotten out of bed and back. In fact, my memories were too hazy and incoherent for me to really remember anything. I brushed my teeth and threw my hair up in a ponytail, then sped out of my bedroom and down the spiral staircase, through the corridors, straight to the music room.

I yanked the door open and stepped into the vast hall, then peered around me. I didn’t remember entering the room before, but I recognized everything, from the marble floor to the heavy furniture and large candelabra. The beautiful grand piano stood in the middle of the room, its lid securely shut, even though I didn’t remember closing it when I was somehow there before. I spun in a circle, confused, and took in several new details. There was a glass door that led to what looked like a back yard, something I hadn’t noticed before. A large painting hung on the wall to my right, and I was sure I couldn’t have simply missed it in my strange dream. I knew I needed to calm down and think for a minute. I scooted into the window seat to look out the bay window. It was the perfect place to curl up with a book or take a nap in the sun. I looked at the shrubs swaying in the wind. *Maybe I was dreaming ...but it felt so real. I swear I could feel the keys underneath my fingers.* My gaze drifted back over to the grand piano.

I knew I wasn’t supposed to mess with the expensive instrument, but my curiosity overwhelmed me. I rushed over to the black-lacquered piano and propped open the enormous lid. I gazed down at the horizontal strings and laughed. I knew there was no way I could play any kind of song on that thing. I lowered myself onto the piano bench, then shook out my hands like some brilliant concert pianist, trying to relax myself before a performance. In the dream, I’d had no sheet music, so I assumed I’d been playing from memory. I clumsily pecked at the black and white keys, playing three notes that didn’t seem to go together at all. *Da-da-dum-dum, dum-dum-dum.* I then ran my hands up the scale and cringed: Even that was off key.

Just as I was trying again, Pam walked in, carrying a cup of tea. “Ouch,” she said. “I wondered who was playing in here.” Her long, wet hair hung in blonde curls. She had a romantic Bohemian about her and had paired a ruffled blouse with a black tiered, pleated skirt. Her style was simple and understated, yet incredibly classy.

I stood and brushed my hands over my humble and dull robe, suddenly embarrassed. “Well, I guess I’m no Mozart.”

She let out a small giggle. Her makeup looked perfect, so natural, giving a glow to her flawless skin. Her blue eyes twinkled in the bright rays of sun. “Maybe the piano isn’t tuned,” she said, trying to cheer me up. “Why are you down here anyway?”

“I had the weirdest dream. I dreamt I was in this very room, playing this think like some concert pianist.”

“Hmm. Well, I hope you gave a better performance than that ear-splitting screech I just heard,” she joked.

“In my dream, I played one of the most beautiful, eerie, and haunting songs I’ve ever heard,” I said.

“Sounds romantic.” She nodded. “Way better than the boring dream I had the other night. My hands were all caked with gray goop, and I was sculpting some ancient Greek statue.” She pointed to the floor. “Hey, I think you dropped something.”

Silver glittered off to the left of the foot pedals, and I reached down and picked up my silver locket. “Hmm. That’s weird.”

She sipped her tea. “What?”

I rolled the jewelry in my hand, regarding it intently. “I only came down here a minute ago. I’m sure I would have noticed if it fell off, especially since everything echoes in here. Maybe I really *was* in here last night and dropped it then.”

“Sleep-walk much?” she teased.

I dangled the necklace in my hands. “I suppose that could have been it, but that doesn’t explain the strange guy.”

“Strange...or hot?” She laughed. “If you are seeing hot guys in your dreams, girl, you’re definitely dreaming. How hot are we talking anyway? Like...Johnny Depp hot or Taylor Lautner hot?”

“Drop-dead gorgeous, but way too old for me—like...ancient. He was dressed in medieval-looking clothes, and he sounded like that one guy on those old *Star Trek* reruns that’s always beaming people up.”

She laughed. “A Scotty in a Scottish castle. Imagine that.” She arched an eyebrow and continued, “But accents are hot, right? Dang it. Why couldn’t he have jumped into my dream?”

I chuckled.

“What century are you talking?” she asked.

“Around the 1800s, I think. He had the greenest eyes and shaggy brown hair, and there was something about his smile.”

“I can only imagine.” She winked. “So, Zoey, what did you two do in this dream? Did you hook up?”

I held back a giggle. Nothing like that had happened, of course, but even if it had, I wasn’t exactly the kiss-and-tell type. “None of that. When I woke up in here, I was standing at the piano, playing it like a pro. He was watching me, and then he told me to go back to sleep, so I did and woke up in my room. It just felt so...real.”

“My mom’s all into that dream stuff. She keeps this corny dream journal and is always reading about Sigmund Freud and checking out dream dictionaries from the library. She says dreams can express our emotions.”

“Well, what’s that mean in this case?”

“I’m not sure, but I think dreaming about being a sculptor has something to do with me being able to create and accomplish my goals—one of which is to ace that geometry test this morning.”

I gave her a fist bump. “Me too.”

“You dreamt that you played the piano,” she continued. “Maybe you’re on a quest for harmony in your life and all that stuff—an epiphany and blah-blah-blah.”

I smiled, because in the midst of all her joking around and sarcasm, Pam made a great point.

“Well, in any case, Dream Boy isn’t here to help you with that math test, and you look like crap,” she said bluntly.

“Yeah, you’re right. I’d better get upstairs and take a shower.”

She turned to leave. “See you in class.”

“Thanks, Pam.” I nodded, and she was on her way.

Pam’s explanations still in my mind. I was ready to believe her, even though I wasn’t fully convinced. The whole experience just seemed too vivid to be a figment of my imagination, but I truly hoped she was right. I yawned, exhausted; the dream and all the confusion had taken its toll. I took one last glance at the piano before my gaze drifted to the floor, where I noticed a small white patch. I ran my fingers over it and realized it was candle wax. The image of me effortlessly playing the keys rolled across my mind, candles burning brightly in the candelabra, and goosebumps rose on my neck. I couldn’t shake off the feeling that I wasn’t seeing the whole picture. *Was I really here last night? And if I was, why can’t I remember it?*

* * *

Pushing the door open to my last class of the day, I scanned the room, hunting for my Hunter. My eyes locked on him, and he winked. A shiver of excitement ran down my spine as I flashed him a grin. I debated whether or not to talk to him after class, and I decided there was no reason not to. I only had to keep it cool and casual, and I decided I’d just ask him if he liked his room, since he couldn’t have mine. It wasn’t exactly talking about the weather, but it was the perfect excuse to strike up a conversation.

As I sat at my desk, chewing on the eraser of my pencil, Pam slid in the desk behind me and smiled a big, goofy grin. Her cheeks were flushed, and I knew immediately that something was going on.

“What’re you so happy about?” I asked.

“Not happy, girl...turned on. Hunter’s friend is so freaking hot.”

“Who? Eric?” I whispered, craning my head to get a better glimpse of the guy sitting in the front row on the left side of the classroom. “I sat next to him yesterday at dinner.”

“Gosh, he’s got it all—the shoulder-length brown hair, brown eyes, and glasses. He’s like Clark Kent, and I bet without those glasses, he could be my personal Superman,” she teased. She stared at him and let out a sigh. “I’ll be his Lois Lane anytime.”

“He is cute,” I said. He wore thin, wire-framed glasses, but he was very attractive and had a killer smile. He stood six feet tall and was broad shouldered with an athletic build. If I wasn’t so smitten with Hunter, I’d definitely be interested.

“Yeah, he’s my knight in shining armor.”

“Hmm. A knight in shining armor or an idiot in tinfoil?” I asked in the most serious tone I could muster, before I broke into a laughing fit. “You just don’t get it, Zoey.” She let out a giggle, slapping my arm. “Some of us aren’t Miss Independent like you. Having a man to take care of you would probably be your biggest nightmare, huh?”

“Hey! Don’t judge me. You just met me.”

She clicked her tongue. “Meh, I know the type.”

I saw nothing wrong with not wanting to play the damsel in distress, and I was dead set on slaying my own dragons. If I was going to be with a guy, he’d have to see me as an equal. No way would I be anyone’s little princess in need of protection. I playfully nudged her.

“Whatever.”

“Isn’t it funny that we’re both natural blondes?” she asked.

At that moment, I felt guilty and embarrassed that I’d thought her hair was dyed, and I was glad I had never mentioned it to her. In any case, her platinum blonde hair was a unique feature about her that made people notice her from miles away. My blonde hair was nothing special.

“So what do you think of *my* Eric?” she asked.

“He’s cute, I guess. His glasses make him look smart.”

“Hey! Back off, woman,” she said with a chuckle. “I’ve got dibs.”

“Relax,” I said, then admitted in a lower tone, “If I were after anybody, it’d be Hunter.”

She cocked a brow, disbelief crossing her soft face. “Hunter? That guy we washed dishes with?”

“Yeah, him.”

As if his ears had been itching, Hunter entered the room with two of his friends, laughing about some mischief they’d caused the day before. He was wearing his typical faded jeans and a white t-shirt, emphasizing his lean, muscular frame. He was sipping from a soda can as he listened to his friends talking, all the while sneaking peeks at me. He was so hot I could have stared at him all day; his charm was impossible to resist.

“There’s just something about him,” I said, nodding in his direction to let her know who I was gawking at.

She glanced up at him as he walked back to his seat. “Maybe it’s that you wanna tame him. I hate to break it to you, honey, but I don’t think Hunter’s gonna be tied down to being a one-woman man anytime soon.”

I laughed. “Oh yeah? A real bad boy, huh?” I asked, my eyes glistening with curiosity and fantasies that I didn’t want to admit.

“Don’t do it, Zoey. I’ve heard the rumors, and you don’t wanna go chasing that one. He’ll probably date over half the girls here by the end of the school year.”

“Maybe...or maybe not.”

She sighed the same way my older sister always did, as if I was a hopeless case. “Tell me you’re not going to ignore my advice on this.”

I nodded, smiling. “Only if he’s interested...and not taken.”

Mrs. Duball’s voice snapped me out of my thoughts. “Students, today we’ll spend our hour going over the history of Tiker Castle. This will be valuable information for you about your surroundings, so please pay attention.”

“Hey!” Pam whispered, kicking my chair.

I turned and whispered, “Are you trying to give me whiplash or something?”

She smiled and pushed a small, neatly folded note into my hand. “Special delivery,” she whispered.

I looked down at the note with red ink on the front: “For Zoey’s eyes only...” With a pounding heart, I opened it, being careful so the teacher wouldn’t see it. “Want to hang out after class?” it said. My mouth dropped when I turned it over and read, “From the guy who almost stole your room.”

I grinned, realizing that Hunter had quite the sense of humor, among his other attributes. I was surprised he wanted anything to do with me, considering the way I’d behaved toward him when we’d first met. We had enjoyed our dish-washing interlude, but for all I knew, Pam might have been right about him. His name might have been some clue, and I feared he might just be one of those guys who loved the thrill of the chase. He was so good-looking, and I knew I had to play it cool so I wouldn’t seem easy like all the other girls in his fan club, so I slipped the note inside my folder, glanced over my shoulder to the back of the room, and shot him a big smile. As our eyes connected, I could feel my heart skipping a beat. He winked. He was so hot, but I couldn’t let him know I felt that way. Still, I was definitely going to talk to him after class.

While the teacher scribbled a bunch of dull facts and dates on the chalkboard, I glanced over at Pam.

She smirked. “So you’re gonna date him, huh?” she whispered, looking none too pleased about it.

“Who said anything about dating?” I whispered back. “He just asked me to hang out after school.”

“Today?”

“Yeah.”

Her face flushed with excitement, and she pushed a hair strand back from her eyes. “Well, maybe you could find a way to get him to introduce me to Eric. Ya think?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t really even know Hunter yet.”

Pam held up a hand. “Stop making excuses.”

“Seriously! I don’t know him any better than you do.”

“Not true. He wasn’t in *my* bedroom, was he?”

I smacked her lightly on the arm. “It wasn’t like that. It was just a . . . misunderstanding.”

“Think about it. We could all go out together—you, me, Hunter, and Eric. Wouldn’t that be fun?” Then, with a short glance at Eric, she added in a lower tone, “And don’t you dare tell me it’s too soon and he’s just a rebound. Yes, I was dumped recently, and my heart is still aching, but it’s time to move on.”

“No promises, but I’ll try to hook you up if I can. The two of you would make a cute couple, and I’m not saying that just to get you off my back.”

Her face lit up. “Really? I think he looks perfect for me.”

I chuckled. “I promise I’ll try. Just don’t get your hopes up, because he might not be your Mr. Right.”

She shot me a huge smile, and I turned back to face the teacher.

“This place has a very rich history, dating all the way back to the tenth century AD,” said Mrs. Duball. “Scotland and England fought over this castle for centuries. If these stones could talk, they’d tell us tales about invasions, massacres, wars, and so much more.” She glanced at all of us, then smiled. “Now, I’d like to take you to a place where you can read more about Tiker Castle, a place where ancient books are kept.”

“Where’s that, Miss Duball?” Pam asked.

“Why, the library, of course, my dear.”

Everyone laughed.

“Please follow me,” the teacher said, grabbing her big yellow folder and urging us to come after her.

Chairs were pushed away, as students made their way across the room down to the library, where she told us we had to divide into groups of four.

Pam shot me a look and grinned; I knew exactly what she was thinking. “Do I look okay?” she asked, sounding worried. “OMG, how’s my hair?”

I reached out and smoothed out a few bumps. “You look great.”

“Thanks. You know what they say about first impressions.”

Before I could say another word, she motioned Hunter and Eric over. As they approached us, she was wearing the biggest smile, like a kid on Christmas morning.

“Um . . . would you guys like to be in our group?” I asked shyly when they were within earshot.

“Study buddies, huh?” Hunter said, smiling at me. “Sure. And you’re lucky to have Eric, here. He was on honor roll last year.”

“Sweet!” Pam said.

I looked up at Hunter. “I got your note, by the way. I’d love to hang out later if you want.”

“An offer you couldn’t refuse, huh?” he said in that arrogant tone I was beginning to adore. He flashed his brilliant white smile, and his eyes connected with mine again, just like they had in class. There was something between us: a spark, chemistry, undeniable interest. I knew he liked me—or at least I hoped so.

Before I could think of another word to break the awkward silence between us, Pam elbowed me and cleared her throat, as if to remind me of something I was supposed to say. “Ahem…”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry,” I said, looking to Eric to make sure he was listening, then back to Hunter, who was still staring at me. “Eric, this is Pam.”

Eric shook Pam’s hand. “Nice to meet you,”

“Thanks,” Pam said. “It’s my pleasure.”

Eric smiled back at her. “A Southern girl, huh? Love the accent.”

“Yeah, it’s really cool,” Hunter said.

She giggled. “Born and raised in Tennessee.”

“Does that mean you’re into country music?” he asked.

“Yep, and I’ve been playing a twelve-string guitar since I was ten.”

Eric smiled. “Impressive. Maybe you can play a few songs for us, because I know you didn’t leave home without your guitar.”

“Finally!” Pam said, looking back to me and giving me a small pat on the shoulder.

“Huh?” I asked, confused.

“Finally, somebody in this old relic of a place gets me!” She smiled at Eric, then sashayed over to a square table, pulling me with her, and set down her bag.

Eric and Hunter followed right behind us.

The conversation went dead for a few seconds as Miss Duball handed us some worksheets and assignments, then instructed us as to what to do.

After she left our table to talk to the next group, I said the first thing that came to my mind. “I’m from New Orleans. Where are you two from?” I was dying to find out everything I could about him.

“Eric’s from California, and I’m from Miami,” Hunter said.

I nodded. “That explains the great tan.”

“Hunter,” said the teacher, “please come and choose a book for your group.”

He nodded and walked over to the shelves, even too tall for him to reach the top. He opted for a huge book with gold lettering, sitting at waist level. “This one looks like a winner.” He then returned to our table, opened the book, and flipped through a few pages.

“What do we have here?” I asked.

“*Tiker Castle*,” Hunter said, pointing at the gold title.

We wrote the name of the book down and started reading through the other forty questions we had to answer.

“Listen to this, guys…” Eric put the book on the table and read, “In 1296, King Edward I of England invaded Scotland, besieging Tiker Castle and its town walls. Edward and his army entered the town by surprise, then spent three days ruthlessly killing almost the entire civilian population, as well as the clergy who worked inside the castle.”

I shuddered. “That’s awful. Can you believe a real bloodbath happened here? Find something more positive about the place, or I’ll never be able to sleep tonight.”

Pam reached over and slid the book toward her, then flipped through the pages. Her eyes grew wide. “Whoa! It says here that some believe the souls of the murdered were trapped. Looks like we’ve got ourselves a cursed castle, ladies and gentlemen,” she said with a laugh, as if she believed none of the gibberish.

“You’re not helping,” I said, giggling uneasily.

Hunter ran a hand through his shaggy, dark hair before giving me an amused look. “Maybe their bodies are buried under the castle and they can’t leave.”

Pam kept flipping through the pages. “Look! There are pictures of some of the people who lived here. Just a bunch of average medieval Joes and Janes—the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick—”

“Wait a minute. Who’s that?” I interrupted with a gasp, pointing at a black and white, fuzzy image that sent a new pimpling of goosebumps up my arms.

She read the caption and announced, “Says here it’s the king’s son, William Bernard Montour. He has a sister named Isabella. Why?” She looked at me strangely. “Gosh, Zoey, you’re as white as a ghost! What’s going on, girl?”

I tried to keep my voice from wavering. “Pam, it’s him! The guy from the piano room! The one from my dream.”

She grinned and tucked a long strand of curly hair behind her ear. “Mr. Hottie Scotty?”

I elbowed her in the ribs, embarrassed, especially with Hunter sitting so close.

Her eyes lit up as she nudged me. “Well? Is that who you’re talking about or what?”

I gave her a small nod, insinuating she was on track.

Pam shook her head. “If that’s the case, the guy you saw has been dead for centuries.”

Hunter arched a brow. “Huh? You saw this dude in a dream or something?”

“Only one dream,” I said. Realizing there was no use hiding it, I went on to explain the entire story to Hunter and Eric. I braced myself for them to crack up in laughter, but neither of them did.

“That’s freaky. And you say you found your locket and some candle wax the next day?” Hunter asked.

“Yes.”

“Maybe the book is right about the restless spirits. Do you guys think this place could be...haunted?”

“I dunno,” I said, shrugging. “Is there anything in there about a woman named Victoria?”

Pam turned a few pages. “Here’s something about a Queen Victoria, the king’s second wife, but they had no children.” She held up the book. “There’s a picture of her.”

I stared at the woman in a Victorian gown, her hair pinned up in an elaborate bun and adorned with a huge diamond crown. I envied her mysterious beauty. She had huge, intimidating, dark eyes, high cheekbones, and full lips, and I was sure the men of her time worshipped her.

“Has Queen Victoria been raiding your dreams too?” Pam asked.

“No,” I said, “but the Scottish guy mentioned her name, as if he was talking to her, even though I didn’t see her. I thought he was talking to me at first, but then he called me by my real name. I’m not sure what it all means, if anything.”

“Meh, I think it just means jetlag and too little sleep,” Pam said, trying to dismiss it.

“Okay, students,” Miss Duvall said, “class is dismissed for today. I’ll see you tomorrow, bright and early.”

Hunter flung his backpack over his shoulder. "Well, you ready?"

"Sure," I said. "What can we do."

"Let's go explore the castle for clues."

I smiled. "You've got yourself a date."

"Wait, guys!" Pam whined. "I want in."

Hunter smiled. "Maybe I can pencil you in tomorrow. Just give my secretary a call and—"

She slugged him. "Not with *you*, silly."

"Uh... you mean me?" Eric asked, wearing a sheepish grin.

"Who else? Hunter's taken, and Zoey's... well, I'm not into girls," she said with a smile.

Hunter laughed. "All right, guys. In that case, let's all meet back in an hour."

With one last glance back, Pam and I hurried up the stairs to our dorms to get changed.

* * *

We decided to explore the other side of the castle, but it wasn't wired for electricity yet, so we sent Pam back to grab a few flashlights from the utility closet. I peered at the empty corridor, my hands clasped in my lap to keep them from shaking. Hunter's gaze bore into my back, searing my skin, but I didn't dare look; I feared I might forget to breathe or, worse, say something utterly stupid. Seconds ticked by and turned into an eternity while I mentally begged Pam to hurry; the silence was becoming unbearable. Eventually, her footsteps thudded on the naked stone stairs, and I breathed a sigh of relief when she popped her head around the corner.

"I snagged one for each of us," Pam said, handing me and the guys a flashlight.

"Great," I said.

We proceeded down a lonely, dark corridor, and my flashlight beam bounced off of the dusty armor hanging on the stone walls. After a few turns, we emerged in a giant, empty room with huge crystal chandeliers hanging from the high ceiling. Leather chairs were set up near the stone walls in neat rows.

As the beam of my flashlight swung around, I noticed an opening in the ceiling. It wasn't big, maybe ten inches in diameter, and a perfect circle. I frowned and took a few steps forward, until I was standing right beneath it. I beamed my flashlight up at it to get the others' attention.

"Check this out. I wonder what it is."

Hunter scooted a table and lined it up with what looked like a trapdoor. "Let's check it out." Without waiting for an answer or any advice from his loyal subjects, he climbed up and pulled down a ladder.

Cobwebs dangled from the ceiling, making me think twice about following him. Blinking, I covered my eyes as dust fell from the ceiling.

"I guess we're going," Pam said.

"What kind of adventure would this be if we don't see what's up there?" I reasoned. I put on a brave face and followed Hunter up the ladder, but it had nothing to do with me being brave and adventurous, which I most certainly wasn't. Usually, I couldn't get away from dark, ominous places fast enough, but I wasn't about to let Hunter see me acting scared and helpless. So, in an effort to protect him, I pushed my chest out, lifted my chin a notch, and plastered the boldest smile I could muster on my face. I followed him up the ladder, my heart beating a million miles an hour.

The smell of dust was overwhelming. The walls slanted steeply upward into a narrow ceiling, and everything was covered with white linens. Curiosity overwhelmed me, and I sneaked a peek under one of the large lumps and caught a glimpse of an antique dresser. I ran my finger along a gothic-looking metal candelabra and cringed when I noticed it was draped with spider webs.

“Um, guys... this is just some kind of storage room, like an attic or something” I said, wiping my hands on my jeans.

“We’re up here now,” Eric said. “Might as well take a look around.”

I peeked under a few sheets and saw more antique furniture. We snooped around for a few more minutes and found nothing of interest. I was anxious to leave the place, especially because it was getting late. I knew we’d definitely be missed and punished if we didn’t show up for dinner. “Maybe we should go back down and—” I started to suggest.

“Guys, come here! I found an old chest,” Pam shouted. She slowly pried the lid open. “Check this out! It’s a bunch of silky, frilly, royal clothes! Talk about vintage!” She fumbled through it and gasped. “Whoa! There are jewels tucked underneath.”

“Jewels?” I asked.

“Yeah, like a crown or something. Why isn’t this stuff locked up in a safe or at a museum?”

“Simple,” Eric said. “It’s all fake.”

I smirked. He couldn’t know that for sure, and for all we knew, the diamond-encrusted crown might have been worth a fortune. I was no expert, but they sure looked real to me, and no one would go to so much trouble to hid cubic zirconia in a horrible old attic. I pulled out a two-tiered tiara, set with dazzling diamonds, and marveled at the way the stones sparkled and danced with brilliance in the light. *This tiny thing alone could buy out the whole shopping mall back home*, I thought.

“Put it on,” Pam coaxed, “just for fun.”

“No.” I shook my head slowly. “We shouldn’t be messing with this stuff.”

“It’s a waste of time anyway,” Eric said. “Playing dress-up with a bunch of costumes and fake crowns isn’t getting us anywhere. Let’s keep looking.”

I regarded Pam. “Do *you* think this stuff is real?”

“They’ve gotta be fakes, Zoey, like Eric said. They wouldn’t be up here if they were worth anything.”

I knelt down and touched the satin dresses that were folded nicely and stacked inside a huge wooden crate. When I glanced up, Pam had disappeared. I spun around. “Guys?”

Nobody answered.

Frowning, I waved my flashlight around and saw my three companions staring at a painting on the other side of the wall.

“Zoey!” Hunter said. “C’mere! You’re not gonna believe this.”

I hurried over and glanced at the ancient painting. All four of our flashlight beams shined on it brightly, illuminating the swirling dust. When I saw what they were looking at, all I could do was gasp.

“Oh my gosh,” Pam whispered, touching my arm. “She freaking looks just like you!”

There was a life-sized portrait of a princess in a flowing V-neck gown and a diamond crown. Her long blonde hair hung in waves down to her small waist. I was shocked by her eyes, because they looked just like mine. Her royal look was accentuated with a crystal necklace exactly like the one I never took off, a family heirloom that had been in the Sanders family for generations. I was confused at the similarity, because I knew the painting had to be created decades ago. *How could a royal princess from hundreds of years ago look like me? And how can I possibly own her necklace?*

Hunter looked at the painting, then focused on my crystal pendant necklace. “Seriously, if I didn’t know any better, I might believe you’re wearing the same jewelry. It’s identical.”

Eric stepped closer, his mouth gaping. “I can’t even tell them apart.”

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