

Sam

CHAPTER 1

It was a cold winter day. It had been snowing all night and the small village was now covered in the most beautiful white snow. Everything seemed so clean, so white, so sparkly, so still, just perfect. There were but few people out in the cold, minding their business, hurrying towards where they were going, trying to ignore the chilling weather. Although they were dressed appropriately, they were shivering, stuffing their hands in their pockets and wearing gloves, too. But it was freezing outside and the gloves didn't seem to be enough. Their breaths left warm steams rising from their noses up, above their heads until they mingled with the cold air and finally dissipated somewhere up...

The little inn at the outskirts of the village was teeming with life though. "SERVING WINES, NOT SWINES" was hanging above the door, covered in snow. The iron chains that kept the label were rattling in the wind making a weird sound which seemed from another world. All the windows of the inn were closed to keep the cold out and the warmth inside. And the smells, unfortunately.

The innkeeper was a man in his early fifties. He was single, had never been married, always busy with his business. He had started from scratch from an early age as he had inherited the inn from his parents.

But when he started his own business after his parents' deaths, the inn was close to dereliction. He had worked hard to repair it and keep it going. And to finally be able to hire a few maids to help him around. By the time the inn started to look respectable enough, he realized he was already 30 years old and he had no family. As the years went by he started to care less and less about that until he didn't care at all. Now he was in his early fifties and had become greedy for money. If he didn't have a family, at least he thought to have money. Money had become the sole purpose of his life. He had become malicious and rude to his employees and nobody loved him, on the contrary. Old Jim, as he was called, was a sturdy man, used to labor. He worked just as much as his three employees, two young women and a young man.

Isabella, one of the two maids, was almost 24 years old and had a six year old daughter, Samantha and no husband. She had been working for Jim since she was 17 and rumor has it she got pregnant while working for Jim there with one of the guests. Jim didn't have the heart to throw her out and even allowed her to keep her baby as long as she worked for him for less pay than his two other employees. She had to make up for the food and shelter Old Jim had to give to her daughter, Samantha, so she agreed of course as there was no better opportunity for her. Isabella was grateful that she still had a roof above her head. And that she could keep her baby as no one else would have hired her in her condition, with an infant to take care of. On the other hand, she never wanted to reveal her lover's identity and after a while nobody even cared anymore. She was just glad she still had a job so she could support herself and Sam, her daughter.

The other woman was a slender red-headed, somewhat beautiful, a bit older than Isabella, called Maria. And the young man working for Jim was a bit daft, he was not in his right mind, he had some mental issues. But at least Tom wasn't dangerous, on the contrary, he was

warm-hearted and caring. And Jim loved the boy, especially as he paid him even less than he paid Isabella or Maria. He was hard working and he didn't understand much of anything that was going on in the inn which suited Jim perfectly. He had never asked for a raise or anything, he was happy with what he got. Which made Old Jim happy too.

It was a busy day at the inn, lots of customers and a lot of work to be done. Tom was cutting wood in the yard to keep the fire going in the stove and the fireplace. Otherwise the inn would get cold which would drive the customers away and drive Old Jim nuts. And Tom didn't want that. As for the women, they were busy cooking and serving at the tables while Jim was also serving and making money.

As for Samantha, or Sam as she was most often called, she was under a customer's table playing with a small rag doll, drawing as little attention to her as possible. She was a good child, content with the little attention she could get from her mother before they cuddled in bed together every night. At least then she didn't have to share her mom's attention with anyone else. During the days, her mom had to work to earn their living, their right to stay and eat there. But before going to bed, Isabella poured all her love on her. She'd make up stories for her daughter and cover her little body in loving kisses. Then she'd be the first to fall asleep as she was always tired from the day's work. And Sam would stay awake a bit more in the dark room, listening to her mom's heartbeat. That was always so comforting for the little child. Then she would hug her mom and fall asleep beside her under the cover, trying to keep warm. Their room didn't have a fireplace in it and it was pretty cold during the winter days. Sometimes, when it was really cold, her mother would warm some water and pour it in plastic bottles which she'd put under the covers for them to hug to get warm as their bodies' warmth wasn't enough....

As Sam was growing up, she started dreaming of the big world outside the inn, beyond their little village, wishing more and more to see the world and escape her life there. She loved her mother beyond words, but sometimes that was just not enough. Their life at the inn was not exactly a happy one. When Old Jim would mistreat her mother which happened pretty often, she wished she could do something about it, but she couldn't. They needed him for food and shelter, at least that's what her mother always said. But she couldn't understand why her mom couldn't get a job somewhere else. She promised herself that when she'd grow up, she'll be braver than her mother.

One day, when Sam was fourteen years old, her mother had sent her to gather some firewood from the nearby forest. Old Jim had made Sam also do some chores as she was 14 now, so she was old enough to work for her own food. She had to choose between spending the day in the kitchen and peeling the potatoes or gathering some firewood. As much as she loved eating the potatoes, she hated to peel them. Solsabella offered to peel all the potatoes and sent Sam for the firewood as she knew that her daughter would rather spend the beautiful spring day outside than peeling the potatoes with her and Maria.

Sam took a small basket for the wood, kissed her mother's forehead, and went for the forest. She knew the road by heart, she had gone to the forest many times for firewood, but this morning everything seemed so quiet, so peaceful, so serene. A red squirrel jumped from one tree to another, looking for food or maybe just trying to find a better place to hide. Sam watched as the squirrel disappeared behind some leaves, daydreaming, thinking of the freedom the little creature enjoyed. She wished she was just as free... but she couldn't leave her mom, her mom needed her too, just as she needed her mom. They had a special bond, they had gone through so much suffering together in that place, she could never leave her mom alone. And her

mom was too afraid of the big world to leave Old Jim and his inn so they were kind of trapped there, working just for food and shelter and nothing more. When she was younger, she was content with the rag doll, her only toy, to keep her company while her mom was working. But now, as she grew older, she wanted, she wished, she needed more from life... She saw the people coming and going from the inn, the smiles on their faces while they were eating and drinking and having fun and she compared their careless lives with her life and her mother's life. The more she thought about it, the more she wished to see her mother smiling carelessly like them, as if they had no worries or troubles in this world. But her mother's smiles got fainter and fewer and only when they were finally resting, before falling asleep. Her once beautiful lips had gotten thinner and her hair had many white streaks now... There was no light in her tired eyes, Sam could see her eyes from under the tables where she was playing with her rag doll, hidden from view. She wished.... But as she was daydreaming, Sam stumbled upon a rock and fell. She didn't get hurt, but she decided to lay on the grass a few moments before gathering more firewood. She lay on the grass, smelling its sweet fresh aroma and enjoying the few fluffy clouds on the otherwise clear blue sky. Without even realizing it, she fell asleep. She was tired from the chores she had to do the other day and the beautiful weather outside took her worries and thoughts away and sent her to the land of dreams. She was always happy when she was dreaming. In her dreams, she was always free and had a place of her own. But she never dreamt her mother there with her, as strange as that was when she remembered her dreams after waking up. If she thought about it, as much as she loved her mother, she rarely dreamt about her mom. But she couldn't dream what she wanted, right?

She dreamt about her dream house again. She was standing on the porch, enjoying a sunny day. But somehow she felt a storm was coming

and she woke up, her eyes suddenly wide open. It took her a few minutes before she remembered where she was and what she was doing there. She didn't know how long she had slept but by the way the sun was up on the sky she must have slept at least a couple of hours if not more. It felt weird as it only seemed as though she had slept a few minutes. But the sun didn't lie. She grabbed her almost empty basket and hurried to gather some more firewood. She couldn't wander off much longer or her mom would be worried for her. So she started gathering whatever she could find to finish sooner. One hour later she was on her way back towards the inn.

As she drew near, she could distinguish the roof of the inn and she could see smoke. She thought it was weird for them to make the fire as it was a warm sunny day. But the closer she got, the more she realized that the smoke was not just coming from the chimney. It was too much and too dark. Her heart raced inside her chest as a bad feeling enveloped her soul and mind. She didn't know when her tiny feet had ceased walking and had started running. She dropped her basket as she ran towards the smoldering inn. She could see it all now and it was a terrible sight. It was all burnt, blackened from what must have been a huge fire. There were lots of people she didn't know, people from the village, no doubt, still throwing buckets of water to put out whatever spark might have escaped them.

Sam watched in despair for any signs of survivors, for her mom. She pushed her way through past the men who were still fighting to put out the remaining of the fire but someone grabbed her and pushed her back. She couldn't see his face as her eyes were drowned in tears but she tried to fight back and get closer to what had been her home her entire life, to where her mom was... and again someone grabbed her and pulled her away. She wanted to scream but the words wouldn't

come out so she punched him in his chest with her tiny fists until she could not lift them any longer.

“Hush, little one, there's nothing there anymore....” Was the last thing she heard before she fainted and lost consciousness. But the voice was reassuring and sweet, calm in spite of all the chaos around.

When she finally woke up, she was all alone in a nice room. It had nice furniture and there were some flowers in a vase on the small table next to the bed she was in. She couldn't remember how she got there. It was all a blur in her mind and she had a headache. Then it all came back to her in jumbled images. She remembered her stroll in the forest and then the inn.... Her mom, Maria, everyone... by the way the inn looked when she got there she knew no one could have survived. So did this mean she was all alone now!?

Large tears rolled down her cheeks as she started crying softly. Then she thought she heard a noise behind the door to the room she was in but as no one entered, she just went on crying until she fell into a deep slumber. When she woke up on the following morning, the pillow was soaking wet with her tears. She must have cried a lot in her sleep. But her tears must have run dry as she couldn't shed another tear now. She got up from the bed and she felt the smell of freshly baked bread and eggs. She looked around and saw the source. There was indeed some bread and two scrambled eggs on a nice plate on the table next to her bed. And a glass of water next to the food. The flowers were gone, though, maybe because the table wasn't large enough to hold everything. She was starving and now she realized it as the smell of food hit her senses. She decided to eat as whoever had put the food there had surely meant it for her. She would thank that person after she'd be full. She gulped down everything in large bites and then emptied the glass of water, too.

The light coming through the curtains from the outside meant that it was late in the morning already. After she finished eating and drinking, she went towards the door and listened. She heard two women discussing what had happened at the inn. One was saying that Tom had set it on fire on a fit and that it was too bad as the owner, his two maids and Tom himself had died in the fire along with a few old drunkards.

As she was about to open the door, she saw the handle turn and the door was open. She stood still waiting to see who was behind the door.

A knock was heard on the open door and before she had the time to answer, a tall young boy was standing in the doorway. He seemed just a few years older than her. He had a strong constitution, a broad chest and strong arms. The T-shirt he was wearing seemed too small for him, but that didn't seem to bother him. Her first impression was that he must be a servant working hard for the master and mistress of the house.

"Who are you and where am I?" she asked with her cheeks red and a thumping heart.

"Hello, miss. This is Rosefield..... ." He said with a slight bow of his head.

His voice.... She knew that voice.... It was him! Finally she managed to go on.

"You.... You took me away from the inn, from my mom!" and she started to punch him in his chest while large tears found their way again down her cheeks as if flowing from the bottom of her shattered heart. She hit him until her palms hurt and until she couldn't even lift her hands anymore. Then she wiped her tears and looked up at the poor boy standing there unmoved while she had poured all her anger and sorrow on him. He hadn't even flinched. He was looking back at her

with the most caring, forgiving and kind eyes, although by the way she had acted, that was not what she deserved and she knew it.

“I’m sorry”, Sam finally uttered in a hardly audible voice.

“No worries, miss. I only answered one question as you didn’t give me the chance to answer both. I’m Kevin. I’m the master of the house. My father died a year ago so now it’s only me and my mom. And our servant, Carla.”

“You’re the master of the house?” Sam asked puzzled as Kevin couldn’t be more than a few years older than her and the thought that he had his own house was overwhelming, especially as she had nothing more than the clothes she was wearing.

“Yes, miss” he said bowing again as if she was some princess and not a poor homeless wretch. This only made her feel even more uncomfortable.

“Is my mom...” but she couldn’t finish her sentence. She didn’t have to. She knew the answer but it was as if only when someone else told her, it became real. She searched his tanned face but that only reassured her that she was indeed all alone in the world now and that what she had overheard the two women earlier was indeed true. Her mom was really gone.

“I’m sorry... miss...”

“Sam, my name's Sam.”

CHAPTER 2

A few minutes later a middle aged woman also appeared in the doorway, behind Kevin. She seemed a severe, strict woman. The wrinkles around her mouth gave her a menacing look. Nothing about her appearance seemed to betray any kindness. She was wearing old shabby clothes. Some patches had been sewn to match her long skirt and to hide the holes in it due to having been worn for too long.

“And how is the little miss this morning?” she asked with a fake smile, trying to hide the fact that she wasn’t in the mood to care for another person. Sam immediately realized that this must be Carla, the servant.

“I’m fine... Do you know where I could find some work? And a cheap place to stay?” Sam asked hoping Clara could give her a hint. Clara, on the other hand, glad that the young lady intended to leave, hurried to make a suggestion and get rid of her.

“Well” Clara began, “there’s a small tavern a bit further down this street. I heard the owner needed a waitress. Maybe he would also let you sleep upstairs in one his rooms. You could go and see...” Carla finally said hoping that settled it.

“Nonsense!” Another voice coming from just outside the room was heard. “How about you work for me and you can have this room!?” Said the mistress of the house, Kevin's mom. She was a tall slender woman and by the expression of her face Sam could see that she was a kind woman. A little sad maybe, but kind and gentle. Sam didn’t know what to say or what to make of her unexpected offer. Was this really happening? By the look on Kevin's face, he hadn’t been aware oh his mother's plans, either. And neither had been Carla. But while Sam could read a sort of wonder mixed with delight (although she didn’t

know why) in Kevin's eyes, she could also see fear and resent in Carla's. (And again she didn't know why but she could make a wild guess.)

“My name is Eleanor” said the mistress of the house. “And if you'd like, you could work for me. Keep the house clean.” She went on with a faint smile and a furtive glance at Carla.

“But I thought that was my job, my lady. Or are you firing me?” she asked in a trembling voice. The hatred in her eyes towards Sam was more than obvious now.

“No, Carla, dear, but you are getting old and let's face it, you are not what you used to be. Your eyes are not as good anymore as you keep missing spots on the cutlery and to tell you the truth I had to wipe the dust from the furniture behind you as well. This young lady will be your helper. And you will teach her what she needs to know. You can see this as a promotion, really. You'll have less work as you'll have her to help you.”

“My name's Sam, ma'am, and I'd like to work for you.” Said Sam with a bow and new found hope in her eyes.

“Good” was all Eleanor said before she left the room, Kevin right behind her.

“Good” Carla grinned at her, “then you can start right away. Follow me and I'll show you what you have to do.”

Carla went ahead, Sam right behind her. As far as Sam could realize, the house was pretty simple but with good taste and it was clean. She was sure that Carla did her job and maybe Eleanor was too strict. Anyway, it was an opportunity for her as otherwise she wouldn't have had where to go....

“Grab a piece of cloth, will you? And start dusting the furniture in the living room.” Said Carla but before Sam had the chance to ask her where she was supposed to take one from, Carla gave her a small piece of cloth from a pocket of her apron. Sam grabbed it and started dusting the table in the middle of the room.

“Ok, let me know when you've finished. And then we can go cook together. Can you cook, Sam!?” she asked doubting that the answer would be yes.

“Not really, ma'am. Only a few recipes. But I am willing to learn more.”

“Hmm, ok then, we'll see when you finish tidying the room”. Carla wasn't so upset with the whole situation anymore. Maybe she didn't see Sam as a danger anymore and just saw her for what she was, a poor kid who had lost everything and needed some help to get back on her feet.

One hour later Sam finished her task. When she was about to open the door and look for Carla, Kevin opened it and saw her standing in front of the door, all sweaty and with the dirty cloth in her hands. Neither spoke when at last he entered the room and she exited past him. He closed the door behind her and she went to search for Carla. She needed a bath before she was going to help her cook. Or help her with anything, as a matter of fact. She was embarrassed because Kevin had seen her all sweaty like that, although if she thought about it, she shouldn't have cared, right?

Carla was standing right in front of the door to the kitchen waiting for her to finish her work when she saw her. She told her that now she could come and help her cook but Sam said that she needed a bath first if she was going to help her with anything.

“ A bath,are you kidding? You'll have a bath in the evening after you have finished all your work and not a minute sooner. Now get in here and start peeling the potatoes.”

Sam's first intention was to answer her back but then she decided to just let her have her way this time. There was no point in quarrelling with Carla over such a small matter. So instead she took a seat by the table and started peeling potatoes just as Carla had told her. If she had looked at Carla she would have seen a quick smile on her face.

Later that evening Sam was tired and just wanted to rest her weary head on the pillow. The family, namely Kevin and his mom, went to the kitchen to have dinner, followed by Carla. Sam helped her put the food on the table and then sneaked out to her room. 5 minutes later there was a soft knock on her door but Sam was already half asleep on the bed. She managed to say “yeah?” in a low voice and then Kevin entered her room with a food tray in his hands. Without saying anything he put it beside her bed on a small table and then he left. Sam ate in a hurry and fell asleep.

The following morning she took the tray to the kitchen to wash it. Carla was already there washing the dishes and when she saw her she told her to put her tray there too as she was going to wash that too. Sam thanked her and hurried outside in the garden before Carla changed her mind. She needed to be alone for a bit, out in the sun. And the garden was the perfect place. She went to the farthest corner of the garden and sat on the tiny bench beneath an old oak tree. The sweet smell of flowers was overwhelming. She closed her eyes and let her mind drift away to other places and other times, happier times, times when she still had her mom... A tear rolled down her cheeks as the memory of her mother came to mind. But she knew her mom wasn't coming back so she had to be strong and make the best of the situation

she was in. She wiped her tears with her sleeve and opened her eyes. She thought she saw someone behind a rose bush but by the time she got there, there was no one there anymore. Or maybe there never was, she wasn't sure. She decided to go help Carla in the kitchen.

Sam went every day in the corner of the beautiful garden to relax and think of everything. It kind of became her spot.

As the days went by she was turning into a really beautiful young lady and Eleanor, the mistress of the house, wasn't blind to this or to the way her son Kevin was looking at her when she wasn't aware. As for Sam, she wanted more from life than just working for Eleanor or Clara. She was sure that life meant more than cooking and cleaning for rich folk. She wanted to see the world not just the tiny town she lived in. She had no one to keep her there. She was all alone and she felt strong and brave enough to face the world.

One afternoon after she had finished her chores she decided to go in the garden in her favorite spot and ponder about how she was going to bid farewell from this nice family. She thought that after a couple of years in their service she surely deserved more than just the food she got. She needed money if she was going to travel the world. And she deserved it as during this time she had never asked for anything else besides the food she got. But she had to leave, she had to make a change in her life. She didn't want to grow old serving Mrs. Eleanor and Clara. As for Kevin, he was nice but rather lonesome and not too talkative. She liked him. But she needed more.

She sat on the bench and stared at the clear blue sky. A few fluffy clouds were forming in the distance. She wished everything was simpler, she wished she still had her mother. But she had no one. She tried to imagine how the dialogue would go between her and the mistress of the house. Would she even miss her? As for Clara, she

wasn't sure. But maybe Clara would also miss her as she did most of the work in the house. And Kevin.... Well, he surely wouldn't miss her. He barely even noticed her, at least that is what she thought. He almost never spoke to her at all. Hmm, or to anyone, as a matter of fact. He was kind of weird, but not in a bad way, if being weird could be good in any way. She remembered one time when she slipped on the front steps with the bowl of boiling water in her hands as she was going in the yard to wash the laundry and as she was going to fall he caught her in his arms and he managed to push the bowl with a swift move. It fell a few paces away from her. She had been lucky or she would have been burnt by the hot water. He didn't say a word then, he just bowed and went back inside the house. She didn't even get a chance to thank him. But all that did not matter now.

As she was thinking of all these it started to grow late. And she was still on the bench, thinking, pondering. Meanwhile the nice day had turned to an even nicer evening. The sun had set and a mesmerizing full silver moon was making its way from far away lands. A storm was slowly taking shape. Then the old oak behind her began to wave its branches in the wind. She got up from the bench and stared at the oak. It was as if it was whispering to her, calling her to come closer. As she looked at the old oak, it seemed bigger and scarier than before. Now the silver moon was just above her and the oak. And still the oak seemed to whisper something in the wind. But that couldn't be, could it? Thought Sam wondering at the same time of her sanity. She decided to get closer. She put her right palm on the old bark and then she felt something very odd, as if electricity had crossed her whole body from her right hand up to her head and then down to her feet. A bluish light enveloped her and the last thing she remembered was a feeling of descent and despair, a fear beyond her imagination. Then all went black.

CHAPTER 3

When Sam woke up, she didn't know where she was. She didn't recognize anything around her. It was still dark so she thought she couldn't have fainted for more than a few minutes. She tried to get up from the hard ground. Her head was still light and dizzy. As she managed to get up she looked for the bench to rest a bit before going indoors. But the bench had vanished. The oak was still there, though. She strained her eyes to look for the house when she realized that it just wasn't there anymore! She took a few more steps in the dark when she realized she was in a park. There were lots of oak trees and pine trees and lots of benches. But not "her" bench. Nope, that was nowhere in sight. Then suddenly from place to place there was light coming from pillars. She had never seen anything like it before. Now she was sure she was in a park. But she had no idea where she was.

She took a few steps towards one of the lit pillars when she saw a boy kissing a girl while an iron beast on two wheels was ready to attack them or something. Then at a second look she saw that they were kissing while leaning against the beast. Maybe it was their pet? But it didn't make any sounds and it didn't seem to be alive. Maybe the boy had just slain it and the girl was kissing him with gratitude for having saved her. Sam decided to go closer and check it out. When she got close enough she observed that they were clad in a funny way. She had never seen clothes like theirs before. Perhaps they were sorcerers, Sam thought. But she needed directions so she approached them carefully.

At a closer inspection, she saw that the boy had long hair that went beyond his shoulders and the girl had short spiky hair and her eyes looked funny. And her lips. Maybe the iron beast had hurt her before the boy had killed it. The boy had a ring in his lower lip and another one in his ear while the girl had none. Sam was pretty much confused by now. Weren't girls supposed to have long hair and rings in their ears and boys short hair and no rings? Where was she?, she thought to herself when the better question should have been "when", not "where"

"Hi..." Sam said shyly when she got next to them. But they just ignored her. So she tried again, this time a little louder. "Hello...". This time she got a reaction. Not what she would have expected, nonetheless.

"Beat it, weirdo" said the boy in a rough voice while the girl grinned at her and then started laughing. She decided to leave them alone and find someone else, someone nicer. While she was going away she could hear them talking about her. The girl was saying that she looked funny and that her clothes were so plain and out of place. Sam thought the same thing about them. Something was clearly not right. She went down the alley in the park until she reached its end. Then all just got to a whole new level of weird. There were so many lights and noises coming from just about everywhere. All the houses were lit but that wasn't candle light, couldn't be. It was way stronger, just like the lights in the park. And whoa, there were other buildings, like sorcerers' towers or something. And there were lights everywhere. "Are there so many wizards here?" She wondered as there were towers everywhere. Where was she? Clearly she wasn't in her home town anymore.

As she was about to cross the street she was almost knocked down by something that went by her as swift as the wind. "What in God's name was that!?" Sam wondered as she had almost been hit by a passing car.

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