

THE LAST  
OF THE  
FIREDRAKES  
THE AVALONIA CHRONICLES

*To my father, the most courageous man  
I have ever known. Rest in peace.*

A

MAR



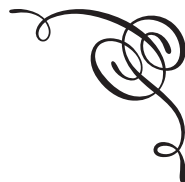
# VALONIA







1  
CHANCE



“GET UP!” said a familiar but thoroughly irritating voice. “Get up, you freak, and stop that awful shrieking.”

I sat up in my bed, sweat pouring from me, my heart beating so fast it was as though I had just run a race. I knew it was only a dream, but it always felt so real, as if I had really lived through it.

I turned my head to see my angry cousin Cornelia glaring straight at me. Her perfect blonde hair was neatly brushed and pulled back with a silver headband. She was already dressed for school, with her uniform and coat on.

“It’s eight o’clock, Aurora,” Cornelia said. “Get up. We are so late. I don’t want to get into trouble because of you again. We already missed the bus; Ms. Holden is going to have a fit. And, for God’s sake, stop this screaming thing that you do every night. I just can’t bear it anymore.” She huffed and preened at herself in the mirror.

“Maybe you need to see a shrink,” she added as an afterthought, glancing at me and turning back to her perfect reflection.

“Okay, okay, I’m up. Give me five,” I muttered as I rolled out of bed and jumped in the shower. Maybe I did need a shrink. I couldn’t control the nightmares, and I had no idea why I kept having the same dream over and over again.

It all started a few months ago, on the night of my sixteenth birthday. Every time I closed my eyes, I could see my mother running down a dark corridor, carrying me in her arms. I could actually feel the heat of the flames that licked at her heels as a woman she called Morgana came rushing towards us with a gleaming dagger raised to strike. But I never knew what happened next; it always ended the same way, with a flash of light and me screaming.

I could never remember anything about my birth parents. But now this dream had started—and I couldn't understand how I knew that the blonde-haired lady in my dream was my real mother. I was adopted when I was barely two years old and was fortunate that the clothes I was wearing had my name embroidered on them when my adoptive parents found me; otherwise, I wouldn't even know what it really was.

The warm shower shook off my fears, and I struggled to get dressed as fast as I could.

Cornelia was pacing up and down the small room as I quickly pulled on my ill-fitting uniform, which consisted of a white shirt tucked into a pleated green skirt, under a moss green blazer. I wore my scruffy black shoes and gathered my books and papers from my bedside where I had left them last night. I hadn't finished my homework, and my side of the room was an absolute mess.

"Come on," Cornelia said impatiently. "Mummy sent me back up to get you."

"Where's the rest of my homework?" I asked, frantically looking around for the lost sheets of paper.

Cornelia shrugged. "The piles of crumpled sheets lying on your desk?" she asked, putting her hands on her hips.

I glared at her and nodded slowly.

“I threw them out with the trash last night after you went to sleep. Mummy said to clean the room, so I did,” she said, grinning slyly.

“But those were my notes,” I ground out through clenched teeth, trying very hard to keep my anger in check.

“Well, you shouldn’t leave them lying all over the place if they are so important,” Cornelia said, dismissing me with a wave of her hand.

“They were not lying around. They were on my desk,” I said, raising my voice.

I was so angry, but there was nothing I could do. I had long since discovered that arguing with Cornelia never got me anywhere. She always wanted to have the last word and would go to any lengths to make sure that she got the better of me.

Sighing, I resigned myself to the fact that I would have to make up some plausible story about my lost homework. My history teacher was not going to be pleased.

I looked in the mirror. There was no point in bothering with my unruly black hair, which had now grown so long it was touching my waist. Just tying it in a rough ponytail would have to suffice.

“Mummy’s going to drive us to school,” Cornelia said as we rushed downstairs. “You know how she hates to be kept waiting.”

Aunt Arianna was standing in the kitchen, drumming her false fingernails on the counter, looking extremely irritated. Her dark, wispy hair was pulled back in an elegant bun, and her sharp, beady eyes glared daggers at me when I walked in.

I was in a bad mood myself, so I just gave her a sulky nod.

“Can’t you ever be on time, Aurora?” said Aunt Arianna scathingly. “For the life of me, I cannot figure out why my



husband agreed to take you in. If it were up to me, I would have sent you back to the gutter you came from.”

Cornelia just smiled and nodded her head, agreeing with everything her mother said.

I flinched at her harsh words but chose to ignore them. It was too early in the morning for another fight. I knew my aunt hated me and didn’t want me around. I had tried being nice and helpful, and I cleaned my room and helped with the chores, but she was still mean to me whenever she got a chance. After a while I had given up trying.

So I kept my mouth shut and got into the backseat of Aunt Arianna’s battered blue Volvo. My aunt handed me a piece of toast before she started the car.

“Don’t want you fainting in school because you had no time to eat breakfast,” said Arianna Darlington, shooting me a withering glare.

“Thank you,” I said, taking it. I was surprised that she had even bothered.

“Don’t thank me,” said my aunt, meaning every word. “I didn’t do it for you, I just don’t want to be called into school to pick you up later today. I have a very busy day ahead, and I don’t have any time for your silly fainting spells.”

She started the car, as unruly tears welled in my eyes. I brushed them away quickly.

It had been two years since my adoptive parents died in a horrific car crash, and I had been staying with my father’s brother, his wife, and his daughter at their London home ever since. I guess I was lucky that they agreed to be my guardians; I don’t think they really had to, since I was not actually family, just adopted. But anything was better than being put in the foster system.

I couldn't wait to turn eighteen; only then would I be free of the tyranny of my Aunt Arianna and Cornelia, both of whom were also probably counting the days until I left their house. It was not for another one and a half years, and it seemed like a lifetime.



School was a disaster.

I had to hand in an incomplete homework assignment because of Cornelia, and I got a week of detention because of it. I knew Cornelia hated me just as much as her mother did, but she was much more clever and sly about it.

As the day trudged on, things got steadily worse. I failed my algebra test, got my ass kicked in basketball, and, to top it all off, I had no friends, so I had to eat lunch on my own. Just a usual crappy day.

I was sitting in the school cafeteria, minding my own business and moving a piece of dried-up meatloaf around my plate, when a mousy girl with huge glasses whose name I couldn't remember came up to my empty table and handed me a note. I took it and looked up at her, confused.

"What's this?" I asked. No one had ever given me a note before.

The girl looked embarrassed but didn't say anything. She just avoided my eyes and walked away.

I opened the note and glanced over it hurriedly. I couldn't believe this was actually happening—this was no ordinary note. It was from Alex Carrington, the most popular boy in school.

I scanned the crowded lunchroom quickly. Alex was sitting at a corner table, chatting animatedly with a group of his

friends, all part of the football team. His hair was blond and cut stylishly short, and he had the bluest eyes I had ever seen.

Suddenly he looked up, and our eyes locked. He was a little taken aback, but he gave me a small smile, which I could only interpret as reassuring. I looked away quickly, embarrassed that I had been caught staring at him.

Inside my chest, my overjoyed heart started doing somersaults; I was ecstatic. Could it be possible that Alex Carrington had actually noticed me? I had had a crush on him ever since the seventh grade, but he never gave me a second glance. Until now, I thought, with a silly smile on my face.

His note said that he wanted me to go with him to Kimberly Walden's party on Friday night. But why would Alex send me a note? He could have just come over and asked me himself, since he didn't seem the note-passing type. But I could be wrong, and I wanted to get a moment alone with him. I gathered my courage and waited outside the cafeteria, preparing myself to finally talk to Alex.

He walked out of the school lunchroom surrounded by his friends and a gaggle of giggling girls, whom I recognized as some of Cornelia's friends.

"Hi Alex," I said abruptly, as he passed by me standing awkwardly alone in the hall.

Alex stopped and turned. "Well, hello there," he said, his boyish charm utterly disarming me.

"Um, I got your note," I said, a little flustered, looking down and shifting from one foot to the other. This was the first time I had actually talked to him, and I desperately wanted to make a good impression.

He raised his eyebrows. "My note?" he said, looking slightly amused.

“Yes,” I said, peeping up at him.

I figured that maybe he was a bit shy and he didn’t want his friends to know about us yet, so I lowered my voice and spoke quietly.

“To go to Kimberly’s party on Friday,” I said softly. “I just wanted to tell you in person that I would love to go with you.”

To my utter dismay, Alex started laughing at me.

“Why would I go to Kimberly’s party with you?” he said between guffaws.

“But the note?” I spluttered.

I fished out the note from my scruffy blue knapsack, still confused, although a growing dread had started to creep into my bewildered mind.

Alex took the note from my shaky hand, stopped laughing and scanned it quickly. Finally, he looked up.

“I didn’t write this. I’m sorry, but I don’t even know your name,” he said, more gently this time. “I thought everyone knew I was going with Cornelia to the party.”

Suddenly raucous laughter erupted behind me. I looked around, with my heart beating a thousand times faster than normal. Someone had played a cruel joke. And it didn’t take a genius to figure out who it was. Cornelia and her friends were laughing their heads off at my utter humiliation.

Unshed tears welled up in my eyes and threatened to spill down my cheeks. I turned and fled down the school corridor, disappearing into the girls’ bathroom, with the dissipating sounds of Cornelia’s evil laughter ringing in my ears.

I was crushed, my already wobbly confidence stamped beneath Cornelia’s perfectly manicured feet. I was never a popular girl in school, even when my adoptive parents were alive. But now I would be the school joke, the person everybody

whispered about behind their back.

After an hour of crying and feeling sorry for myself, I finally managed to dry my tears and wash my face. I had to try and pull myself together so I could get to my next class. I looked in the mirror. My face was all blotchy, and my usually bright green eyes were dull and tinged with red.

I dragged myself out of the bathroom and managed to slip into my English class. I sat at the back, where I would not attract undue attention, and tried to listen as Mr. Roberts warbled on about the significance of Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, but my mind was elsewhere.

I knew my grades had slipped drastically, and I was working on it, but there were some days that I still could not function properly. I would just lie in my bed for hours, thinking about my adoptive parents and all the good years when I had a real family. They may not have been my birth parents, but they cared for me as if I was their real daughter.

My mind was filled with memories that I held on to like a lifeline. Picnics in the park, holidays by the sea, people who actually loved me—and then I would realize that it was gone, that I was all alone and nobody wanted me. And I would cry into my pillow at night, muffling my sobs so that Cornelia would not hear me.

I had long ago given up wondering about my birth parents: who they were and why they gave me up. No one ever had any answers, and soon I stopped asking altogether. But now I was having this dream, and I didn't know if it was a real memory or just a figment of my imagination. I tried not to think about it, but the mysterious woman in a crimson cloak who held a dagger to my mother's heart seemed all too real.

The medallion I wore around my neck was my only link

to my birth parents, and I never took it off. It was all I had with me when I was adopted. I turned it around between my fingers. It looked like a small gold coin. But the carvings on it were in a script that I could not recognize. It was my lucky charm, and, although it wasn't much, just having it with me made me feel safe.

"Aurora Darlington," came the crisp voice of Ms. Holden, the headmistress of my school, snapping me jarringly out of my reverie. I looked up. I hadn't even noticed her come into the classroom.

What had I done now? I wasn't exactly the best student these days. I knew that. But I had made it a point to scrape through just enough to stay out of the headmistress's office until now.

"Aurora, I'd like to see you in my office," said Ms. Holden. She nodded perfunctorily at the bespectacled Mr. Roberts, who looked utterly terrified of her, and walked out of the room.

I gathered my books and bag and got up from my desk. A few girls sniggered behind me, but I was used to it. Ever since my parents died, everyone spoke to me in hushed voices, as if I might crack any minute, or they talked and whispered about me behind my back. I had learned to ignore it and move on.

Nothing, however, could be worse than the humiliation I had experienced earlier today at the hands of my horrible cousin. Now I knew exactly what they were laughing about. I hung my head and hurried out of the classroom.

Headmistress Holden's office was much smaller than I had expected. As I closed the door behind me, I noticed a man was sitting in one of the chairs with his back towards me. Ms. Holden went and sat down opposite him and directed me to the chair near the man. I walked forward and turned to stare at

the familiar face of my uncle, Christopher Darlington.

He had a long, angular face, with dark brooding eyes hidden behind horn-rimmed glasses. His hair was a dirty blond color, like wet sand. He was wearing his usual grey pinstripe suit and was dabbing his sweaty forehead with a crumpled handkerchief, which he dug out of his pocket.

What was he doing here? Was I in trouble?

“Good afternoon, Aurora,” said my uncle.

I nodded at him.

Christopher didn’t hate me like my aunt and cousin, but most of the time he treated me like I wasn’t even there. He wasn’t mean to me, but he never stood up for me either. We barely said two words to each other, and I only saw him at dinnertime. He worked at a bank or something and was out of the house before I woke up.

Ms. Holden cleared her throat before she began.

“Aurora, my dear,” Ms. Holden said, in a voice so different from her usual rude, clipped tones that I was momentarily taken aback. She always had a sour look on her face, as though she had just eaten a whole bowl of lemons. I had never even seen a flicker of a smile on her face, and now she was grinning away like her life depended on it.

I stared at her and back at my uncle. What was he doing here? What had I done now?

“Now Aurora,” said Ms. Holden, “your uncle has requested for you to take a leave of absence from school.”

“What! Why? Right now?” I blurted out. No one had said anything about this.

“Let me finish,” said Ms. Holden sternly. “Your grades have been steadily slipping and you have barely passed most of your classes this year. Nevertheless, I have decided to grant you leave

this time, since your uncle has explained the circumstances.”

“Which are?” I asked, looking at my uncle, who remained quiet.

“I am sure your uncle will explain it to you,” Ms. Holden said.

It was strange; my uncle hadn't mentioned anything last night at dinner. I decided I would ask him later. And I wasn't too disappointed; after all, missing so many days of school would be great. And that meant I would be away from all the pointing and whispering, which had been happening since the whole school heard about my incident with Alex Carrington.

Ms. Holden and my uncle stood up and shook hands.

“Thank you,” said Uncle Christopher to my headmistress. “You have been most helpful. I will have her back in a few days.”

He walked across the room and opened the door. “Come on, Aurora, we have a busy day ahead,” he said, exiting the principal's gloomy office.

I remained silent, gathered my things, and followed my uncle out of the school. I had no idea what was going on, but I was sure I was going to find out soon enough.



## REDSTONE MANOR

AS SOON AS we got home, I packed my meager belongings—a few jeans and T-shirts, an old tracksuit of Cornelia’s, a pair of pajamas, and my toothbrush—in an old duffel bag that Aunt Arianna had found for me from the attic. It was splitting at the seams and the handle was torn, but somehow I managed to lug it down the stairs and out onto the street.

My uncle had explained that we were all going on a trip. He and the family had been invited to his boss’s country house for a few days, and Uncle Christopher insisted that we leave immediately.

This was why I was pulled out of school? What was so important that it couldn’t wait until the holidays? And how come they were taking me with them?

The last time they went away, Aunt Arianna left me with Mrs. Haversham, who lived across the street. She had two uncontrollable little children, and, in way of payment for my room and food, I had to babysit the little devils. It wasn’t that I didn’t like children, but seven-year-old twin boys were a bit more than I could handle.

A big black Range Rover was parked outside the house. Uncle Christopher was sitting in the front passenger seat, and a chauffeur in a hat got out and opened the door for me to get in. I handed the chauffeur my luggage and got into the roomy

back seat, where Aunt Arianna and Cornelia were waiting.

We drove at a leisurely pace at first, due to the traffic while leaving the city. But within half an hour I could see Windsor Castle rising up in the distance above the treetops, and soon we were in the countryside. Uncle Christopher had said it was going to be a long journey, so I closed my eyes and decided to nap.



When I woke up with a crick in my neck, we were driving past meadows and farms and acres of woods. I had no idea which part of the country we were in. It had suddenly become colder, and there was a nip in the air. Although it was spring, the weather was temperamental. I looked out at the trees whizzing past and shivered a little as I pulled my favorite brown leather jacket closer around me.

It was a cold and gloomy spring evening. As we finally neared our destination, a light mist rolled around our car as if searching for a way to get in. I peered out of the backseat window. No house in sight! Not that you could see much with twilight just setting in.

We must have been traveling for hours, and I was exhausted.

“Another few minutes and you will be able to see the house,” said Uncle Christopher chirpily, as if the long journey hadn’t affected him in the least.

Cornelia didn’t even bother to look up; she just huffed and continued texting away on her new iPhone.

When the house finally came into view, I was taken aback. For the first time, I had to admit that Uncle Christopher was right to get so excited. The “house,” as my uncle called it, was not just a house—it was a massive, centuries-old structure

called Redstone Manor.

As we drove through the gargantuan iron gates and up the long gravel driveway lined with old spruces and ancient oak trees, Uncle Christopher chattered on in his irritating nasal voice.

“Redstone Manor was built three hundred years ago, and it has been in my boss’s family ever since,” he said proudly, as if he had something to do with it.

It was a huge pile of high walls, turrets, massive pointed gables, and pinnacles with ornate chimney stacks. It looked more like a mini castle than a house. Ivy and creepers climbed the walls, and massive arched windows embellished with decorative panels lined the sprawling structure. It was absolutely enchanting.

“Welcome to Redstone Manor,” said my uncle.

As we drove up to the massive front door of the house, I was excited. I had never been inside a real English manor house before, and I was looking forward to exploring the property.

A thin, stern-looking lady with spectacles and a severe white bun was standing at the top of the steps to greet us. She introduced herself as the housekeeper, Mrs. Pitts. Standing to her right was a portly man, smartly dressed, with his shoes polished to perfection. He was Mr. Martins, the butler.

“Welcome to Redstone Manor, Mr. Darlington,” he said.

“Yes, yes, glad to be here,” said Christopher, puffing out his chest. He was obviously feeling very important right about now. I wondered what his boss was like. His house was nice, that’s for sure.

Uncle Christopher cleared his throat. “When will I be able to meet Lord Oblek?” he asked.

“His Lordship was delayed. He will meet with you tomor-

row when he returns,” said Mr. Martins.

“Follow me and I will show you to your rooms,” said Mrs. Pitts crisply. “I will have some food brought up to you, as you must be tired from your long journey. The footmen will take your luggage up to your rooms.”

My uncle and aunt nodded and beamed as if they were walking into Buckingham Palace. We followed the housekeeper up the broad stone steps and into the massive house.

The great arched wooden doors opened into a massive foyer, which had a grand staircase that led to the upper floors. Statues and huge paintings lined the walls of the mahogany-paneled corridors, but I hardly noticed. I just fiddled with my medallion and followed Mrs. Pitts, my mind on other things.

I couldn’t understand what we were doing here. Uncle Christopher worked at a bank. Did he really work for the person who owned this house? And why did the butler refer to this Oblek guy as His Lordship? Was he a lord? An earl? A duke? It was all very strange. How would my uncle know a lord of the realm?

Mrs. Pitts showed me to my room and left me to unpack and freshen up. Cornelia and I had a whole suite of rooms, with two bedrooms and a large comfortable living room.

My bedroom was beautifully decorated with green-and-pink flowered wallpaper and matching curtains. Cornelia’s room, which was even bigger than mine, adjoined the living room on the other side, opposite my room. I didn’t want her presence to spoil my experience here. I had already decided that I was going to make the most of this place. I liked history and being in a house this old made me very curious to explore.

I wandered around the room and sat on the edge of my bed. I wished for the thousandth time that my life were differ-

ent, that somehow my adoptive parents hadn't died in the car crash. I even wondered occasionally what my life would have been like if my birth parents hadn't given me up. Definitely better than this, I was sure. But it was no use wondering; it was not going to bring anybody back.

There was a tray laid out in the living room, so I had a little of the tomato soup and two of the chicken sandwiches, which were very good.

I left my mobile phone on the bed and went for a shower. We had been traveling in the car for most of the day, and I was tired. I couldn't sleep, however, without reading for a while, so I decided to go and look for a book after dinner. Surely a house this large and old had a library.

After I had my bath and changed into my pajamas I put on my pink fleece dressing gown and resolved to wander around the house.

I walked quickly down the long corridors of the massive manor house, occasionally passing white-capped maids in uniform shuffling busily out of rooms, arms laden with linens or clothes. Moonlight streamed in through the windows, and the corridor ahead was illuminated by a spectral white sheen. Finally I stopped one of the maids and asked for directions. I was pointed towards another, darker wing of the house.

It was eerie in the east wing, and cobwebs hung in the corners of the shadowy corridors. I tried a few doors and found myself in various stuffy rooms with white dust covers that obscured the furniture. This part of the house looked like it hadn't been lived in for a long time, and the rooms smelled musty and unused.

I nearly gave up my search when finally I came across huge wooden double doors at the end of the corridor. I pushed the

heavy door open slightly and peered inside.

This was it, the library. Great, finally! Now if only I could find a good book.

The beautiful, oak-lined library was a remarkable space. It was the only room in this part of the house that looked like it was cleaned every day and pristinely kept. A first-floor gallery ran along one side of the gigantic room, adorned by an intricately crafted, church-like ceiling. Two large leather armchairs were placed on opposite sides of a small round mahogany reading table, and the wooden floor was covered with plush Persian rugs. Along one wall, two immense bay windows, both hosting a comfortable cushion-covered window seat, overlooked the vast manicured gardens of Redstone Manor.

Perfect for reading.

As I walked further into the gigantic library, I looked over to the wall at the very end of the room and was immediately mesmerized. The entire wall at the far end was covered with a huge tapestry that dominated the whole space. It was a delicate and elaborate weave, depicting a dark forest surrounding a crystal-clear lake, with a magical castle glistening in the distance.

Now I was positive that this was my favorite room in the house. I turned back to the bookshelves. Redstone Manor had an excellent collection.

Where to start? The walls of the enormous room were packed from top to bottom with shelves, filled with a seemingly countless array of books. Some were newly bought, and some looked as though they must have come with the house many centuries ago. This was like a dream come true.

Just as I found the complete Chronicles of Narnia, I heard someone at the door. I don't know what came over me, but I

panicked and dove behind one of the large leather armchairs. I knew I was not doing anything wrong—just borrowing a book—but I still felt spooked.

I peered out from behind my hiding place, feeling immensely stupid.

It was my Uncle Christopher. I tensed. Maybe he had come down to choose a book himself? That seemed like a reasonable explanation. I was about to come out from behind the chair and announce myself when I realized that he wasn't going towards the books, but towards the tapestry.

What was he up to?

My uncle stood unmoving in front of the tapestry and stared at it. I stayed where I was because I had no idea what he was doing and I didn't want to startle him. He might get angry. I looked over towards the double doors of the library. They were shut, and there was no way I could leave the room without Uncle Christopher noticing.

So I crouched and waited.

My uncle was definitely acting very oddly. That was clear when he held out his arms, palms facing outward and touched the tapestry. As he did that I felt a breeze enter the room.

I turned to the windows, but they were shut. A rustling noise startled me and I looked back towards my uncle. My mouth fell open, as I stared mutely at the scene unfolding in front of my eyes.

The tapestry on the wall was shimmering like moonlight on water, while the rustling noise and the breeze were coming from inside it. I spotted the bushes in the tapestry moving slightly, and sudden, strange ripples started forming in the fabric, expanding from the middle, like when you throw a pebble in a pond. Quite unexpectedly, a big booted leg and an

arm came through the tapestry. Slowly, finally, a whole body emerged.

I had to clap my hand over my mouth to prevent myself from gasping aloud. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. A big, bearded, rough-looking man in a battered fur-lined black cloak, with a patch over one eye and a massive sword that swung at his rather large waist, had just stepped out of the tapestry, and into the library of Redstone Manor.

Everything happened so quickly, I couldn't even think. I knew I should say something and excuse myself, but then my uncle might think I was spying on him. So I decided to remain where I was for the moment. In fact, I was too fascinated to do anything more than crouch behind the large leather armchair and see what happened next.

Finally the stranger spoke. "Christopher, do you have the girl?" he said, his voice a deep rumble. He looked mean, with a patch over one eye and numerous scars, which crisscrossed his bearded face.

For a moment I wondered what had happened to him to disfigure him so. But then my thoughts whirled quickly back to the main question clamoring in my head. How on earth did he appear out of the tapestry? Then more questions whirled through my confused mind. What was on the other side? Who was this man? And what girl were they talking about?

"Lord Oblek," said Christopher, bowing slightly to the black-cloaked man. "I have brought her."

The rough-looking man called Oblek stared at my uncle, his one good eye widening in expectation. "Is she here, in the house?" he said.

"Yes," Christopher replied, quickly stepping back.

I could tell my uncle was nervous.



I couldn't understand who or what they were talking about, but I started to get a really bad feeling that I wasn't going to like it.

"Are you sure she's the right one?" Uncle Christopher asked.

"Yes, of course I'm sure," said Oblek, in a condescending tone. "Would I have wasted years of my life searching for her, only to find the wrong girl? Come on, Christopher, you know I am smarter than that. Imagine my delight when I found out she was your niece. Well, your adopted niece anyway."

My uncle Christopher nodded and dabbed his perspiring head with a purple handkerchief.

I couldn't believe what I had just heard. They were talking about me. Uncle Christopher had no other nieces that I knew of. Why would this strange man be looking for me? This made no sense.

Oblek grinned and clasped his hands together. "Finally I will deliver the girl to the queen and she will reward me beyond all imagination."

"Yes, yes, you can do what you like with her," smirked Christopher, "but not before you pay me my fee. It has become quite considerable now, seeing as I will have to answer many questions about her when she's gone."

Gone? Where was I going?

"You'll get your money," said the wily Oblek. "But only after I have the girl in my possession. When is the earliest you can get her to me?"

"Arianna will bring her down here at midnight," said Christopher.

I wasn't surprised to learn that Aunt Arianna was involved in this. She wanted to get rid of me ever since I moved in with her, but I thought Uncle Christopher liked me. I couldn't be-

lieve how wrong I was. There was absolutely no one I could trust.

Suddenly my foot cramped. I gasped, clutched at it, and started rubbing, but I had to change my position. I moved ever so slowly, adjusting myself behind the armchair, but it was a futile attempt. My shuffling had created a noise, and I knew I had been heard.

“Someone’s here,” said Oblek, whirling round, his hand on the hilt of his massive sword.

I moved backwards, but there was nowhere to go. I was trapped.

Christopher came over quickly, grabbed me by the arm and pulled me up from my crouching position.

“Don’t you know that it’s bad manners to eavesdrop, young lady?” said my uncle, angrily. His floppy gold hair was a mess; he was fuming, and his glasses were steaming up.

“What have we here?” asked Lord Oblek, his one beady, black eye fixating on me with a scrutinizing glare as he walked slowly towards me.

“It’s the girl you have been searching for, my lord,” said Uncle Christopher, with a slimy smile on his reddened face. He pulled me along towards Oblek, clutching my arm with his bony fingers, which bit into my skin like needles.

“Hey, that hurts,” I said, trying to pull my arm free from his grasp, but he didn’t let go.

“So, it seems your work has been done for you, Christopher. She has been delivered to us of her own accord,” said Oblek, his arms crossed across his chest.

“I’m not a package to be delivered anywhere,” I said through gritted teeth. “You have the wrong girl. I don’t even know you.”

“Ah, but I know you, Aurora Firedrake,” said Oblek.

“What nonsense. That’s not even my name. I’m Aurora Darlington,” I insisted. “I told you, you have the wrong girl.”

Lord Oblek ignored me and spoke to my uncle. “She has a strong likeness to her father—the same dark hair and green eyes of the Firedrakes. She is definitely the one. I don’t know how she stayed hidden all these years, but she is Azaren’s only child. I am sure of it.”

My mind reeled with the implications of this revelation. I longed to know who my real parents were, and this person here seemed to know them, however dangerous he looked.

“Let go of my arm,” I said to Christopher, trying to twist out of his vise-like grip.

He just laughed at me and held on tighter, so I punched him in the stomach, and he released me, momentarily stunned as he bent over. I took my chance and made a dash for the door, but my uncle recovered quickly, caught me again and slapped me across my face. My neck whipped to one side with the force of the blow. I had lost my chance, and Uncle Christopher dragged me back to Oblek, who stood watching all this calmly.

“Interesting!” said Oblek, coming closer to me and staring me down. “A feisty little thing, isn’t she? I must get her to the queen immediately; there is no time to waste.”

What queen? What the hell was this guy going on about? Why was he after me? And where did he want to take me?

He stepped closer to me, and I instinctively shrank away. His breath was rancid, and his rotting teeth grinned at me through the mess of his black beard.

“You’re not taking her anywhere until you get me my money,” Christopher said, holding on to me like a lottery ticket.

He started edging away from Oblek, towards the door, pulling me along with him. "I want what I was promised."

"And you can't take me anywhere I don't want to go," I added for good measure. Not that it was any help.

"Oh, you'll get what you deserve," said Oblek, an evil grin spreading across his hideous, scarred face. Faster than I could follow, Oblek raised his right hand, and white bolts of light shot out from his palm, hitting Christopher squarely in the chest. His grip loosened immediately on my arm, and my uncle crumpled to the floor like an empty sack.

Oblek closed the space between us in a trice. "And you, my dear, don't have a choice," said Oblek, as he closed his big, beefy hand around my arm.

I stared at the crumpled form of my uncle on the floor. He looked dead. Did this weird guy just shoot white light from his palms?

"You killed him?" I gasped, still shocked at what I had witnessed.

"It doesn't matter. I just needed him out of the way," said Oblek, not giving Uncle Christopher another thought.

All this was happening so fast; I couldn't understand what this had to do with me. I wanted to find out more about my real parents, but I didn't want to go anywhere with this horrible person. Who knows what he had planned for me?

"I'm not coming with you," I said, trying to pull away from him. "You're a monster." But he held my arm in an even tighter grip than my uncle had.

Oblek laughed. "You haven't seen anything yet, girl," he said. "Where you're going, monsters will be the least of your problems."

"What do you mean?" I asked, my voice cracking. My legs

felt shaky, and I was now bordering on the edge of panic. Where was he taking me?

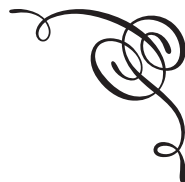
“You will find out soon enough,” Oblek said, grinning.

He pulled me towards the tapestry that shimmered as soon as he touched it with his palm.

I felt like my life had just shattered all over again. My parents were gone, my uncle had just sold me like a slave, and there was no one to help me, no one on my side. I was alone, I was in trouble, and I had absolutely no idea what to do. It was all too much, I couldn't help it; I burst into tears just as Oblek yanked my arm and pulled me into the magical, shimmering tapestry.



3  
KIDNAPPED



FOR A SECOND that felt like a lifetime, everything stopped; I felt like I was floating in nothingness. Then I blinked, and, when I finally opened my eyes and focused again through the tears, I couldn't believe what I was seeing.

I found myself standing at the mouth of a small cave situated on a hill and overlooking a quiet, moonlit valley. On my left, a dark forest stretched out as far as the eye could see, tree-tops glistening silver in the light of the full moon. The hills around us undulated into wildflower-filled meadows that lay sleeping in the dewy night.

Far down in the valley, I could see a little village, its lights twinkling in the distance. To my right, a waterfall splashed playfully into a small river that ran down into a lake, next to which the little village was built. The moon here was fuller and larger than I had ever seen it, and the night sky was awash with a fantastic array of glittering stars.

Had I passed through the tapestry? Where was I?

I looked around, disbelief clouding my judgment. I was still trying to get my bearings after that strange moment when I had been inside the tapestry and nowhere at the same time. It gave me a funny feeling, as though I had been lifted out of my own consciousness and then put back into my body.

A warm breeze brushed past my face and played with my

hair. Gone were the cloudy grey mist and the cold, nipping wind of the English countryside. I drew in a sharp breath—the air was crisp and clear, sweet smelling, and fresh. The moonlit valley was filled with fruit trees, wildflowers, and rolling meadows.

“How did we come here? Where are we?” I asked, still confused.

“You really are ignorant,” said Oblek, glancing at me. “I take it your uncle didn’t tell you anything?”

I shook my head and looked down. Oblek had tied my hands with a rope he had with him while I was still dazed and looking around. It was humiliating, and the rough ropes cut into my wrists, rubbing them raw every time he pulled me forward.

I had to find some way out of this. And, at the moment, the only thing I could do was discover more about where I was. Then, when I got an opportunity, I could escape and find my way back up to the cave on the hill, where we had arrived out of the tapestry.

But then what?

Christopher was probably dead, and Aunt Arianna would doubtless blame me for everything since I had disappeared at the same time. I had no idea what to do. I didn’t really want to go back, and, now that my adoptive parents were dead, I had nothing to return to.

I was starting to panic. I had nowhere to go, and my mind was imagining an array of horrible outcomes of my kidnapping. My palms had become sweaty, and my racing heart was thundering in my chest as I half-walked and half-ran, desperately trying to keep up with Oblek’s giant strides.

“Why are you doing this?” I pleaded with my kidnapper.

But Lord Oblek said nothing. He didn't even look at me. He just kept walking ahead and dragging me along behind him, with no more explanations as to what he was planning to do with me.

I was terrified, and I had no idea if I was going to survive this. But I tried to be brave. Maybe I could talk my way out of this?

"You do know that this is called kidnapping?" I said, trying to reason with Oblek.

He didn't bother to answer.

"What will happen to me now?" I squeaked, my voice breaking, as I tried not to cry.

"Queen Morgana will decide what is to be done with you," said Oblek, finally.

Queen Morgana! The woman from my dream? It was not possible that this, too, was a coincidence. It must be the same Morgana, the one who had tried to kill my real mother.

Who the hell was she?

Suddenly all of this seemed extremely scary. I hoped that I was still dreaming and that there was no way I had actually traveled through a magical tapestry into some strange land. It all seemed very exciting in books. But actually being kidnapped and then hauled around like an animal, traveling deep into a land I knew nothing about, was not my idea of fun.

I had to get away from this horrible man, and fast.

I wanted to find out more, but I was getting tired as I trudged along behind Oblek. My legs were aching, and my fluffy slippers were wet and dirty. I wondered how much longer we would have to walk.

"Where are you taking me?" I pleaded, running helplessly behind him. "Please, you don't have to do this, just let me go."



I won't go to the police, I promise. Just let me go."

Oblek suddenly turned towards me to say something. I realized that was my chance, and I took it. I kicked him on his shin, yanked the rope out of his hands, and tried to make my escape, but Oblek hardly felt it; he quickly caught the end of the rope that he had tied around my hands and pulled on it hard, which made me spin around and fall forward onto my hands and knees.

Oblek sneered at me lying in the mud and held out his huge beefy right hand, curling his fingers as if he was catching something in the air in front of him. Suddenly I felt an invisible hand grab my throat. I choked and gagged as Oblek slowly cut off my air supply, clawing at the invisible hand and trying to wrench myself free. It was no use; he was using his magic again. The invisible hand was pulling me to my feet, lifting me up by my throat. I was terrified and tried to scream, but only choking sobs escaped my parched lips. I was feeling dizzy as I gasped for air, the world swimming before my eyes, and I was sure I was about to die.

Finally, after moments that felt like hours, he loosened his invisible grip on my neck. I landed on my knees, and, with a flick of his hand, Oblek pushed me backwards. I fell on my back and clutched at my neck as I gasped for air.

He had tried to kill me. This guy was truly a monster, a real thug. What the hell had I got myself mixed up in?

"That was only a warning, you foolish girl," said the evil Oblek. "The next time you try to escape, you will not be so lucky. The queen may want you alive, but she never specified your condition. I am quite sure she will not mind if you are missing a few body parts."

I started trembling. This guy was serious, and he was re-

ally going to hurt me if I didn't comply. I had no choice as he started pulling on the rope; I had to get up or risk being dragged along behind him all the way. I tried to calm my galloping heart and concentrated on just putting one foot in front of the other.

After a while, I had already fallen countless times, and my hands and knees were bleeding. Aching all over, I struggled to keep up. If I didn't or if I tried to get away, there was no telling what Oblek might do to me. Tears were streaming down my face as I ran behind him. Shaking and sobbing, I tried to stem the flow and pull myself together.

I followed Oblek down the hill and into the valley. I could see well enough because of the full moon, but the shrubs and bushes snagged and tore at my clothes as he led me along a muddy path that skirted the edge of the woods.

"Please, can't you at least tell me where we're going?" I pleaded again.

To my surprise, Oblek replied.

"Tonight we will stop at my castle," he said, "and at daybreak tomorrow we will ride for Nerenor. The queen will be eager to see you." He turned and grinned maliciously at me. I noticed through all the confusion in my mind that some of his rotting teeth were missing.

"Will we be riding . . . horses?" I asked, understanding slowly dawning.

"Yes, of course," he said, looking momentarily bewildered. "Why would you ask such a stupid question? Ah yes, in your world you have, what do you call them . . ." He snapped his fingers as if trying to remember. ". . . Those funny carriages you call cars to get around."

He yanked the rope and pulled me along again.

“Never really liked your world,” he continued. “And I seldom go there; that’s why I get people like your uncle to do my work for me.”

I looked at him, astonished, as the bitter realities started seeping into my sleep-deprived brain. This world had no cars, probably had no electricity or running water, and was ruled by a queen who sounded like an evil tyrant. It looked like I had been wrenched into the dark ages.

How would I survive here, even if I did manage to get away from Oblek?

We walked the rest of the way in silence. I was exhausted and had abandoned my wet, muddy slippers somewhere along the way. My feet were cut all over and bleeding. I couldn’t help it as big fat tears rolled down my face, but Oblek didn’t care. He just pulled me along like a dog on a leash.

It was still dark when we finally reached his castle. It was nothing like Redstone Manor or the surrounding countryside that I had seen when I came into this world through the tapestry. The castle was bleak and sinister, and it stood out like a charred, ash-covered rock amidst a green, flowering valley.

At first glance I could tell it was an incredibly ugly structure. High stone walls surrounded the main tower, and a dirty, moss-covered moat encircled the castle on all sides. The keep was flat, squat, and covered in blackened vines and creepers. I shuddered as he led me towards the terrible place. A thick, gnarled forest stretched out behind it, and numerous guards were posted on the battlements.

I wasn’t sure what to expect now. I wiped my face with my sleeve as best I could. My feet were burning, and I was not sure how much more of this treatment I could take. I wished for a warm bed and some food, but was not sure if I would

get either.

A big wooden drawbridge swung down in front of us. The guards, recognizing their liege lord, had signaled the gatekeeper to lower the bridge. We entered a walled courtyard, and I stumbled to a stop behind Oblek.

I gingerly looked around. A big stone fountain of a goat-like creature spouting water dominated the central space. Looking up, I could see people peering out of the windows that surrounded the courtyard. I wondered if there was anyone there I could ask for help, but I doubted it.

“Guards!” commanded Oblek, without looking at me. “Take her to the dungeons. No one is to speak to this prisoner, or it will cost them their head. Is that understood?”

The guards nodded and scurried to catch hold of my arms, one on each side. There was no use struggling—even if I did get free, where could I go?

“The pit has other prisoners, milord,” said one scrawny guard with long, matted black hair, whose filthy hand was wrapped around my arm. “And all the other cells are full.”

“Just put her in the pit,” said Oblek. “The prisoners down there are to be executed at dawn, so anything she says will go with them to their grave.”

The guards took me down the grey stone corridors and dark steps that led to the dungeons. They shoved and pushed me the whole way, even though I wasn’t resisting. I had started crying again and tried to cover my sobs, but the guards heard me, and they sneered and laughed as they thrust me down the stairs into the depths of the stone castle.

It was damp and dark down in the dungeons, where the air reeked of rotting food and other horrible things that I didn’t even want to know about. I could hear moans and strange

screeching noises coming from some of the other cells. I tried to ignore the sounds as the guards unlocked another door, which led deeper underground.

As I walked past the iron-barred dungeon cells, a thin, wrinkled hand shot out from between one of the bars and grabbed me. Shooting pain lanced through my arm as the hand clutched at me, digging long, dirty black fingernails into my skin.

A shriek of laughter made me look up. The weathered hand belonged to a gnarled, white-haired woman. Her face was brown and wrinkled like old leather, and her eyes were completely white. Was she blind?

“Finally she has come!” she shrieked.

“Shut up, old woman,” said a guard angrily. He leaned over and pried her fingers off me. I was stunned and shaken as I was dragged to my doom.

The old woman didn’t stop; she went on screaming, “She has come, she has come!”

Shrieks of cackling laughter followed me as I was led deeper down into the pit, the lowest and most horrible part of the dungeons. Obviously the old woman was mad. She couldn’t even see me, but still, I was shaking.

The guards looked at me suspiciously as they shoved me roughly into a cold, dark cell. The guards left, their booted feet thumping on the stone floor. I heard the wooden dungeon door creak and slam shut. Even the cackling laughter of the old woman dissipated, then . . . silence.