



BEHIND His MASK

THE FIRST SPELL BOOK

STEPHANIE VAN ORMAN

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If I Tie U Down
If Diamonds Could Talk (sequel to *His 16th Face*)

Behind His Mask
The First Spell Book

By Stephanie Van Orman

Dedicated to Andrew, who lets me be Emi, and Christopher, who lets me be whatever I want.

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Chapter One

The Boy Next Door

I was riding the bus. I wanted to wear headphones like all the other teenagers my age, but I didn't have any, so I looked out the window at the inner-city streets and daydreamed... not about having an MP3 player, but about what *could* happen later that day.

My first daydream had a chance of being realized in about two blocks. I liked to pretend Evander Cheney would come out of the Stanley Milner library and get on the bus I was riding. We were going in the same direction. We were getting off at the same stop. Both those things were true almost any day. It was the timing that was pretend. Usually, he was later than me and I missed him. In my mind, he'd board the bus, he'd see me, notice the seat next to me was empty, and then sit there. It was pathetic, but in my daydream, I didn't have anything planned after that. He wouldn't have to do more than sit beside me to turn me into a puddle of bliss.

If the bus zoomed by the library without picking him up, then I had a second fantasy all ready. We were going to the same place because I was going to his house. He lived with his Uncle Vincent and Aunt Emi. I babysat their daughter every Tuesday and Thursday evening. Sometimes Evander was there, but it wasn't his job to watch the baby. It was his job to hole up in the basement and avoid human contact as much as possible. Enter my second fantasy. I wished he would come out and say something to me. I'd say something back, and soon we'd be talking. In my dream, we had everything in common, and in thirty minutes of conversation, we would instinctively know we were made for each other. He'd ask me on a date.

Then I had a collection of smaller little interchanges all worked out. For instance, I wanted him to be the one to answer the phone when I called his house, or I wanted him to walk me home after it got dark, or I wanted to accidentally see him somewhere—anywhere—and talk for one minute. You'd think that at least some of those things would have been possible, but he didn't talk much.

The bus was about to pass the library. By that point, I felt stupid about my harmless daydreams and I cracked open my book. We passed the library and I waited until the end of the chapter to look up.

I was stunned. There he was, standing not five feet away from me, holding a metal support rod. He had his Skull Candy on and he was staring out the glass doors like he saw something incredible. He might not have seen me.

I wasn't shy so I tapped him on the shoulder. "Do you want to sit here?" I asked, and pointed to the seat next to me.

He looked at me, smiled, hooked his headphones around his neck, and said, "What did you say?"

The way he looked at me was weird, almost like he had no idea who I was. Ruffled, my eyebrows came together and I repeated what I had said.

"No thanks," he said kindly. He put his headphones back on and continued staring into oblivion, slamming an invisible door in my face.

I scratched the back of my neck. My pathetic fantasy had come true, but the happy part was missing, like always. All I wanted him to do was sit next to me and it was too much for him. That's how things were whenever we met.

We got off the bus at the same stop, since we were both going to his house. He got off the bus seconds before me and walked five or six steps ahead of me all the way. The only consideration he offered me is that he left the door open when we got there. The only reason he remembered to

do that much was because of one time when he closed the door on me and almost broke my nose. He was apologetic, which was only right of him. I had been coming to his house every Tuesday and Thursday for months.

If you examined Evander carefully, he looked like a complete snob. He had blond hair that grew in loose curls that always looked a little sun-bleached. He had lean cheeks that tanned easily and a wide chin that was flat without a dimple or a cleft. His eyes were brown like toffee. Unlike most guys his age, his clothes looked like they had been meticulously chosen to emulate a more classic style, almost like he was about to go boating in a glossy magazine. The guys I knew wore T-shirts adorned with skulls and snakes.

I didn't even choose *my* clothes that carefully, and I was a girl. When I stood in front of my closet, I chose what didn't make me feel ugly, which was a hard lottery to win, considering I shared a closet with my mother.

Anyway, he held the door open for me, but not in a romantic way. It was more like he left the door open for me. He had his back to me the whole time we walked. Our eyes didn't even meet once.

That night, Emi was in a hurry and she shouted three instructions to me before scooting out the backdoor. Paisley was already asleep, but she could be up any minute, and there were strained peas in the fridge for her when she woke up. So I waved to Emi from the kitchen window and then went back into the living room to wait for Emi's baby to awaken.

Sitting in the living room of the Cheney household was always the place where I felt the class distinction between us the strongest. There was a photograph of Emi that was larger than a flat-screen TV over the fireplace. Emi had dark brown hair that hung in long, curled tendrils and fell in a blunt line across her back and across her forehead. In the picture, she was wearing deep raspberry lipstick and holding a dark red rose. Apparently, Vincent took it. Even though the photograph was in color, she still looked like a movie star from the forties.

Across the room, there was a magnificently framed picture of Vincent. I'd never met him in person. He worked all the time and when he didn't work, Emi usually went somewhere to meet him and I watched Paisley. Evander looked a lot like Vincent—only Vincent was an older, darker, less snobby, more respectable version. He was less snobby because of his smile.

And there were sweet little pictures of Paisley everywhere. In some, she had angel wings. Others were extreme close-ups of her soft, pink, face. There were all sorts.

If you walked into the room when the sun hung at just the right angle, the light reflected through the chandelier and against the glass in all the frames and for a moment it seemed like you were walking into a room of mirrors. It was a really lavish place.

As I sat there, my stomach did a ripple flip to let me know I needed an after-school snack. Usually, Emi told me what I could munch on before she left. Since she forgot and wouldn't be home until close to ten, I peeked in the fridge, but I didn't see anything that screamed, "Emi left me for you!"

So, I got an impish idea to go ask Evander what I should eat. I tiptoed down the stairs, found his door, and with my heart up in my throat, I gave the door a little tap.

No answer.

I knocked again—louder.

No answer.

I tried again—even louder.

That time I got his attention and he opened the door a crack. It was dark inside and the only thing I could see was the flashing light of either a TV or a computer screen.

“What is it?” he asked like he could hardly be bothered.

“I was just wondering what there is to eat,” I asked hesitantly. Crap, I was losing my nerve.

He looked at me like I was the stupidest thing he had ever seen. “How should I know? Find something. Anything.” He shut the door in my face.

I trudged back upstairs, but I was lucky because when I got there I could hear Paisley crying. I went and got her.

The evening went on like it usually did. I played peek-a-boo with Paisley and fed her dinner. Then I took her out to the backyard and played with her in the evening air. The weather was getting colder since summer was disappearing. It was easier to babysit during the summertime. It would be harder when it was too cold to go outside. After the outside exertion, the baby was tired and I changed her diaper and put her back to bed. Babies her age were so easy to take care of. They're just learning to walk; haven't had their first birthday yet. It was a breeze.

After I sang her a lullaby and put her in her crib, I went to the bathroom. As I was washing my hands I looked at myself in the mirror.

My hair wasn't the right color. It should have been dark or light but instead, it was neither—totally blah. It wasn't that I didn't have the money to fix it—I did. I had money from all the babysitting I did, but I was terrified. What if the dye job didn't turn out? What if I couldn't get my money back? What if it took two hundred years to grow out again? Or what if it looked fabulous and I had to come up with the money to keep it fabulous? Like Evander...

Facing facts, I was a little obsessed with the difference between my looks and Evander's. Somewhere in my little brain, I thought that the difference in our looks was the reason he didn't want to talk to me. To make matters worse, it wasn't just my hair that gave me an inferiority complex, my eyes were green and not a pretty green. They looked like pale green grapes that had been cut down the middle. And I didn't tan. I was scary-white—reflective white. My clothes were all wrong and I didn't know how to pluck my eyebrows.

I shuddered and went out of the bathroom. I dropped myself on the couch and read my book. Normally, I would have gone downstairs and told Evander that Paisley would sleep until Emi got home, but that night, I didn't have the courage to speak to him. I'd already embarrassed myself enough.

About ten minutes later Evander came upstairs. Usually, when he came up, it was either to get something to eat or to leave the house. That night, he came into the living room and stopped to talk to me. Was one of my fantasies coming true?

“Is Paisley asleep?” he asked quietly.

I nodded.

“Then why don't you go home?”

Surprisingly, that moment reminded me why I had the deepest crush on him in the world. It wasn't because he was ridiculously hot, it was because, at that moment, he didn't seem snobby. His voice wasn't snobby. His expression wasn't snobby. Everything about him was gentle, rather than arrogant. It didn't even sound like he was trying to get rid of me. It sounded like he was trying to be a real gentleman and even though it didn't last; I knew it wasn't all in my head. I loved it. Hardly anybody treated me with consideration.

“She was fussing,” I lied. “I just put her down, but she might wake up any second.”

He nodded and went back into the kitchen. Then he made himself a peanut butter sandwich and went back downstairs.

That was it. That was all there was to our interaction, except he'd shown me what to eat and I copied it.

When Emi came home I was still reading on the couch, secretly glancing at the door every two minutes wishing Evander would come upstairs again, but Emi didn't need to know that.

"How did it go, Sarah?" she asked, as she dropped her purse on the stairs.

I told her about the evening as she propped her white-toed boots on an ottoman and untied the black lace scarf from around her neck. Emi always looked like she was auditioning for the part of *the witch*. After knowing her for four months, I could tell that something wasn't quite right with her. She was a young, wealthy mother (not over thirty), and even though she constantly wore black, her apparel never dipped into the realms of the vampire fads. Instead, she dressed classically, like the artist she was. That was where she went on Tuesday and Thursday nights—to the city art gallery.

In short, she dressed like she was mourning for a dead husband, but acted like the sun was always rising. She was very cheerful.

"Did Evander show you his book?" she asked casually.

"No. Did he write a book?"

"Hm. He really didn't talk to you about it? He's been writing it for years and he submitted it to two publishing houses. Unfortunately, he got rejected. He was really discouraged, so I decided I would get it printed and bound for him myself. You know, to give to him as a present."

"You're so sweet, Emi."

"No. I'm not. I just wanted to show him that if all he wanted was a shiny cover with his name on it, then it's not expensive to buy. He needs to figure out what his motivation for writing really is, and I think this the quickest way. I thought he might mention it to you because I had to order a lot of copies for the printing house to do it for me. If he hasn't offered you one, then you might as well take a copy. I know how you like to read."

She got up and fetched me a brown, hardcover edition. There was no cover art and there was only the title in gold lettering with Evander's name underneath. It read: *Behind His Mask*, by Evander Cheney. I felt like I had just been given the world.

"Thanks, Emi," I cheered. "You're the best!"

"I know," she said with a wink. "But please, don't tell him I gave you this. If he was too shy to mention it then he might not be comfortable with you reading it."

"Is he shy?" I asked, unknowingly. Sometimes I felt sure his silence was not shyness, but discrimination.

Emi raised her eyebrows in shock. "Teenagers must live their lives with blinders on. They're so self-conscious; they can't even notice what's going on in another teen's life. Evander is not shy. He's reclusive. He's the type who will do whatever he wants, but he's also the type who doesn't want to share himself—another stumbling block he's going to have to conquer if he wants to be a novelist. Just promise me you won't tell him I gave you a copy."

"Kay, I won't tell him," I promised.

"And don't read it when you're over here," she continued.

"Okay."

She grinned and gave me a little pat on the shoulder. "Enjoy it, little girl. Now, hide it in your bag."

She walked me to the door and looking outside, commented on how dark it was getting now that summer was over. "Why don't I call Evander up to walk you home?"

I glowed. I got my shoes and coat on and tucked the book in my bag. She was orchestrating a new fantasy for me. Evander was going to walk me home!

He took forever coming up the stairs and while I waited, I couldn't help thinking about what

Emi said. Wasn't she being a trifle over-anxious? Surely it couldn't bother Evander too much to see me reading his book. Nah, he was a huge snob and she was just trying to protect me from the uglier side of his moodiness.

Evander came up the stairs and got ready to walk me out. Emi waved good-bye to us on the stairs and we were soon on the sidewalk.

We walked by a few houses before I thought of an adequate conversation topic. Forgive me for my insipidness, but when I was around him, I got rattled and my brain didn't work at full capacity, so my ideas were less than astounding. That night, they were quite stupid.

"Do you think it's really necessary to walk me home?" I asked. "It's not very dark yet."

"It's no trouble," he drawled.

It was another one of those moments I liked best.

"The neighborhood's not the best, but I've never had anything bad happen before when I walked home from babysitting jobs."

He was silent for a second before he spoke up. "You've walked home alone from other jobs?"

"Well, yeah. A lot of the other moms I work for are single and they don't have a nephew handy to send home with me."

"No, I guess not," he said slowly.

Then we were at my door. I whipped out my keys and slid them into the lock. "Thanks, Evander. See you next Tuesday."

"Yeah, see you." He waited until I was in the second door before he turned to go back down the apartment building steps.

I turned and watched his back for a second. I was sort of hoping he would ask me to call him the next time I had to walk home alone from babysitting. It was very natural that he didn't. That was one of my thoughts that fell into the daydream category.

Going up the stairs, I walked past the bloodstain. A few months ago someone had been stabbed just inside the building and no one had bothered to deep clean the carpet to get rid of the bloodstain. That was the kind of place I lived. Two landings up, there was a pee stain where an adult had literally taken a wiz on the carpet. No one had bothered to clean that up either.

It was strange that the hyper cheap apartments and the ritzy houses should be within walking distance of each other, but that was Edmonton for you. One second you're standing in front of a skyscraper reflecting the sky as clear as water and the next you're walking past an unkempt peepshow theater. It was the same in the residential areas. One minute you're walking by the cheapest apartments the city has to offer and the next you're passing a house that sold for over a million dollars because of the gorgeous view of the river valley.

The apartment where I lived with my mom was a one-bedroom. We slept on two bunk beds in the same room with blankets put up around our bottom bunks like bed curtains. Why bunk beds? I had two older sisters who didn't live with us anymore, but just in case they stopped by, my mom wanted to have a place for them to sleep.

Where was my dad? Who knew. My mom had been through the process of dating (when she had daughters) enough times that she had grown tired of it. She hadn't brought a man home since I was seven. So, unless one of my sisters showed up, then it was just the two of us.

I said before that it was the living room in Evander's house that made me feel so unworthy of him. That was because it was so different from the living room in my apartment. The family pictures on my living room walls were half-sized school pictures. My mom couldn't afford to get them done every year, so they were all up on the wall – even the ones from when I was in the second grade. I look scruffy. No one bothered to make sure my hair was smooth or that my face

was clean. It wasn't just me either, my sisters looked the same.

As for my sisters, there was Rachel. She moved out when she was seventeen. Since then, she worked in an overpriced, low-class restaurant that dressed their waitresses up like hookers for their male oil-rigger clientele. I despised her for not aiming for something better, but she made major money in tips. And she had a secret. The truth was her head was shaved and she wore a beautiful blonde wig to work. That proved there was a tiny spark of rebellion in her and I knew that one day she would make enough money to do something better with her life.

My other sister, Carly, ran away from home six months before. My mother made the police treat her disappearance like a missing-person case, but I knew she ran away and we wouldn't find her until she came back on her own. Maybe that was her idea of a prank to drive all of us nuts, or maybe she outright hated us. Who could tell exactly what she thought?

By that point in my unnecessary and painful comparison of living rooms, I wasn't feeling too excited to read Evander's book. I left it in my school bag and brushed my teeth instead.

Chapter Two

The Lord of the Capricorns

It was Friday and I hated everybody. I was in the first semester of grade eleven and I hated everybody. My teacher? Yeah, I hated him. He was telling us why we had to study like we'd never studied before if we wanted to do well on the midterm. The lunch lady? Yeah, I hated her, too. I had to buy my lunch that day and the prices were so high. The kid who had the locker next to me? Yeah, I hated him, too. We hadn't even had our lockers for two months yet and something inside his was starting to smell. The girl who texted me in the middle of math class? Yep, I utterly despised her.

I only had one spare that day and it was during the second to last period. It wasn't until then that I got a chance to crack open Evander's book. I went to the library, found a cozy spot in the corner on one of the couches, and pulled it out of my bag. The book itself smelled great. It looked great too, just like one of those beautifully bound books on the shelf of a nineteenth-century library. I was excited as I flipped open the cover and found the title of the first part. It was called *The Lord of the Capricorns*.

Insert girlish scream—which was immediately squelched by the grouchy librarian's glare.

I started reading.

Once upon a time, there was a land of greenness unlike any other. It bordered no seashore, no desert, and no mountains. It was a land touched by the grace of the goddess of rain. There, the sun shone golden, covering the land in light and beauty. It was a place of peace where the fields had not absorbed the blood of war and where dead warriors were not buried. Flowers were as valuable as gemstones. Images reflected on a clear lake's surface were more prized than those on foreign mirrors.

The kingdom was known as Lilikeen. In the center of all gracefulness and goodness was their greatest prize, Princess Sarafina. Her beauty caused aches of longing throughout all the neighboring countries. Her head was blessed with soft, sunlit, curls that fell in voluminous waves to her slender waist. When she wore rings on her fingers, the rings seemed enormous and made her fingers more elegant. Her eyes were green like the green that unfolds in the curve of a newborn leaf.

Love for her was inevitable.

Reading it made me hate Evander, too. Of course, he liked that kind of girl. It sounded like a female version of him, except for the green eyes. But even after having my fears about him confirmed, my disgust didn't negate my interest in what he had to say, so I kept reading.

At the age of fourteen, she stood in her personal library. It was a beautiful room designed with enormous panels of glass in the ceiling to let in the light for the weightless vines that clung to the bookshelves, adding color and freshness. She was meant to entertain a prince, but not just any prince. The youth invited was the second prince of the Kingdom of Bellique—a country with a strong political hold on Lilikeen.

Bellique lay to the south. It was a great arching country that covered the entire continental coast and cradled a multitude of small kingdoms in its arc. It was the shape of a crescent moon and Lilikeen was like a star dangling from the top corner of it. Bellique sat in a rather difficult position, for it was constantly under invasion from the countries across the sea. It was stained in blood until the earth was red, and if Lilikeen and her neighbors wished to keep their lands pure from warfare, they had to pay a heavy tribute. The money kept Bellique's soldiers paid, their weapons sharp, and their boats afloat. Each and every citizen of Lilikeen paid some of their

income to keep Bellique's war machine ticking.

The morning Sarafina entertained Prince Murmur of Bellique, the Queen of Lilikeen watched with great interest from a balcony above.

Murmur entered. Sarafina stood by an empty fireplace with nothing on her mind particularly. She had already learned she did not need to exert herself, particularly when dealing with prospective suitors. She did not need to think of witty conversation. They were happy enough to talk about themselves and the time would soon pass.

For Murmur, the effect of her beauty was devastating. Because she did not speak much, she opened his imagination up for what she could be instead of exactly what she was, which was bored, underdeveloped, and childish. He didn't know this. The combination of her obvious acceptance of him and her outward perfection made him believe, even though he was too young to marry her then, that he could have no one else as his wife.

The next day he was carried away back to Bellique's impenetrable capital, but two months later a very royal missive was received by the King and Queen of Lilikeen. It was an official request for a betrothal. An excellent offer it was too, for it offered to have the tribute sent to Bellique reduced by half during each year Sarafina was married to Murmur. However, the King and Queen did not accept it. The Queen knew what their kingdom had—they had a daughter capable of mystifying a prince in one afternoon. From that moment on, the Queen began plotting for a better marriage for Sarafina. What good was Prince Murmur? He was not the Crown Prince. He would never be a king. Instead, she set her heart on his older brother, Prince Tremor.

Tremor was a legend. It was not Murmur who protected the entire continent from the threat across the sea, but the Crown Prince. If Sarafina could have the tribute halved by marrying a prince who would never be a king, how much could she have it reduced if she married the man who would be? Tremor was an unmarried soldier, a general, and a prince who would be a king.

The Queen wrote a letter inviting Tremor to Lilikeen. There was no response for over six months and when the epistle was received, it was opened to uncover his refusal. He could not leave his fortress at Sealoch to go courting. To the Queen, it was a minor setback. This was a different kind of warfare, one for which a queen was well equipped. She would have her daughter married to the Lord of Sealoch!

I sat back and thought about that for a second. If the story were a window into Evander's life—did he fear his aunt and uncle would tell him who to marry? Or could he not have the girl he wanted? I tapped my toe thoughtfully when the rustling of my skirt caught my attention. I stopped, stunned, I hadn't worn a skirt to school that day.

Taking my eyes off Evander's book, I saw I was wearing a yellow gown and I was not in the school library anymore. Getting up, I realized I was standing in a round room with stone walls. Going to a window, I stared out at a breathtaking green prairie that seemed to stretch forever. A castle spread out beneath me too, just like the dress had. I was standing in a turret room. I could see other towers, courtyards inside the gates, people walking about in fine apparel, stone archways, and beauty everywhere.

Looking around the room, I saw a bed with the curtains tied back, a huge armoire, a dressing table with silver brushes, and a mirror propped up on it. Moving closer, I saw my reflection in it. I looked like the girl in the story. It wasn't that my face was different. It was the same, but my hair was vibrant blonde with glorious curls. In the sunlight, my face had radiant color—something I never saw when I did my makeup in the cheap fluorescent light in my bathroom back home. Was it really me?

A second later there was a tap on the door and a young girl around twelve years old came in.

"I've come to get you ready, Princess Sarafina," she chirped.

I stood there for a second. My name was Sarah, not Sarafina. "Excuse me," I said kindly. "What's your name?"

"Tripsy."

"Okay, Tripsy. How did I get here?"

She looked around the room like she didn't understand.

Then I said, "I'm not from this place. I was reading a book in my school library."

She froze completely, like a statue. She had stopped breathing. Every muscle in her body seemed paralyzed.

I went up to her and waved my hand in front of her eyes, but she didn't even blink. Then I yelled at her, "Wake up, Tripsy!"

She came to life again. "What would you like to wear to the ball tonight?" she asked, opening two of the armoire doors. She started pulling out gowns of all different colors and varieties. I had never seen anything like it in my life—not even when I skulked into bridal shops to peek at what the girls who had money bought.

Even though it would have been fun to simply put on a dress and run downstairs to a ball, everything was too weird. Wasn't I in the library at school? Wasn't everything I saw and felt a fantasy my brain cooked up to go along with Evander's story? What if the castle was in my brain and my body was still at school? If that were the case, I couldn't just take my clothes off and start putting on imaginary ones. I was already going to be sent to the funny farm for talking out loud to make-believe Tripsy with everyone in the library hearing me.

I grabbed the back of the chair, hoping it was really the couch in the library and I was plum crazy. I looked around for Evander's book, but it was nowhere to be seen. Did I set it down? I looked all over the room, but it was gone.

Tripsy was holding a ball gown in each hand, waiting for me to make a decision.

Getting desperate, I pinched myself. It hurt, but nothing happened. Crap! What was I supposed to do? Listen to a puffed-up personification of my imagination and strip? I closed my eyes, wound up, and slapped myself across the cheek. It hurt, but when I opened my eyes again, nothing had changed.

Tripsy's expression didn't seem to register that anything was weird with my behavior. Somehow for her, it looked like everything was normal.

So at the risk of sounding crazy, I tried another tactic. I started screaming. Well, not really screaming, but calling out with a bit of volume to the air around me. "Whoever is watching me make a fool of myself, please stop me. Take me to the office. I'm not feeling well. Give me a ride home. I need to rest. But please don't smack me across the cheek. I already tried that and it didn't do anything. Help me. Please!"

Nothing happened.

I tried yelling again. "Really! I'm crazy! I need professional help!"

That time Tripsy came over and touched my arm. "Why don't you rest a minute, Your Highness? You can tell me which ones you like from where you're sitting."

I frowned miserably. I felt like I was about to play a make-believe princess game in front of half of my school. If only I could keep my public transgression to talking in my sleep. That wouldn't be so bad, except, I didn't feel like I was dreaming. Besides, I never fell asleep anywhere other than my bed. The vision in front of me had more clarity and detail than any dream I'd had before. The only other conclusion I could draw was that I was completely nuts. Delusions! And if that were true, then it would be better if I were found out sooner, so that

someone could get me some help! For the time being, I let my overactive imagination take the reins.

I looked at the dresses Tripsy was presenting. At least, it was a good fantasy so far (although if I were going to fantasize in public I would not have chosen a princess theme). The dresses were interesting. I'd never seen a dress show before. There were pink silky ones, navy ones with jewels sewn all over them, orange ones with embroidered flowers, coral-colored ones with thousands of beads sewn on, purple ones with long transparent overlays. I was at a complete loss of which one to choose or what to do.

"Which one would you like to wear tonight?" Tripsy asked again. "They're expecting you downstairs in half an hour."

"Well, they'll have to wait," I said, as I picked up the coral colored one. "I'm not sure which one to choose. As soon as I start stripping in the library, I'm sure to get hauled off to the loony bin."

Tripsy didn't remark. She didn't hear me.

It was at that moment that the Queen paraded in. She had to be the Queen. She couldn't be anyone else with a three-tiered crown on her head. She was a vision. Her dress was black with green fringes running down the side and across the bodice. She looked like the Queen of Hearts. No, she looked more like the Queen of Shamrocks, since she was wearing green.

"What are you doing?" she hissed at me. "Didn't I tell you Prince Murmur is attending tonight? You're supposed to be downstairs. Tripsy, get out. I'll finish getting the Princess ready myself."

Tripsy ran for her life and shut the door behind her.

"You can't wear that!" The monarch scoffed at the yellow dress I had been so hesitant to take off.

"Why not?" I asked, as I suddenly felt that was a brilliant defense. Then I wouldn't have to change into anything.

She scowled at me. "I'm not in the mood for jokes," she pronounced noisily. "Choose a gown at once."

I grabbed a white one.

"No," the Queen said, and snatched it out of my hand. "That's for your wedding."

"All right," I said and reached for a pink one.

"No. Not that one either. Really, darling, where did your sense go? This one," she said, as she pulled one from the bottom of the pile.

The dress had a tight white bodice and a spring green skirt that flared out to infinity. The bodice had a pattern of beautifully arranged beads. Stepping into it, I wondered if princesses felt like they were going to die of embarrassment when they changed outfits. I thought I could feel the eyes of thirty invisible teenage boys staring at me in the library. If only I could wake up.

"Of course you couldn't wear pink," the Queen huffed. "This is a national celebration."

"What are we celebrating?" I asked. She tightened the corset strings. I yelped.

She didn't skip a beat. "Your letter from Tremor, of course. Finally, after all these years of waiting, he's agreed to marry you. Just thinking about it fills me with triumph. Mind you don't flirt with Murmur tonight, dear. If you do, he won't like to see you as his sister-in-law and the future queen of Bellique. He'll be miserable."

"I'm going to marry Prince Tremor, then?" I asked uneasily as I remembered the opening paragraphs of Evander's book.

"Of course."

"Is Tremor downstairs, too?"

“Of course not! He’s with the soldiers in Sealoch. Why would he be here? You’ll go to him tomorrow. I can just imagine you, standing on the balcony of the castle at Sealoch.” She shoved me into a chair and started pinning my hair into an elaborate up-do. “You’ll wear red then, the color of Bellique, and all the soldiers will salute you and think of your beauty as they throw their bodies into the fray for your sake.”

“My sake!” I gasped.

“For the sake of us all,” she corrected. “And after the battles, you’ll go down to the encampment with a flock of servants and see to the medical needs of the brave men that fight for our freedom. It will be glorious and you, my love, will be the most famous beauty in history.”

I thought about that. “Lowly teenager from a one-bedroom apartment becomes *The Most Famous Beauty in History*.” I’d never imagined being like Cleopatra or Pocahontas. It didn’t seem possible. I’d only wanted to stop being so wretchedly inferior to Evander. The most I’d ever wished was for him to like me.

Then something occurred to me. “Does Prince Tremor love me?”

“Love you? He’s never even met you, but that doesn’t matter. The fame of your beauty has reached his ears,” she said as she corrected the direction I was looking with both her hands on either side of my head. “He must be very interested in you to declare that he wants to marry you. Don’t worry about his stipulations and go right ahead.”

“Stipulations? What stipulations?”

“Oh, nothing,” she said, sticking a final sparkling adornment in my hair. “Nothing. He just wants you to take a boat down the river to Sealoch. It’ll be easy, just a little ferry ride. My brave princess can easily manage it.”

“Right,” I said as the Queen pronounced me ready and elegantly hauled me down the curving stairway.

We descended the tower stairs and down a long hallway onto a balcony that overlooked the ballroom. It was a lovely room with tall, graceful, archways, and six crystal chandeliers hanging from the ceiling. There were beautiful wooden beams put together in a jigsaw pattern on the ceiling with the centers of each pattern like a rose painted green. There were cream and emerald tiles on the floor. At one end, harpists were playing. At the other end, people danced.

Everyone stopped what they were doing when the Queen and I came in and immediately a man dressed in a strange green and yellow coat stepped into place next to me. From there he announced, “Queen Rosary the Fourth and Princess Sarafina.”

I felt kind of important despite my awkwardness as everyone else in the room bowed. Then the Queen led me down another staircase and onto the ballroom floor. Upon my arrival, at least a dozen people moved to speak to me, either to offer their congratulations or to tell me how much they would miss me after I went to Sealoch. Then suddenly, the crowd parted and made way for one man.

At first, I didn’t know who he was. He was older, had a thick beard, and wore a gold ring around his head. Then it became clear to me. It was the King—Sarafina’s father.

He took my hand in a firm grip and kissed both my cheeks. Unfortunately, I took a step backward. I had played along with my incredibly vivid daydream, but I couldn’t act normal in that situation. He had a beard. I’d never been kissed by a man or a boy and starting me off with kissing an older man with hair on his face was a little much for me. Luckily, he didn’t seem put off by it. Actually, he seemed amused and grabbed my elbow to help me steady myself.

“I knew my darling girl would secure our country’s future,” he said joyfully. His eyes were wet and droplets of water settled in his eyelashes.

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