

Prologue

Once upon a time, a very long time ago, the Beginning fell in love with the End. Some also say the Sun fell in love with the Moon, the Light with the Dark, Good with Evil, Everything with Nothing.

The two of them had as many names as they had faces, but they were commonly called the Sun King and the Queen of the Night. They loved each other deeply and reigned as the first gods over a world that was filled with wonder, potent yet untamed and full of chaos. It wasn't long before new gods and goddesses were born from the chaos. The first was a woman who seemed to emerge from the Earth itself, and with her came Father Sky.

Mother Earth was kind, a voice of harmony amidst the chaos, but she could also be impetuous and wild, and her anger could shake the world. In contrast, Father Sky was wise, his thoughts boundless and his will unbending, but his arrogance and pride were as limitless as the horizon itself.

At first glance, they were complete opposites, yet they existed in perfect harmony.

They were followed by a maiden with eyes of infinity and hair spun from gold. When she laughed, the sun rose, when she dreamed, the moon caressed her cheeks. The Sun King and the Queen of the Night loved her dearly and the maiden was henceforth called Sister Time. The world became calmer, tamed by the gods, the chaos almost completely receded. Almost.

Chaos reared up one last time. The earth shook, the mountains spewed fire into the sky. And along with the storm and the rain came the last of the gods. The chaos consolidated into a cold heart that would henceforth beat within the chest of Brother Fate.

Once the chaos was tamed, it was possible for more life to develop on Earth, and so the first humans began to populate the world. The gods were fascinated because, unlike them, these humans were finite, their lives lasting no longer than the blink of an eye, and yet they were capable of doing things the gods themselves could not: they brought forth life. Children turned into women and men, women became mothers and men

became fathers. The children's laughter sounded like music to the ears of the gods.

Curious, the gods walked among the humans, and it is said that they gifted magic to those children they cared about the most and imposed tests on them. Those who passed these tests received the gods' favor – not just magic, riches and land, but also the gift of immortality. Those who had been thus favored gathered as courtiers among the gods, the first noble families who later went down in history as the first fairy tale families.

The humans were happy, the world was full of magic and wonder, and the gods reigned in harmony.

Their existence was infinite. They knew neither sorrow nor suffering. They were happy. Well, most of them were.

"I know: the Queen of the Night was sad!" I burst out.

"Shh, stop interrupting, Rain," Fiona hissed at me, a light summer breeze blowing her black hair around her shoulders.

Even though Fiona was twelve and thus five years my senior, she always claimed we looked like twins. But that wasn't true. Fiona's skin was much lighter than mine because she spent a lot more time in the library studying. Things for big girls, as Grandma liked to say. And I wasn't a big girl. According to Grandma, at least. Fiona's hair was long and smooth, mine always stubborn, and after my cousin Avery had stuck a piece of chewing gum into my hair, it was so short it tickled my ears.

In my opinion, the only thing Fiona and I really had in common were our eyes. They were blue. Just like Mum's and Aunt Lilly's and Grandma's. Apparently Aunt Pansy had had blue eyes as well. Back then, before ... I wasn't sure before what because at that point Mum and the others always went silent. But given that her son, my cousin Avery, had been living with us for as long as I could remember, she must have been gone for a very, very long time.

"Pay attention, children!" Grandma lowered the book of fairy tales with a stern look. She was sitting on the old bench underneath the old apple tree in front of our house. With her long nose and piercing eyes, she always reminded me of a crow. Just scarier.

"Rain is always making trouble," Fiona snapped at me.

"That's not true," I exclaimed, cheeks hot with anger. "But it's a stupid story. We've heard it a million times. At least!"

"You're such a child," Fiona hissed, throwing her long hair over her shoulder. A butterfly fluttered around her. Animals loved Fiona. She was always surrounded by butterflies. Like a flower, though a poisonous one. I glared at her.

"That's enough," Grandma said, her strict tone sufficient to shut up both of us. She adjusted her round glasses, their golden frames flashing in the sunlight. "Fiona. It is not proper for a young lady to lose her composure and raise her voice."

"But Rain ..."

"Rain," Grandma interrupted her. I slumped under her piercing look. Grandma's gaze was always uncomfortably heavy. "Rain must learn to listen. You may know this story already, but you haven't understood it."

"Of course I understand it," I said defiantly, and Fiona pinched my leg. The cow.

"Well, if that's the case, you're welcome to go back into the house. I'm sure Avery will be glad about the company."

"No." I blinked at her, fidgeting with a loose thread on my white dress. The tall grass tickled between my naked feet. My left knee was scraped from when I had tried to climb higher on the apple tree than Avery. "Why is Avery never allowed to attend history class? I'm sure he would like to be here."

Grandma clicked her tongue, frowning. "Avery is a Hunter."

"Is that bad?"

"He comes after his father. We, on the other hand, are Snows."

Just like every time Grandma said this, something in her face made my breath catch. Made me feel important.

"We carry a powerful and ancient heritage within us. We are descended from the first fairy tale families that were gifted magic and immortality by the gods themselves.

"Blue blood flows in our veins, old blood, powerful blood. We and the other fairy tale families are the last heirs of true magic. Fiona?" Her gazes bored into my sister's eyes, who squared her slender shoulders. "Who were the first fairy tale families to receive gifts from the gods?"

"The gods gave particularly promising humans magical gifts and imposed difficult tests on them. Those who successfully passed these tests received the gods' favor and were blessed with immortality as well as land and riches. We no longer know how many there were because many fairy tales have been lost over time, but some of the greatest noble courtiers were the families from: Cinderella, Rapunzel, Snow White, The Frog Prince, Sleeping Beauty, Snow-White and Rose-Red, Allerleirauh, The Six Swans, Thrusbeard, The Twelve Dancing Princesses, The Goose Girl and The Three Snake-Leaves."

"Among others ... but apart from that, that is correct." Grandma turned towards me. "Rain? Which heritage do we carry within us?"

"We are descendants of the Snow White Family," I said, quick as a shot.

"That is correct," she said, an expression of pride flitting through her eyes.

"Our ancestor was Snow White. After passing three difficult tests, she became one of the most powerful courtiers. Which tests were they, Rain?"

I nervously peered across to Fiona, who was smiling the same way Grandma did when she thought someone was stupid but was too polite to say so. I glared at her defiantly and said: "She was poisoned by a comb, strangled by a corset and choked on an apple. Once she had passed all tests, she was accepted at the court of the gods."

That went down like butter. It was Avery who had taught me the word strangled.

Fiona pressed her lips together before giving a pointedly friendly smile and patting my head: "Well done, Rain."

"Stop that," I said, swatting her hand off my head.

"What? I was just praising you."

"No, you were making fun of me."

"Children!" Grandma chided us, giving us a sharp look until we moved apart again. Granny sighed before continuing: "Who can ...?"

"Grandma?" I interrupted her, prompting another sigh.

"What is it, Rain?"

"Which gift did Snow White receive from the gods?" I asked, a little breathlessly.

Grandma's smile conjured fine wrinkles around her mouth that looked softer than the rest of her. Almost conspiratorially, she said: "She received the gift of a pure heart."

I pouted in disappointment. "That's it?"

"What do you mean, that's it? What did you expect?" Grandma asked, displeased.

"I was thinking of something more magical, something cooler," I said, and Grandma looked like I had put a frog in her soup.

"Something cooler," she repeated the word with the level of contempt she otherwise only bestowed on democracy.

"My dear child, the gift of a pure heart is extremely powerful. Her soul was so pure and untainted that even the queen's poison had no effect, she could use her kindness and warmth as skillfully as a sword and even defeat the sleep of death. Do not underestimate this gift. She passed all tests that were imposed on her, making her one of the most well-known fairy tale characters of all time. We Snow women carry this heritage within us. This gift still lies dormant inside us, even if there is hardly any

magic left in this dismal world. We are its last testimony. One of the few fairy tale families who haven't died out. It is up to us to maintain and pass on that heritage. To hope that the gods will impose tests on us again so that we can prove ourselves and restore the ancient glory of the fairy tale families."

Fiona's lips curled with pride while she lowered her gaze, her eyelashes touching her cheeks. "I shall endeavor to live up to our heritage, Grandma."

"I sure hope so," Grandma said, passing her the book. "Would you like to continue reading, my child?"

Chapter 1

Eleven years later

"Heinrich, the carriage is breaking apart."

"No, my lord, the carriage it's not,
But one of the bands surrounding my heart,
That suffered such great pain."

From "The Frog Prince; or, Iron Henry"
Brothers Grimm

Somehow stealing a car was easier in theory than in practice. Most of all, it was less dirty.

I wiped my dusty hands on my black leather jacket in disgust. My fingers were already black. I would basically have to scrub them bloody to get them clean again and remove all traces. My grandma noticed every detail, no matter how small.

"Hurry up, Rain!" A pale freckled face appeared above me, thick brown hair tumbling out from underneath a blue hoodie. "We've got about two minutes before we'll get busted," my best friend Holly said.

Grunting through gritted teeth, I kept fiddling with the cables of the ancient Bentley. "Not long now, I just need to bypass the poles of the cables between relay and battery."

Looking skeptical, Holly put the straw of her blue slushie in her mouth and slurped loudly. "Looks to me like you're producing cable spaghetti rather than connecting poles," she declared.

There was a thump from the back seat and my cousin Avery's mop of blond hair appeared between the two of us. "If you cause a short circuit that kills the three of us, Grandma will strike us all so dead. I mean, she'll strike us dead anyway when she finds out it's her car we're stealing. And it'll only get worse if she finds out why we're doing it."

Avery wasn't entirely wrong. Unfortunately Granny was the only one with a car that was old enough to hotwire. My dad's Polo might look rusty but I'd never manage to hotwire it. Same for my mum's Audi or my aunt's Mini.

The cables dug into my skin as I looked up abruptly. "If you two could stop complaining and start helping me instead? Otherwise we'll never make it to our gig at the *Cage*."

"How?" they both asked at the same time.

"How about some light?"

"Oh, of course ..." Holly pulled out her mobile phone and gave me some light while I twisted the cables together.

"Ok, that should really ... here ... and then ..." A spark of light sizzled between my fingers, singeing my fingertips. I swore softly, more from fright than pain. Avery ducked and Holly sought cover behind her slushie. At the same moment, the motor rattled to life. Much too loudly. We flinched.

I looked nervously across to the house. Everything remained dark. Luckily my family were sound sleepers.

Everyone except Granny, that is ...

But when there were still no lights to be seen, I sat up triumphantly. "There we go, it worked!" I grinned at Holly and Avery, ignoring my throbbing fingers.

"We really need our own car," my cousin complained.

"You're welcome to do it yourself next time while I make unhelpful comments from the back seat," I offered and put the car in gear, the dim headlights illuminating the gravel driveway.

I glanced into the rear-view mirror. The venerable building that was Whitestone Manor rose up behind us. So massive and ancient that it was essentially held together by overgrowing ivy, a bit of stone and pure willpower. Everything remained dark, and yet I suddenly felt like the numerous windows with their drawn curtains were staring at us accusingly. This house definitely knew and saw too much. I resolutely stepped

on the gas, the motor producing an ear-deafening bang that sounded like a pistol shot.

The three of us flinched again while Holly hastily buckled up. "Go, go, go!"

I hit the gas. Gravel sprayed from underneath the wheels as we thundered down the driveway.

"So much for inconspicuous. The light in Granny's bedroom just went on," my cousin observed, craning his slim neck to keep the manor in sight.

Holly frantically slurped her slushie while I shot the vintage car around the corner, pushing the old AC/DC tape into the tape deck. The car was so old that even the tape deck was modern by comparison. A second later, *Thunderstruck* was blasting through the chassis. This stunt would probably get us grounded for three months, but for this brief moment it was totally worth it. Grinning broadly, I maxed out the volume, my ears positively vibrating, and drummed my black-painted nails on the steering wheel while I raced down the winding road. The forest that was part of the estate rushed past us. I heard Avery wind down the window behind me, hooting loudly out the window. Cold October wind whipped into the car, messing up my short black bob.

Holly wedged the slushie between her legs and shot me an amused glance. "If we keep this up, we'll make tomorrow's edition of the Woodley village news."

"More publicity for our band," I retorted.

My friend snorted while turning towards Avery, grabbing his coat and dragging him back into the car. "Get your head inside, Rambo, or you'll just get yet another sinus infection."

My cousin flopped back onto the seat with tousled hair and a broad grin. "I'm taking it all back. We should steal cars more often."

Amused, I stared at the road in front of us. The wrought-iron driveway gate was open. Granny usually personally locked it every evening so that – and I quote – no "prying rabble" would think of wandering around on her private estate. There were more than a few crazy tourists who would do anything to see a "real" fairy tale family up close. One time, some creepy dude offered me over two thousand quid if I let him onto our estate. Grandma almost had a fit when she heard about it. Particularly because I had been ten at the time and seriously considered taking him up on the offer. We might have a peerage and be descended from a very dead fairy tale character, but that didn't mean we were rich. Whitestone was nothing but a ruin. Of course there were some fairy tale families who capitalized on this kind of tourism and made fat profits off their family tree, even if it was nothing but a piece of paper, but Grandma would probably rather set fire to both herself and Whitestone before

allowing tourists onto our estate. No matter how tight the money was. Appearances were everything, and if anyone was clinging to an ancient facade, it was Granny.

We were Snows.

We lived off family trees, a straight sitting posture and well-groomed cuticles, and we were proud of it.

How I hated being a Snow.

The headlights lit up a few weeping willows that were leaning heavily over the gate with age. I took a deep breath and tried to relax while I raced towards the gate as if someone were chasing us, casting repeated glances in the rear-view mirror.

"You bluebloods suffer from actual paranoia, you know that?" Holly needled me, blowing a strand of hair away from her face.

"And you non-nobles are jealous because nobody cares about your pathetic little fairy tales," I retorted, and my best friend, who was descended from the family from Old Mother Frost, gave me the finger.

Yup, that's what it was like growing up as the descendant of a fairy tale character. Even your best friends were descendants. Not that there were that many of us left. As a matter of fact, there was a limited number of families and they stuck together. At least outwardly. Provided your family tree was clearly rooted in a fairy tale and you could afford it, that meant our own kindergartens, our own primary schools and, as in our case right now, Grimm's College, which our great-great-grandparents had already attended to uphold their exclusivity. To the rest of the world, we descendants were probably a kind of wacky cult. A very famous cult about which there were lots of rumors and photos in the gossip magazines.

But the point was that we had hardly any friendships with "normal" people. Grandma almost had a heart attack every time I brought home a friend whose ancestors didn't at least have a talking feather duster. She was already less than enthusiastic about my friendship with Holly, who, while descended from a fairy tale character, didn't have a drop of noble blood inside her.

"Just FYI: we need to be on stage in forty minutes if we want to make our gig," Avery pointed out.

I took a deep breath, looked into the rear-view mirror and recoiled so violently that I jerked the steering wheel sideways. Avery and Holly yelled in alarm. A young man was visible in the rear-view mirror. Dark hair, dark eyes and an amused grin on his lips. He gave a cheerful wave. It looked as if he was sitting next to Avery in the back seat, but I knew there was nobody there. Just a ghost. Just an illusion, nothing more.

"Piss off!" I snapped.

"What's wrong with you, Rain?" my friend screeched while I jerked the steering wheel back again.

I shook my head to calm my thoughts and glared at the figure in the rear-view mirror. It cheekily winked at me before vanishing a moment later. Thank God. I had always seen a lot of invisible things. Especially as a child. Unfortunately I still had a tendency to do so, and these days it wasn't even half as cute.

"Sorry. A fly," I lied, squaring my shoulders. "We'll make it!" I accelerated until the speedo was completely maxed out.

Fifty minutes later we turned into the parking lot of the *Cage*. The club was right in the heart of London. I parked so crookedly that I would have gotten a ticket anywhere else. I killed the engine, grabbed my guitar bag, slid the strap over my shoulder and slammed the door shut behind me. London lay before us. Glittering, colorful and as bright as a diamond someone had smashed into tiny pieces. The sweetish smell of the Thames wafted towards me, making me shiver in my leather jacket. Looked like October was too cold for my outfit after all.

I pulled up the zipper on my jacket and nodded at Avery and Holly. Holly adjusted her hat, rocking nervously on the balls of her feet. Avery hung the strap of his bass over his shoulder.

"Now or never," I said grimly and we started moving together.

My boots banged loudly on the asphalt as we approached the entrance of the *Cage*. The club was located in an old factory building and the queue in front of it was outrageously long. Just seeing that and thinking of playing for so many people on an actual stage, rather than at our grubby school gym in front of the caretaker who made sure that nobody stole so much as a volleyball, made my heart beat faster with excitement. The music of today's main act was already blasting from inside the club. A rock band called *The Screwers*.

Avery seemed to have read my thoughts because he snorted. "Looks like they couldn't think of an even stupider name."

"Maybe, but that didn't stop them from being on stage on time, which we certainly need to get better at," Holly interjected, her drum sticks sticking out of her pants pocket. The drum set was already at the club, so we only had to steal the car and not drag all our equipment along as well.

"Then again, the *Screwers* didn't have to climb out a window and steal a car to be here today," I grumbled, pushing past the queue. I simply ignored the middle fingers pointing my way and shortly after held up the band ID that dangled from my back pocket under the bouncer's nose. "Hey. We're the *Poisoned Apples*. We have a gig

here tonight." I took my guitar off my shoulder and tried to walk past him, but the guy didn't move.

He just stared at us. "You're late."

Now I did stop, annoyed. "We noticed. We ... had car trouble." I nodded towards the vintage car.

The bouncer crossed his arms in front of his chest. "You're late."

"Exactly. That's why we need to get inside asap, or ..."

He didn't even let me finish and just shook his head. "Sorry, kiddos. Airs and graces once you can afford them. Run late and you're not going to be on stage."

I felt Holly and Avery getting uneasy behind me.

"But we couldn't get ..." Holly began hesitantly, but I was already in the guy's face, chin raised.

"Now listen. We risked our necks to be here today. I've fought for this gig for months. This is our chance and we're not going to let anyone ruin it. Not my tyrant of a grandmother and not a steroid-inflated asshole like you either."

In hindsight, it might not have been the best idea to insult the guy who was supposed to let us in. Then again, hindsight is always twenty-twenty.

I stared the guy down, refusing to avert my gaze even when a vein on his forehead began to throb.

The bouncer leaned down towards me with a snort. Slowly enough that the leather outfit into which he'd squeezed his bulging muscles was creaking loudly. "Oh yeah?"

Narrowing my eyes, I stabbed my index finger into his ridiculously broad chest. "Wanna bet?"

His eyebrow shot up. "I think I'll risk it," he growled before grabbing me by the neck like a puppy. "Now, you're going to turn around and ... argh!" He grunted in pain.

I pulled back my knee, having just landed a juicy kick to his crown jewels. You had to give him credit for not letting go of me despite the pain.

"You little bitch!" he wheezed while I just winked at him, zipping open my jacket and slipping out of it in one smooth movement so that he ended up clutching nothing but a piece of leather. Behind us, the queue cheered as if they were enjoying a good show.

I just shouted "Let's go!", grabbed my guitar and tore open the door.

Holly and Avery followed me. Out of the corner of my eye, I could see my cousin grinning broadly while Holly looked as if she might die of shame right there and then. Ah well, she'd just have cop it.

"Stop! Stop, you ..."

The bouncer's bark was swallowed by the door of the club slamming shut. Rock music blared towards us. My already quickened pulse shifted up yet another gear as I plunged into the crowd inside the *Cage*.

The club was packed, the stage brightly lit. On it were the *Screwers*, their lead singer, a guy with long blond hair and smudged eyeliner, roaring into the microphone. He was a few bars off as far as I could tell, but the bass player managed to save most of it. The beat vibrated in my bones and a guitar riff elicited enthusiastic cheers from people. You had to hand it to them, their music definitely packed a punch.

I let my gaze wander until it landed on the bar. Or rather on Jolanda Nightingale, a descendant from Jorinda and Joringel and the owner of the *Cage*. She was currently drawing a pint behind the bar, which was covered in band stickers and scrawled signatures. I pushed through the crowd, copping a few painful kicks to the legs and pokes to the ribs before I managed to set my guitar down beside me, swing myself up onto a bar stool and lean across the counter.

"Jolanda!" I called, waving.

The club owner looked up, studying me with a disparaging expression. "Well, look who decided to turn up after all." She threw a cleaning rag over her shoulder.

I blew a strand of hair away from my face. "We're here and can get going right away."

"You're late."

"I'm really sorry, but ..."

"There are no buts in this business. Sorry. You're late. No gig for you."

Something constricted inside my chest. Digging my fingers into the scuffed wood, I leaned further across the bar. "Just three songs," I pleaded.

"No."

"Just one."

"No."

"Please, Jolanda, we ..."

There was a bang as Jolanda set a beer down so forcefully on the counter in front of a customer that the foam spilled over. "No, Rain. You know me. I've been turning a blind eye since you were fourteen and tried to convince me you were of age. I'm not a fan of keeping children from doing something they clearly don't want to be kept from doing. It's not like your mum and I were any different, after all. But being in front of the stage and being on stage are different things. Up there, you're no longer a child. Being up there means taking on responsibility. If you can't do that, your place is elsewhere but not here. Consider it a valuable life lesson. Life punishes those who come too late."

"Jolanda, please. We can't just leave like that," I said in a tight voice, staring at her as intensely as I could.

Jolanda simply stared back. "Not today. I can offer you another gig in three months' time."

"Three what?"

"I'm sorry." She turned away, disappearing towards the other end of the bar.

Shaken, I watched her leave. I was having trouble breathing and my heart beat with a decidedly unhealthy rhythm.

"Rain? Let's just go." Holly squeezed in beside me.

I pressed my lips together and shook my head. "No. I'll talk to Jolanda again. She has to let us play tonight."

"Rain ..." my friend started when a heavy hand suddenly slammed onto my shoulder. I turned around in alarm and found myself looking into the bouncer's pissed-off face.

"Look who we got here," he snarled.

Oops. "Well ..." I started but before I could say anything else, the huge man had already grabbed me, throwing me over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. My world tilted so that I saw Avery's and Holly's stunned faces upside down.

"What are you doing? Let me down!" I yelled at the bouncer who was stomping with big steps towards the door we had only just come through. My friends exchanged a glance, shrugged and followed me, Holly with my guitar over her shoulder. "This is going to have serious consequences! Do you have any idea who I am?" I yelled at the rocking butt in front of my nose while I squirmed and twisted like an eel.

"Should I?" the bouncer asked, unimpressed.

"Of course you should! I'm Rain Snow. Granddaughter of Esmeralda Snow. And when she finds out how you're treating me right now, death by guillotine will be reintroduced more quickly than you'll lose your job."

Fine, maybe a little far-fetched. Then again, my grandmother was perfectly capable of reducing grown men to tears.

"Snows? Never heard of them," he said, unmoved. As if. He was gripping me so hard the air went out of my lungs. My ribs uttered a distinctly disapproving crack.

Before I even managed to gasp for breath, cold evening air struck me again. A chorus of spiteful whistles and jeers accompanied us as I was carried past the queue all the way to the parking lot. I grimly raised my middle finger, netting me a few extra laughs.

"Sod you guys!" I snarled as the bouncer came to an abrupt halt, grabbed me around the waist and threw me off his shoulder like a sack of flour. I slammed onto my butt so hard that a sharp pain shot through my back. "Bastard!" I spluttered.

He flung my leather jacket into my face, simply said "You're banned," turned around and positioned himself in front of that stupid door again.

"We'll see where you can stick your ban when the whole world is talking about the *Poisoned Apples* and you'll be begging us to play here!" I yelled after him.

The guy didn't even glance in our direction.

"Guess that didn't work out." Avery plopped down onto the ground next to me, stretching out his long legs and looking languidly at me from underneath his blond hair. "You've got a bit of angry drool there, cousin." He pointed at my lower lip.

Annoyed, I slapped his hand aside and flopped onto my back like a starfish. "So close. We were so close to our goal. I could practically feel the stage underneath my feet."

I heard the sound of shoes on concrete next to my ear as Holly also plopped down next to me, slinging her arms around her drawn-up knees. "At least we tried," she said.

"And failed magnificently," Avery declared solemnly, sloppily tying his shoulder-long hair at his neck. "But I've got the moment you kicked the bouncer in the crown jewels on video. I'm going to turn it into the most successful GIF of all time. At least for ten minutes. Even five will be enough to make me a millionaire."

I looked up at him askance. "Are you shitting me?"

My cousin just grinned. His light-green eyes flashed. "Fine. I'll give you twenty percent."

I went back to staring at the sky above me with a sigh. London's smog was plunging the night into a hazy grey, but individual stars were still visible. They blinked at me. I blinked back.

"What a disaster. I'm so sorry," I mumbled, disappointment nearly suffocating me. My eyes were burning but I resolutely held the tears back. If I cried now, I'd never be able to show my face at the *Cage* again.

My cousin patted my knee. "At some point we'll manage to become rich and famous and get away from Woodley. And if that doesn't work, I'll marry rich and just take you along to my new castle."

"Granny saw us. If she gets her hands on us, we're dead, so you're going to have to marry pretty fast," I told him.

"Chin up, Rain."

I sighed deeply. "Maybe we should just run away. If we're quick, we could be in Scotland before Grandma catches up to us."

My cousin's eyes grew even wider as he hissed: "No, I really mean chin up, Rain! Someone's coming towards us and I have a feeling you don't want to look like a puffy-eyed raccoon that got dragged out of a rubbish bin in front of a certain somebody."

"Huh?" I asked, lifting my head and freezing a moment later.

A tall figure was stepping from the club. Short blond hair flashed. Full lips curled into a smile. A piercing blue gaze met mine. That should've been impossible at this distance but the guy was basically a kind of fairy tale prince. I guess his eyes had to sparkle in such an unnatural way. Fairy tale laws and so on ...

"Ugh, he's the last person I want to see right now!" I sat up so abruptly that something cracked in my neck. "Please tell me Edward Cinderbe isn't just coming out of the *Cage* and has witnessed this whole debacle."

"It's not just our head boy coming out of the *Cage*," my cousin replied with a mean grin. "His annoying sister and his incredibly attractive but aggressive cousin are also here. Who, by the way, was in detention with me today."

Indeed I now spotted two more figures behind Edward. I groaned inwardly.

"What are the high-born descendants of Cinderella doing here?" Holly asked.

I hummed and hawed. "I don't know what Brianna and Cyress are doing here, but it's possible ... I maybe may have possibly invited Edward."

"What?" They both looked at me, aghast.

"When did you invite him? And why didn't you tell me?" Holly wanted to know.

"It was at lunchtime today. He saw the flyer in my hand and ... It doesn't matter, it's not like I thought he'd actually turn up."

Holly's eyebrows shot up but she didn't say anything.

She didn't have to, either. That whole thing with Edward and me was a bit tricky. That whole thing with the Snows and the Cinderbes was a bit tricky. Not only did we live on adjacent properties, our families were arguably among the oldest and most influential in the country. As children, we had practically spent all our time together. Whether we had wanted to or not. We had gone to the same kindergarten and the same schools, and I had witnessed Edward transform from a shy, stuttering rugrat into an attractive high achiever who could do everything and knew everything. Even his hair fell perfectly at the right moment. To top it off, the guy was insufferably nice. I hated it. And I hated that grandma was making every effort to hook us up. I hated that he was so conformist and perfect. Everything I was never going to be. If he had at least been an asshole like his cousin Cyress, it would have been so much easier to dislike him, but no, his niceness regularly threw me.

But I knew one thing for sure. Edward Cinderbe and I would never be together. And not even just because of me. My grandma refused to see it, but the Cinderbes had been avoiding us for years now as if we had some contagious disease. I knew which one, too. It was called being broke. Unlike the Snows, the Cinderbes weren't just an old fairy tale family living in an even older house, no, the Cinderbes were rich. Filthy rich. And they not only exuded that, they lived like it and even chose their friends accordingly. Never in my life had I counted on him actually turning up to our gig.

"We could say you've got the flu and that's why we couldn't perform," Holly mused out loud.

"A nasty one that makes you throw up whenever a snobbish cheerleader gets too close," my cousin added.

Before I could weigh the pros and cons of that idea, the Cinderbes were already standing in front of us. Edward smiled at me. "When you promised me a badass show, I was ready for a lot but I definitely wasn't expecting to watch you being hauled from the club by a giant while cursing like a sailor."

"Cinderbe," I just drawled with a nod, "didn't expect to see you here."

Dimples appeared in his cheeks. "Wouldn't have missed it for the world. Will we still get to hear the notorious *Poisoned Apples* play today?"

Next to me, Avery gave a little cough, earning him a heavy blow with my elbow.

"No, there were a few issues, we'll probably perform some other time," I said feebly.

"Almost inspiring just how pathetic that was just now," Brianna commented. Unlike her brother, her hair was sandy, falling all the way to her hips. Their slim figures and elegant facial features were similar, though, as if they were more than just half siblings.

Edward frowned. "Don't be so mean, Brin."

She studied us with a disparaging look. "I'm just being honest. This is what we sacrificed our free evening for?"

"I thought we were here for the drinks," Cyress interjected. There was a click as he lit a joint. The tip flashed in the dark and smoke streamed from his mouth as he continued to speak. "I'm not nearly as drunk as I should be."

"We've got a maths test tomorrow," Edward objected with a stern look at his cousin.

"Precisely," Cyress just said, flicking ashes off his joint.

I struggled to my feet. "Well, I'm sorry the evening was a bust."

Edward smiled, and again a few dimples appeared in his cheeks. "It was by no means a waste of time. Shall we go back in? We've got to be home soon."

"Or your car is going to turn into a pumpkin?" Avery joked.

Edward blinked. "What?"

My eyes widened and I gave Avery a look.

He just shrugged. "Cinderella, awful family, glass, shoe, prince, midnight ... Am I the only one who finds that funny? Seriously?"

Edward cleared his throat. "Yeah, no, we've got that maths test tomorrow. That's why," he reminded us. "So are you coming back in with us?"

Avery rolled his eyes and mumbled something about people with no sense of humor. Only Cyress was grinning but I put that down to the weed rather than Avery.

"Thanks for the offer. But it looks like we've been banned from the club."

"Even better," Cyress said, stepping on the stub of his joint and giving a perfunctory wave. "I'm going back in."

"Wait for us, Cy!" Brianna called after him, looking at her brother. "Are you coming, Eddy?"

He hesitated. "Give me a minute. You guys go back in. But we really have to go soon. If Cy wants to get plastered, he better be quick."

"I'll tell him." Brianna threw a last glance at us that could have been interpreted as hostile if it hadn't been so bored before following her cousin into the club.

For a brief moment, we stared after them and an uncomfortable pause ensued. Holly eventually broke the silence. "We should get going, too. Provided we can get that old clunker going again. Otherwise it's going to be bloody long walk back to Woodley."

Edward frowned when he spotted the old car behind us. "Is that your car, Rain?"

I made a face. "No. Mine's at the workshop and still needs a few parts before it works."

"Actually, she's only got a seat and a steering wheel," Avery teased me.

"Only two more late shifts at Al's and I've got a motor," I countered.

"Late shifts? You're working next to school?" Edward asked.

We blinked at him. "Yeah. We all do," Holly explained. "Rain at my Uncle Al's workshop, Avery at the store, and I do tutoring."

Edward stared at us as if he'd never heard of the concept of needing a job to subsidize your pocket money. "Oooh. I'm surprised your grandma allows that sort of thing in addition to school." It sounded almost reverent and I had to admit: if anyone was even more of a tyrant than my grandma, it was probably Elstan Cinderbe. Edward's grandfather.

"Allow is such a big word. Let's say Holly helps me with homework three times a week," I mumbled.

The corners of his mouth twitched. "So whose is the car?"

"We borrowed it," I said evasively.

"I see," he muttered, trying his best to look convinced before smoothing down the short hair at the back of his neck. "Listen. There's something I wanted to ask you ...," he started and then stopped. His gaze darted across the carpark.

"Which is?" I stared at Edward, nonplussed. Mostly because he was still here talking to us. Talking to me. For so long and in one go.

"You're drooling again," Avery murmured into my ear.

"Get lost," I hissed back at him.

My cousin just laughed, put his arm around Holly's shoulder, who peeked up at him in surprise, and waved at Edward. "We'll go and see if we can scrape the slushie off the windscreen. See you later, head boy."

"No problem. See you guys tomorrow."

Avery winked and dragged Holly to the car while I wrapped my leather jacket, which I had put on again, more tightly around me.

"Is it about homework?" I took a random guess.

"Did you do it?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"Whether that's your question."

"No."

"Then no."

"What if I had said yes?"

"Then it would still be a no but I'd be more embarrassed about it."

He laughed and I had to force my pulse to stay down. "Rain, I ..." He bit his lip before suddenly bursting out: "Your birthday is three days from now, isn't it?"

Oh. That.

I took a deep breath.

"Yep," I said tersely, and Edward seemed to be waiting for more. Most female descendants could barely wait to turn eighteen and do *it*. And I'm not talking about sex. But I wasn't like most female descendants, and if I could have, I would have stopped time just so I wouldn't turn eighteen and have to do *it*.

"Well," Edward continued, visibly rattled by my frosty tone. "Are you excited yet? It's a big day for your family. It's all over the gossip magazines. It's been a while since

a descendant of a noble fairy tale family was permitted to follow the prophecy. Everyone's talking about it. Even my grandfather."

"Whatever. I was too distracted by the quiz on page ten to find out which sexy fairy tale descendant is my perfect match. Nice poster of you, by the way. How does it feel to hang on the walls of screaming fans?" I needled him.

Edward turned red around the tip of his nose and ran his hands through his hair again. "And?" he asked.

"And what?"

"Who's your perfect match?"

"Rumpelstiltskin," I replied drily, which got a laugh out of him.

"Okay, whatever. Looks like I'll be at your party."

"I thought you might be."

The dimple was back. He really needed to stop that. It made him disturbingly sexy, and the last thing I wanted was thinking of Edward Cinderbe as sexy. A relationship with Edward would only play into my grandmother's hands. Therefore everything about him – including his dimples – was off limits.

"All right. I'll see you tomorrow at school then." He winked at me.

"See you tomorrow," I echoed, watching him turn around and disappear back into the club.

Holy shit, what had happened just now? I swallowed and walked back to the Bentley.

"And? What did Cinderbe want?" Avery asked. He was lying on the hood of the car, getting head scratches from Holly.

Confused, I leaned against the bumper. "He brought up my birthday. Looks like he's on the guest list."

Holly sighed. "Don't make a face as if it was the end of the world. We survived that whole circus, too. Nothing's going to happen. Nothing ever happens. There's just a lot of fuss about a stupid prophecy that everyone knows is bullshit. It simply means a lot of prestige, cash and sponsorship money, plus we kind of have to do something special or people might start thinking we're completely normal." She winked at me and I rested my forehead against the cool chassis.

"I don't want any of it," I said.

Holly nudged me. "Cheer up. On that one day, you can finally feel like a real princess. Isn't that something? There'll be a few paparazzi taking pictures of you in a pretty dress. Then there'll be pompous speeches, you go down there, get it over and done with, and that's it. Nothing's gonna happen."

Ever & After (Vol. 1): Der schlafende Prinz

Ever & After (Vol. 1): The Sleeping Prince

By Stella Tack

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I pinched the bridge of my nose with a sigh. "I'd do anything to simply skip that day."

"Maybe a little bit of magic will help and there'll be a hurricane or London will be destroyed by an earthquake, then they'll have to cancel," Holly mused out loud.

"There's no magic anymore," Avery and I said simultaneously.

Holly snorted, amused. "Are you sure? I'm not so certain sometimes."

"I wish it was so," I muttered before pushing myself off the Bentley and heaving myself into the driver's seat. "I hope we'll be back before Granny has come up with a bunch of ways to have us legally murdered."