



**Whispering Willows:
Book 2**

**Forget
Me Not**

Diana Dawn

Chapter 1

“Forget Me Not”

“Snow, it’s Mitch! Where are you?” Mitch had reached the clearing, but there was no sign of Snow. Good. Perhaps he had beaten her there. It wasn’t too late.

“Snow!”

‘Mitch?’ Snow thought. Was that Mitch she heard in the distance?

“Mitch?”

“Snow, where are you?”

God, he was in the direction of the clearing! She had just thrown the grenade and ran from there. It was going to blow any second! She ran towards him, “Mitch, get down! Run! Get away from there! Mitch!” They met and Snow grabbed his arm to run with him. Just then the woods exploded from behind Mitch sending both of them flying backwards, leaves and branches showering them.

“Wha’ th’ hell was that?” Donnie shouted as the rest of the village stopped mid-bite in their breakfast. Kristen had been a little annoyed at Mitch for asking her to cook breakfast for everyone two days in a row with no warning. But he said it was very important. With Mitch and Snow both missing at breakfast, she had to trust that what he had to ‘do’ really was something important, and not just an attempt to be alone with Snow again.

“It sounded like an explosion!” cried Jill.

Donnie sprang up, “I know wha’ it sounded like. I’m gettin’ my gun. I need a team of five to go with me. Duncan, Bart, Murray, Nicholas, and...” he looked at Edward, “...and Roger. You five come with me.” Eddy nodded to himself as if he understood why Donnie didn’t choose him.

The men followed Donnie to his hut to get his gun. He also got guns for the other men. They ventured into the woods to find out what the explosion was.

Snow awoke to the smell of burnt leaves and bark. Lifting her head from being face down in the thicket, she coughed to get the dirt and moss out of her mouth and nose. She had to struggle to wrestle free from all of the branches that had fallen on top of her.

“Mitch! Mitch where are you?” She coughed hoarsely still spitting out sand granules. Snow crawled along the leaves and tossed off branches and twigs ... searching, yelling, but received no response.

“Mitch!” Why did you have to come after me, Snow thought? If only you’d have been just a moment later. Snow saw a patch of color, “What’s that?” She ran towards it. It was Mitch! She dropped by his side and frantically began to tear away the branches and twigs. She pulled him out of the leaves and onto her lap. His head was bleeding. He must have been hit by an object in the explosion. “Mitch! Mitch, please wake up!” She blotted his head with her dress. They were both so dirty from the explosion itself. She wiped the dirt from his face with the tears that fell on his cheek from her eyes. “Mitch, darling! Please, just open your eyes!” She hugged him to her chest, “Stupid grenade! Why did I come out here with that thing! You’re so stupid, Snow!” She scolded herself until her sobs would no longer let her. She just cried as she held him to her, stroking his hair as he would very often stroke hers. “This should be me, not you! I should be the one who’s hurt! This is all my fault ... bringing that witch here! Why? Why did it have to be you! Why!”

The team had heard the voice and followed it quietly. Not quite knowing what it was, Donnie rounded the corner of the brush where he heard the noise, “Freeze!” Snow slowly looked up into Donnie’s gun barrel just inches from her face. She didn’t even flinch.

“Snow? Mitch? What’s ‘appened?”

Duncan rounded the corner to find the two on the floor of the woods. He crouched beside Snow, “Snow, what happened?”

“He’s hurt. Duncan, please help him!”

Murray and Roger helped carry Mitch while Snow leaned on Bart for support, still shaken by the explosion.

When they returned to the village, they put Mitch to bed in his cabin. Donnie demanded to know what all was going on and why was there an explosion in the woods. Snow refused to tell Donnie anything about what happened after he got in her face demanding an answer. She agreed to tell Bart after he had cared for her in a very gentle nature in the woods. He then shared the story with the others.

Duncan spoke his peace to everyone, “Look, we all know it was a mistake for them to have planned something like this, but I don’t want any of you to pester them about it. Is that understood? I’m sure they’ve learned their lesson.”

“Well, one thing’s for certain. We need ta make sure they don’t got any more grenades!”

Duncan nodded at Donnie’s words. He would be sure to ask Mitch as soon as he awoke ... he and not Donnie.

Kate had dressed Mitch’s wounds with Jill’s help as Snow looked on from across the room.

Jill kept an eye in Snow’s direction, “Kate, I’m a little worried ‘bout Snow. Doesn’t she seem a little odd ta ya?”

“She’s probably still in a little bit of a shock is all. She’ll be alright.”

Kristen entered the cabin, “Hey, how goes it? How’s he doing?”

“Well, he hasn’t woken up yet, but he got a nasty bump, so it could be a while till he does. The bleeding has stopped, though, which is a good thing. I think he’ll be alright shortly.”

With Mitch still asleep, the girls had to convince Snow to go wash up and get some sleep. Some of the men took turns watching Mitch through the night. They had to keep an eye on him to be sure he didn’t have a concussion. Snow said a short prayer before she went to bed. As she went up to the bed loft in her tree house, she sighed sadly as she noticed that her daisy from Mitch had only one petal left.

Early the next morning, Snow came to Mitch’s cabin.

She was greeted by Bart. “How are you feeling, Snow?”

“Better. Thank you for being so kind, Bart.”

He smiled at her and nodded.

Snow noticed that Mitch’s appearance had improved as well. He now showed a little more color than before. Bart said he’d leave her alone now that she was here with Mitch. Snow sat by his bedside. She brushed her hand through his hair and touched his cheek. “It seems as though our roles have become reversed, Mitch. Now you’re there and I’m here. The thing is, I doubt that a kiss would wake you.” But Snow tried nevertheless, more on impulse than anything. She gently kissed him. Just as she thought, he had no response. “See, I knew it wouldn’t work. You’re not under a spell are you?” She wiped a tear from her face. “Mitch, I don’t know if you can hear me like I could hear you, but I have to try. Please come back to me, Mitch. I need you, I can’t lose you! Please come back to me.”

She gently put her head on his chest and felt it move up and down from his breathing. At least this was a comfort to her. She heard the cabin door open and raised her head. It was Kate. Snow was grateful for Kate’s skills in dressing Mitch’s head wound.

Kate smiled, “How’s he doing?”

“He looks better today. He seems to have more color.”

Kate began to prepare a fresh dressing for Mitch’s head on the other side of the room. As Snow sat holding Mitch’s hand, his eyes began to flutter. He moved his head and moaned. He opened his eyes and raised his hand to his bandaged head, “Ow, God, what happened?”

Snow gave a huge sigh of relief, “Mitch! Mitch, thank goodness! How do you feel?”

He turned his head and looked at Snow. The expression on his face was that of casual intrigue, “Hello, beautiful.”

Snow smiled very big, “Hello.”

“What’s your name, Love?”

Snow giggled, grateful that he couldn’t feel too badly. He felt well enough to kid with her, “I take it you feel OK, then?”

“Quite well with such a lovely stranger at my bedside. Are you new to the Willows?”

Snow shook her head smiling. Wasn’t it just like him to carry a jovial setting as far as he could.

Kate was concerned at what she was hearing. She frowned as she approached the bed, “Mitch, do you know where you are?”

“Yeah, Kate. I assume I’m in my cabin, at least it looks like my cabin. Right?”

“What’s your name?”

“What sort of question is that?”

“One I have to ask. What is it?”

“Mitch Lawrence.”

“Do you know who I am?”

“Yes, Kate, of course.”

Kate hesitated, fearing what she was about to hear, “Do you know who she is?” motioning to Snow.

“No, sorry ... can’t say as I do. I’ve never seen her before. Is she your sister?”

Kate was afraid to turn around ... afraid to look at Snow, but she did. Snow wore a very confused look. “Snow, do you know what ‘amnesia’ is?” Snow shook her head. “Well, it’s a fairly commonplace occurrence after someone sustains a head injury where they often don’t remember certain things.” She turned back to the bed, “Mitch, what’s the last thing you remember?”

He stretched up his arms and yawned then propped himself up on his elbows, “Well, I don’t know ... I guess planting that herb garden. Oh, yeah ... and you wrestling with that blasted pig!” He laughed, but stopped short when he saw that Kate wasn’t laughing with him.

She turned back to Snow who still wore the same questioning expression, her eyes begging for an answer. “Most often it’s only temporary.” Kate felt awkward saying that, as she knew that most cases she had read about were not temporary ... only a few.

Snow swallowed and blinked her eyes, “Are you trying to tell me that he doesn’t remember who I am?” She had to choke out her statement, barely able to speak the thought out loud.

Kate replied softly, “It looks that way, Snow.” Snow stood frozen for a moment, unable to move. Her lip began to tremble and curled into a pout ... something she had not done in a while. Up until this moment she had no reason to.

Mitch looked at the both of them trying to comprehend the situation, “Is there something wrong?”

Snow looked at Mitch and began to slowly back away from the bed, her eyes wallowing up with tears.

Kate stretched her hand out, “Snow wait ...”

Snow began to cry as she trembled. She quickly backed up, in a hurry to get out of there. She put her hand over her mouth to try and conceal her whimpering. As her reasoning left her she had forgotten the door was closed, her back slamming into it. She quickly turned and tried to open it. In a panic, she desperately fumbled with the latch but couldn't get it to open. Kate approached the door to help, but before she could reach her, Snow yelped as the latch opened and she dashed out the door.

She could barely see the ladder through her tears as she climbed up to her tree house. Again, in a panic, she had trouble opening the latch to her house. She collapsed onto her pillows sobbing, her shoulders trembling in a convulsing manner. She couldn't breathe. She was gasping for air through uncontrollable sobs. She even looked to be sure there wasn't a mist in the room as there had been that day in the woods when she couldn't catch a breath. But there was nothing, just the pillows of her couch. She could see Mitch in her thoughts, all racing before her. She remembered all the laughs, the glances ... the kisses, as few as they were. Could all of that really be gone? She heard it with her own ears. Her true love didn't even know her name. Now she wished there was a mist ... she wished it would just suck the life right out of her. For what life had she now without him? So weak from crying she couldn't even lift her head from the pillow as she looked at her flower in the vase. Through a misty eye, she watched as the daisy's last petal floated gently to the floor.

Chapter 2

“Snow Who?”

Snow awoke to a violent knocking at her door. “Snow! Snow, are ya in there?” It was Stevie.

At that moment all the memories came flooding back to her mind. The explosion, the injury ... the amnesia. She’d hoped it was just a nightmare. But it wasn’t, she realized as she became more awake.

“Yes, Stevie I’m here. Come in.”

Stevie opened her door. When he saw her, a wave of relief washed over his face, “I’ve been worried about ya, Snow. Kate told me what ‘appened. I’m so sorry, Snow. I’ve been knocking a while. I thought you was hurt. Are ya alright?”

Snow sighed in a monotone voice, “I’m alright Stevie.”

“Ya been gone for hours. Everyone’s wondrin’ where ya been.”

“I’ve been right here. But I’d rather be alone right now, if it’s OK. I’m just not feeling very well.”

Stevie studied her face. He had never seen her look so sad. “Are ya sure ya want to be alone, Snow?”

Snow managed a weak smile, “Yes, please.”

“Alright then. I’ll let everyone know you’re alright.”

Snow watched Stevie shut the door behind him. She admired his cheerfulness. She wondered if she would ever be cheerful like that again.

“That poor dear. Snow must be crushed!” Kristen mulled the situation over in her mind after Kate explained what had happened.

“I don’t know what to do,” Kate continued, “I don’t think there is anything we CAN do. We just have to wait and see if Mitch remembers things on his own. If not, it will be like starting over.”

“We will need to fill him in on important things like new rules or situations, things like that.” Donnie warned, casually.

Kristen glared at him, “Oh, and so I suppose his relationship with Snow was just not one of those *important* things, right? I’m sure Snow would appreciate hearing that.”

“You know I didn’t mean it that way Kristen. I ain’t gettin’ involved in no one’s personal affairs. I’ll leave that to the women. No offense of course,” he added quickly with a glance at Kate.

Stevie entered the main hut, “Snow’s still in ‘er tree house. I really wanted to talk to ‘er, but she wants to be alone.”

Kristen glanced at Kate, “I wonder if she’d talk to me or Yolanda?”

Kate shook her head, “It’s probably better to give her some time. Imagine what a blow she just took.”

“How’s Mitch doing, besides his memory?” Nicholas inquired as he removed his pipe.

Kate shrugged, “Fine, now. He’s just behind a few months. So if you asked him to do anything recently, you’ll probably need to ask him again. But I don’t want him doing much of anything for at least a few days, maybe just some light cooking if he wants. But no wood chopping or the like. He needs some rest.”

The door to the main hut opened. To everyone’s surprise, it was Mitch, “Hi, everyone!”

“Hey, Mitch!”

Through the round of ‘hello’s’, Jill whispered down to Kate, “Does he know he has amnesia?”

“Yes, I told him.”

“Does he know about the relationship he doesn’t remember?”

“Not exactly.”

“Are ya gonna tell him?”

“I guess all I can do is try.” Kate sighed.

Mitch looked over in Kate’s direction and smiled. She returned the smile.

For the rest of the afternoon, the men began to catch Mitch up on the recent occurrences and decisions about the village, just about anything that did NOT involve personal relations. Kate began to go over in her mind what she would tell Mitch. There were probably many things about his relationship with Snow that Kate didn’t know. She could only tell him what she did know. Throughout the review of past events by the men, Kate caught Mitch side glancing at her often, smiling. ‘God,’ she thought. ‘Here we go again!’ Perhaps, this was going to be harder than she thought. After the discussion had moved on to less serious points, like Rein’s worst drunken stupor, Kate got up and went into the kitchen for some more tea. Mitch followed her.

Silence covered the main hut when Snow entered. All jovial conversations and laughing turned to silent whispers and looks of concern. It made her stomach churn to have all eyes on her like that. When she was singing for the group, it was fine ... but not like this.

Stevie jumped up and headed towards her, “Aye, Snow! Glad to see ya up ‘n around. Feelin’ better I hope?”

She smiled politely and nodded.

“Ya must be starved. I’ll get ya something. What would ya like?”

Snow eyed a basket of fruit on the table and headed right for it. “That apple right there looks good.”

As she took the apple in her hand, Stevie grabbed it from her, just as Mitch had done. “What is with you folks in this village not wanting me to eat fruit?”

“It’s the apples, Snow,” offered Trent. “See in the story, Snow White was poisoned by an apple.”

The realization shone in Snow’s eyes, “Ohhhhh, now I get it! And all this time I thought you all were just crazy!”

Around the room you could hear giggles and chuckles.

“Stevie I think that one is OK for her to eat,” laughed Kristen.

Stevie smiled and gave Snow back the apple. She bit into it hungrily.

Kristen continued, “Of course, I wouldn’t have recommended you take one from Eddy.” This time the whole room burst into laughter.

“Ha ha, very funny Kristen,” snarled Eddy over the laughing.

“Ya want something to drink?” Stevie offered to Snow as she tried to swallow the bite in her mouth to answer him. “Yes, thank you. Is there any tea?”

“Oh, I’m sure there is. Come on.” He innocently grabbed her hand and hurriedly ran toward the kitchen. Just as they reached the kitchen door, Stevie added, “Mitch can get ya some tea.”

Snow stopped dead in her tracks causing Stevie to almost lose his balance.

“Mitch is in the kitchen? Never mind, dumb question. That’s OK Stevie. I’m really not that thirsty after all.”

“Snow, it’s alright. Kate’s in there.”

Snow’s eyes got really wide at that thought. Her statements became more emphatic, “Stevie really, no! Never mind. I don’t want any tea! NO!” as he proceeded to drag Snow into the kitchen.

“Need any help, Love?” as Mitch watched Kate searching for tea bags.

“Well, yes actually. Where did you put the ...” she stopped, remembering his amnesia. “Oh, forget it. It was just last week. Don’t worry about it, I’ll find them. I’m glad you’re here, though, Mitch. We need to talk.”

Mitch smiled and offered a flirtatious tone, “We do, huh?”

Crouched down by the cabinets, Kate closed her eyes at the ‘overly friendly’ tone in his voice. She strained to remember the way things were before Snow came, the way Mitch used to flirt with her on a daily basis, asking for a date, pleading with his eyes. Now, here they were, together again. It was like dejavu to Kate.

She stood up and faced Mitch. His eyes showed a combination of curiosity and hope at what Kate was going to say. “Mitch, I think I should fill you in a little bit about what has happened since you and I planted the herb garden.”

“But, I thought that’s what the guys just did?”

“Yes and no. They told you about the more village-related issues, but ... well, not the personal ones.” Kate thought she saw a glimmer of hope in Mitch’s eyes, and turned away from him toward the sink. “Mitch, you had a relationship ... a very lovely one at that ... with Snow.”

“With Snow?”

“Yes.” Kate began opening drawers looking for the herbal tea.

“Is that her real name, Snow? What’s her last name?”

Kate stopped, knowing this would raise a question, “White.”

“Snow White? Are you kidding?”

“No.” Kate proceeded to explain Snow’s arrival to the village and the problems they had with Margurite and Eddy. She told him frankly that the reason he had amnesia was due to his and Snow’s plans to get rid of Margurite.

Mitch listened to her story quietly, nodding every now and then. He had no reason to doubt her, especially with a village full of people who could back up the story ... as wild as it was.

“What kind of relationship did Snow and I have? How deep was it?”

“Well, I don’t know,” Kate sighed, wishing she’d been nosier for once in her life.

“Is that why she seemed so upset yesterday?”

Kate nodded.

Mitch took a step in her direction, “Well, what about you, Kate?”

Kate shook her head, “What about me?”

“What’s the scoop on you and Donnie? You two still ... seeing each other?”

Slamming a drawer, frustrated in not finding the herbal teas, “I’m not the issue here, Mitch.”

“Here, most of the time I’ve kept the teas over here.” He pulled out a drawer on the other side of the kitchen revealing a combination of different teabags. “I’d still like to know, Kate.”

“Mitch, you’re not listening to me. Snow is ... going through a lot, emotionally. I mean one day she has this wonderful healthy relationship, which I know for a fact that she desperately wants, and then the next day the guy doesn’t even know her name. How would you feel?”

“OK, I see your point. Well, she’s a pretty girl. I’m sure we could arrange a date, possibly. What about our date, by the way?”

Kate grunted loudly and then looked up, “Why do I even bother!”

The kitchen door opened with Stevie dragging an objecting Snow through the door, “NO! Stevie, I said no!”

Stevie looked at Mitch, “We came ta get some tea for Snow, ‘ere.”

Snow immediately directed her eyes to the floor not wishing to look at Mitch nor Kate, then quickly spat, “I’m not thirsty.”

Mitch took a fairly long look at Snow. Even with her not looking directly at him, he could see the beauty in her face, her clothing. He noticed how her lips were curled into a pout. Quite appealing, he thought. "Tea? Of course." Mitch cheerfully poured her a fresh cup and offered it to her, "Here you go."

"Thank you." Without looking at him, Snow quickly grabbed the cup and dashed out the door. Stevie followed her, although she was still quite annoyed with him for dragging her in there.

Kate looked at Mitch who wore a perplexed look at Snow's speedy exit and she offered, "She just needs some time, I think. That's all. She's really not usually like that ... usually."

That evening, Snow couldn't sleep. Regardless of the warnings, she decided to take a late night walk through the village. Although it was cold, the chill in the air was comforting to Snow. The crisp air smelled clean and fresh as she wrapped her shawl around her. She found herself at the back door of the kitchen, where she had bumped into Mitch so many times in the past. She noticed the baskets sitting outside the door, the ones they used to take to the orchards to put the freshly picked fruit into. She recalled the day she reached for that peach, and ended up falling into Mitch's arms, just like on her first day in the Willows. She ventured into the kitchen where things were neat and tidy as usual. She ran her hand over the countertop and along the cabinets as she recalled their kiss on All Hallows' Eve. She remembered the many conversations they had there in that kitchen as she could almost hear them in her mind, and of course how they were always interrupted when he kissed her. Feeling the tears begin, she shook off those thoughts and decided to look for one of those special herbal teas Jill invented to help one sleep.

As she searched through the cabinets, what she found in one of them was Mitch's homemade wine. "Hmmm. Nah, I shouldn't." As she was about to put it away, she stopped and stared at it for a long time. "Oh, what the heck. It's not like I have to answer to anyone at the moment." She poured herself a generous cup and continued to look around the kitchen. After about three more cups, her scavenger hunt eventually led her to the storeroom out back. Nothing interesting whatsoever, thought Snow. However, she came to a tin can that rattled when she picked it up. She took it with her as she closed the storeroom door and stumbled back to the kitchen. She opened the can to find it full of coffee beans and little paint vials. At the bottom was a crumpled piece of paper. She clumsily straightened the paper. As she poured herself a fourth cup of wine, she began to read the note. It was an unfinished note to her. 'To Snow, my love.' Just to see these words and knowing Mitch wrote them, she felt her eyes begin to tear and she couldn't see well enough to read the rest of the note. She put the note in her pocket, closed the tin and put it under one of the cabinets in the kitchen. That's when she spotted it. Over in the corner, carefully draped over a chair ... it was Mitch's apron. He was hardly ever without it. She gently touched it, then put her hand to her mouth as she let out a soft whimper. She took and cradled the apron in her arms for a moment, burying her face into the garment as it absorbed her tears. It smelled of Mitch, of course.

She put the rest of the wine back away, wadded up her shawl, grabbed her cup and headed back outside toward the barn. She opened the barn door enough to slip inside. She went over and sat down next to the little baby colt. "Hello, 24-Carrots. How are you this evening?" Although his eyelids were heavy, he was still awake. She polished off the rest of her cup of wine, "Couldn't sleep either, huh?" She leaned back against the colt's pen, looked up into the loft and remembered her date with Mitch. She thought back to the lovely smell of vanilla, which of course was not there now as she wrinkled her nose. She looked around the barn and remembered their dance. After a few attempts, she got up and walked over to where they had stood. As she thought back to the music playing she closed her eyes and relived the steps once again. She lifted her arms into a dance position as though he

was there in front of her and began to dance around the floor. Although she was much clumsier now having had four generous cups of Mitch's homemade wine, it didn't matter. She could still see it all in her head as it happened that night. Then she thought back to the conversation they had about Kate. She remembered what Mitch said, about how he had pursued a date with Kate ... about how he was actually pursuing Kate before Snow came to the village. Now, it was like things had started over again. It was back to that point in Mitch's perspective, before he knew Snow. He was with Kate in the kitchen tonight. He wants Kate again! Why not? He doesn't even remember Snow, now. He doesn't remember their date, their talks, their hugs, their kisses. He doesn't remember All Hallows' Eve, or her falling into his arms in the orchard, or waking her from the queen's spell with a kiss ... nothing! She touched the string of coffee beans that adorned her arm. He doesn't even remember making me this bracelet, she thought. She grabbed her bracelet of colored beans and ripped it from her wrist, spraying painted coffee beans all over the barn floor. He remembers nothing. She's nothing to him now, as if she never existed ... never.

Snow was sobbing uncontrollably as she dropped limply to the floor. She had to cry. She didn't want to stop crying. She just let her tears fall as they may. Maybe they would flood the barn and drown her, Snow thought.

"M' lady, are you alright?"

Startled, Snow looked up to see Bart looking at her with much concern. She could barely talk, "What are you doing here?"

Bart knelt down to Snow, "I couldn't remember if I had locked up the horses. I came to check and I heard you crying. Would you like some help getting back home, Princess?"

Princess. He called her Princess. She wondered why, as only Mitch called her that ... or used to call her that, rather. She doubted that she would ever hear him call her 'Princess' again. She smiled at hearing it come from Bart, remembering his kindness to her through this whole ordeal as he took her hand and helped her up. She was very unsteady on her feet, and Bart could tell she had been into some kind of drink.

He began to unwrap her shawl to put around her but Snow grabbed the shawl, "No, thank you. I'm not that cold at the moment."

He smiled and led her back to the tree house, as she held the wadded up shawl in her arms.

Halfway there, he felt Snow go limp on his arm. Quickly, he grabbed her under her waist to keep her from hitting the ground too hard. She had passed out cold. There was no way he was going to be able to get her up that tree, he thought. As he picked up the princess into his arms, her shawl fell to the ground. As it lay open, he saw the reason she protected it so. Wrapped inside of it had been Mitch's apron. Sympathetically, he shook his head as he leaned down and collected the garments.

He then carried her to his cabin where he tucked her into his bed. Beautiful girl, he thought, such a lovely glow she has. As he touched her face he whispered, "I'm so sorry about Mitch, Snow. I hope you don't let it get you down too long. In my opinion he is really missing out. If he doesn't come around, believe me, you won't have a problem finding someone who's just as willing to love you, Princess. Believe me." He watched her sleep for a moment, then he kissed her forehead, "Goodnight, Snow."

Morning's light broke through Bart's window waking the sleeping Princess. Bart had been awake a few moments, "Good morning, Princess. I take it you slept well? Good thing I didn't have a pea under my bed, eh?" He chuckled.

Not understanding his meaning, she simply smiled and yawned. Wait a minute? What am I doing here, thought Snow?

Bart saw the confusion in her eyes, “Not to fear, Snow. You were having a rough evening. I found you in the barn when I went to check on the horses. You must have gotten into Mitch’s wine. Do you remember that?”

Snow nodded.

“You weren’t in any condition to climb up to your house, so I let you sleep here. I hope that’s alright. How are you feeling?”

“OK, I guess. My head hurts.”

He laughed, “I can imagine it does. Would you like me to get you some tea to help ease that?”

Snow smiled and nodded, then grabbed her head in pain from simply moving her head. He laughed again as he went to the door.

“Bart, thank you for your hospitality. It was very considerate of you.”

He looked at her briefly, then smiled, “Anytime, Princess”.

Snow was still very tired from her evening walk and ‘related events’ from the night before. She thanked Bart for walking her home, struggled her way up to her house, opened the door with much effort and plopped onto her couch pillows, her wadded shawl sprawling out next to her. Not wanting to move for a while, she noticed something that caught her eye. Interwoven with her shawl was a white garment. She sat up and picked up the strange cloth. It was Mitch’s apron. “Yes, I forgot! Oh dear, I should return this.” But as she held the apron up to her cheek, she could see him in her mind ... could hear his voice. She could smell all those wonderful familiar smells in the garment ... the kitchen, the coffees, the teas ... and of course, Mitch. She felt as if she had been forced into another time, a time where her true love no longer knew her, a time where all her dreams were gone. She held the apron to her and rolled over on her side. She then felt something crumpling beneath her. She reached into her pocket and pulled out a note. “I forgot about this, too.” She opened the crumpled paper and began to read ...

‘To Snow, my love. Words cannot express my true feelings, but I must try nonetheless. In this journey through life, the most precious thing we have is love. Although in life we are destined to take crooked roads and wrong turns sometimes, as long as we have love in our lives, anything is possible. For love is life they say. And if that’s true, then you are my life, Princess. You are my love and my heart. If I could be granted one wish in life, Snow, it would be to have you as a part of my life forever. It would make me the happiest man alive to have you forever in my life ... to have you forever as my wife.’

A tear fell on the paper as she closed her eyes and hugged the note to her chest. Although it didn’t appear to be complete, even abandoned perhaps, Mitch wrote it about her. That’s all that mattered. He wrote that he wanted to marry her. And he wrote it before that horrible explosion, while he was still her true love. Would she ever find that again? No, never, thought Snow. Mitch was a stranger to her now. Things could never be the same.

As Mitch prepared lunch for that day, he pondered Kate’s words. She had made it clear that she was still seeing Donnie and had no immediate plans to change that. Perhaps he should find out more about Snow, about the relationship they’d had. He really did wish he could remember. She was so sweet and gentle ... and beautiful. The ‘real’ Snow White! Mitch just couldn’t get over her being a ‘living fairy tale’. He was almost glad to have missed the trouble they’d had with the queen, though. What was her name, Margaret? Poor Eddy. I’m glad that’s all over, Mitch thought.

Kate had told him of Snow’s decree and how she’d originally sought after Eddy. Mitch laughed to himself. Mitch was fascinated by how Snow had seen her father in the woods and he’d released her from her decree. That had to be a hallucination, right, thought Mitch? Well like Kate said, the strangest things happen here in the Willows. Still, he wanted

to get to know Snow better. Perhaps they could start over. As 'luck' would have it, Snow was designated to set the table for lunch that afternoon. Mitch wondered if Kristen possibly set the whole thing up, since she had worked out the schedule that morning.

As Mitch turned over the meat in the oven, the kitchen door opened slowly. A shy Snow peeked her head in, "May I come in?"

Mitch almost laughed at her extreme courtesy, "Of course, Love."

Love? Did he just call her 'Love?' Had to be my imagination, thought Snow. She let the door close behind her, "Kristen said I was to set the table today."

Mitch wiped his hands on his apron, not his usual one at that. "Yes, I thought she mentioned that. Thanks for your help, Snow. I'd offer you an apron, but this one is my spare, and filthy at that. Mine seems to have just sprouted legs and walked away." He laughed, then stopped short when he noticed that Snow seemed very nervous and was not laughing. She couldn't look at him now, knowing it was her that had stolen his best apron. 'Snow, you thief!' she thought to herself.

"Snow, I know that things are strange right now. Believe it or not, I really wish I could remember more, remember anything. But I'd really like to spend some time with you, get to know you."

Snow couldn't help but look at him now.

"Kate told me that we had a relationship, but she didn't know very much about it to tell me. So, that's where you come in."

"Me?"

"Yes, Snow." He approached her and took her hands in his, "It seems that you're the only one here who really knew the man I had become. Now, I'll need your help in getting me to where I was."

Snow couldn't hide her tears, "Mitch, I'm not a child."

"I know. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to speak as though you were. What I meant was, I need your help in getting US back to where WE were."

Snow turned away and began to gather the flatware to set the table, "Mitch, you don't know me at all, now."

"Which is exactly why I'd like to spend more time with you, Snow. Maybe things can get back to where they were, eventually."

Snow put the back of her hand up to her mouth as if she were warning herself not to burst into sobs. She gathered up the flatware in her arms, "I'm not sure if it can ever be the same, Mitch."

She quickly went through the door into the dining area. As she began setting the table, Kristen and Kate could noticeably see she was crying, or at least was trying not to. Kate started over to her.

Kristen put her hand on Kate's shoulder, "No, don't. I think it's best for her to just have a minute." Kate nodded.

As Snow was finishing the table, at that moment her worst fear had come true. She didn't have enough place settings. She was going to have to go back into the kitchen.

Feeling like a total clown, she re-entered the kitchen. She stopped and just leaned up against the kitchen door looking at Mitch. Upon seeing her, Mitch set down the cooking pot he'd just taken off the stove and looked at her in return.

Snow suddenly burst into giggles, "Here I was, making this grand and dramatic exit. What I failed to do was to make sure I had the correct number of place settings!"

Mitch smiled and approached her. Again he took her hands, "Why not, Snow? Why can't it be like it was? Can't you guide me?"

Snow looked down at their hands, "But don't you see? I'm so much more advanced in this whole thing, you know. In that, as you can guess, my feelings for you are so much deeper than yours that ..." she stopped and just shook her head.

He lifted her head and looked into her eyes, "That what?"

"That it could take a lifetime for you to feel the same way I do." Barely able to speak, she whispered, "That's how much I love you."

Mitch was very much taken aback by her words and the depth of feeling in her voice.

There was a knock at the kitchen door. It was Nicholas relaying a message, "Hey, troops are hungry in here! They want to know when to expect the 'grub'?"

As Snow ducked away and around Mitch, he yelled through the door, "It's just about done!"

She gathered the remaining flatware she needed. "Well, I won't bother you any longer. I just need to get a few more place settings."

Mitch gently grabbed her arm as she was about to leave with the flatware, "Snow, I really do want to talk some more ... about all of this."

She smiled and gently replied, "Alright, Mitch. We will."

"Lunch was delicious as usual, Mitch," as Thomas picked some meat out of his teeth. "At least you haven't forgotten how to cook."

Kristen gave him a hush look as she glanced at Snow who had been almost afraid to look up at anyone the whole meal except Stevie.

"Aye, Mitch ... delicious," agreed Rein, "What is this, duck?"

"No, rabbit," Mitch said proudly. That new pen you men built is great. Those two fat ones were so easy to catch in the pen ... the calico and that furry white one."

Snow spit her water onto her plate and proceeded to choke on the rest, coughing.

The women all looked at Snow quickly with concern, knowing that was her favorite rabbit. Still coughing, Snow frantically stood up and backed away from the table, causing her chair to crash to the floor.

She turned and ran out the door before anyone could say a word.

"What happened? Is she choking? We'd better go after her."

"No, Mitch," sighed Kate, "It's just that you cooked her pet rabbit. Whitey was her favorite."

A look of horror spread over Mitch's face in the thought that he'd messed up things already. He loudly blurted out, "Well, then why the hell didn't anyone tell me that before I cooked the blasted creature!"

"This can't be happening!" Snow thought as she ran into the woods. She could barely see where she was going through the tears in her eyes. "I'm so tired of crying!" she yelled as she stopped at the river. She stopped in the same spot she saw her father in the reflection of the river that day ... her wedding day. She wondered if she'd ever see that day again.

"Daddy! Where are you? I need you so much right now! Are you there?" She looked over the rock and into the water, but only saw her own reflection. She sat back and spoke quietly, as though he could hear her anyway, "Things have gone so wrong, Daddy. I did what you said. I disregarded the decree and found my true love. But now, he doesn't even remember me. He doesn't remember his own self, either. Everything the village went through, everything WE went through. He remembers nothing. So where is my true love now? It can't be here." She was sobbing but no tears would flow. "I can't even cry anymore, Daddy. I've run out of tears." Snow sat and stared down at the river a while. She watched the gentle waters flow downstream carrying with them the leaves from the trees. Snow wished she were one of those leaves to be carried off, carried away from these troubles. She wanted to escape. She wanted to be anywhere but here. Snow got up and proceeded into the woods. She ventured through the brush with purpose. She had a direction. She was headed back to where the portal had been.

As she entered the general area where the explosion had taken place, there was still a hint fragrance of burnt leaves and wood. There was no mist, and Snow couldn't even tell where the original tree had been where Stevie had found her. "Where are you?!" Snow screamed at the top of her lungs. "This is all your fault, Margurite! I'm not afraid of you! Show yourself, you witch! I know you're here. You're always lurking somewhere, aren't you? Come out! I'm here, stepmother! Why don't you take me? You want me so badly ... here! Take me! I'm right here! Where are you? I know you aren't dead, you witch! There's no way to kill you, is there? So just come get me ... you want me so bad. I have nothing here, so come on! I'm ready to go home! I'm ready to face you! I'm not afraid of you! You hear me? I'm not!" Snow dropped to the ground in exhaustion, crying. "I just don't belong here. That's what it is. That's why all of this is happening. I just need to go home, no matter what is waiting for me. I should just go home."

A touch on her shoulder startled Snow, as she quickly turned and looked up.

Chapter 3 “Thanksgiving Turkey”

The sun was in her eyes, and she couldn't quite see who was standing before her. As she tried to use her hand to shield the sun from her eyes, the figure noticed her struggle and took a step sideways to stand between her and the sun's blinding rays.

“Thomas, what are you doing here?”

“Everyone's been looking all over for you! You ran out of the dining room so fast. Are you alright, Snow?”

“No, not really. But I hope to be better soon.”

Thomas helped her to her feet. As he did, her troubled state caught her off guard and she stumbled.

He grabbed her by the waist to steady her, “Not too steady on your feet, there. Do you feel alright?”

“Yes, thank you Thomas. I've just not had a very good week, is all.”

“I understand, Snow. Are you ready to go back to the village?”

She steadied herself, and sighed, “Not really, but I imagine that we should go back anyway.”

Thomas stopped and looked at her with concern, “What is it, Snow? Is it really that rabbit that has you this upset, if you don't mind my asking?”

“No. It's just that it still bothers me terribly that Mitch doesn't know me anymore. He used to know how much I loved Whitey and protected him from being slaughtered for meals. Now, it's like he's a whole different person. He's not the same Mitch I knew.”

“He's the same person, only he's just lost track of time. You know what I mean? He just needs someone to refresh his memory.”

Snow pondered this a moment.

“Now, you ready to go back? Everyone's looking for you.”

She smiled and nodded once again.

As they approached the main hut, Stevie ran to Snow, “Snow! I have ta show ya somethin'!” He grabbed her arm as she waved goodbye to Thomas. He dragged her all the way over to the rabbit pen.

“Stevie really, I don't need to be reminded that Mitch cooked my favorite rabbit!”

“No Snow, that's just it. He didn't. Look!”

There in the pen was Whitey, safe and sound. Snow squealed with delight, “Whitey!”

Stevie continued, “Yeah, I jus' found out from Nicholas that they found another white rabbit in th' woods this morning, a rather plump one. When I came to look, there was Whitey! I'd know him anywhere after watchin' you 'old 'im, Snow. I knew that you would want to know right away.”

She picked up the rabbit and cradled it in her arms, “Thank you, Stevie.” She leaned over and kissed him gently on the cheek.

Stevie had never remembered such a sweet and gentle kiss from Snow before.

Meanwhile, Mitch had seen Stevie drag Snow across the yard and followed to see what was up. He overheard Stevie's good news about Whitey and made a mental note to NEVER cook that one. But more importantly, he felt a strange familiarity when he watched Snow kiss Stevie. Was it ... jealousy??

Snow sat in a large lounge chair and enjoyed the festivities after dinner that evening. She tried to feel at home as she did just a week ago amongst her good friends in the Willows. Snow sighed during a lovely melody on the mandolin by Bart. He smiled at Snow as she clapped vigorously once he had finished. After a wonderful performance on the flute

by Duncan, Kate asked Snow to come and sing. Her voice was like a bird as she did her rendition. Mitch looked over at Kate with a smile of approval at her choice of entertainment. Kate returned the smile. Snow looked over just in time to see Mitch smiling at Kate and her smiling back. Snow stopped before her voice cracked, unable to continue with her song. Kate glanced at Snow fearing that she had thought the worst from she and Mitch's glances. Snow excused herself claiming some sort of 'night air' laryngitis and left the hut. Kate was about to follow, but was beaten by Stevie, quickly following behind Snow.

"Did ya want to be alone again, Snow?" Stevie caught up to Snow as she headed back to the tree house.

She smiled at him, "No, Stevie. Why don't you come and keep me company for a while. Do you have a book with you?"

He smiled happily and quickly pulled a book out of his jacket.

She nudged him, "Now, how did I know you'd have one?"

"Oh, an' I think you'll really like this one, Snow. It's about these two people who get lost in like a time warp. An' they go back to the medieval days, you know where there are knights and kings and all that stuff like back in your time, Snow."

"Sounds lovely, Stevie." Snow got a fire going in her little kitchen fireplace and the two of them sat amongst the couch pillows as Stevie began to read his book aloud.

Snow was deep in thought. She would hear a sentence or two every now and then, but for the most part she was lost in her own world. Though in Stevie's company, Snow still felt lonely. She missed the company of a loving companion. She missed the butterflies in her stomach. Where had they gone? Although Stevie was a sweetheart and a good friend, that was just it ... he was a friend, a playmate of sorts.

Lulled by Stevie's words, Snow began to drift off to sleep. She could see Mitch talking to her. She could hear his voice. They were in the barn, in the loft with the soft purple velvet and the lovely scent of vanilla. She snuggled up to him as he put his arm around her. She smiled as he would whisper wonderful little things to her. She nuzzled her face up to his neck giving him little kisses.

Stevie's words began to slow down. His attention became distracted as Snow snuggled closer to him. He lost his place on the page altogether when Snow began kissing his neck. Not quite knowing what to do, Stevie just looked at her. She was so lovely, and looked so peaceful lying there next to him. She reminded him of his friend, Roy's girlfriend Carrie back home, although he felt a stronger bond with Snow. Stevie wasn't sure what to think about Snow's actions. He felt confused. He was enjoying himself, but didn't know what to do now, how to react. "Snow, are you awake?"

Snow made no reply. She simply lowered her head back down and rested it on Stevie's shoulder. Forgetting about the book, he set it down and turned to face Snow on the pillows as she repositioned herself next to him, still asleep. What are these feelings, thought Stevie? He didn't know what to make of them. He didn't even know what his feelings for her were, exactly. He reached up and touched her cheek as he had seen Mitch do before, then brushed back her hair as it had fallen onto her cheek in her sleep. He couldn't leave, as he knew that would wake her up. He decided to simply stay until they both awoke and then he could go. He whispered, careful not to wake her, "Snow White, is your dreamland a fairy tale, too? Then maybe I'll see you there, eh?" He closed his eyes and soon fell asleep.

Kate caught Snow after breakfast in the main hut, "Snow, can I speak with you a minute?"

"Yes, Kate?"

Kate sloshed the coffee around in her cup, "Well, it's about last night."

Snow averted her eyes to the floor.

“Snow I think you misunderstood something you saw. You didn’t leave the hut because you were sick, did you? I know what happened. You saw Mitch and I look at each other. Am I right?”

Snow nodded, “I know it’s a silly thing Kate, but I just couldn’t continue singing. I’ve not been myself lately.”

“I know, Snow. You’ve been through a lot, I understand. But I needed to tell you this. Mitch looked at me and smiled because I had just asked you to sing. You know, to him it was the first time he heard you. He was giving me his approval on my choice for the entertainment ... namely you, Snow.”

Her eyes lit up, “Really?”

Kate smiled and nodded.

Snow waved her arms in frustration, “And there I go botch it up by running away! He didn’t even get to hear me at all, hardly.”

Kate laughed, “I’m sure he’ll have lots of chances.”

“Alright, tell us again about this ‘Thanksgiving’ holiday. You say it’s a custom over in the states?” Rein asked Yolanda as he continued the repairs to one of the cabins.

“Yes, when the pilgrims first landed on the new world’s east coast, they endured a very long and hard winter. The Indians came to their aid teaching them the best ways to plant crops for the harvest, to season and can food to preserve it for winter consumption, and even the best way to hunt for the animals in the new land. The pilgrims showed the Indians their appreciation by inviting them to a large feast after their first successful harvest. They gave ‘thanks’ for surviving the winter and for the harvest being so fruitful...hence ‘Thanksgiving’.”

“Who are ‘pilgrims’?” inquired Bart as he stopped sawing on a board.

“They were the first real settlers from Europe. They had gotten fed up with England.”

“Here, here!” barked Duncan. He smiled at her as the other men chuckled.

She gave Duncan a playful glance and then turned to Bart, “In fact, it was about a century after you discovered the new world.”

Bart smiled as he looked around at the other men, “And don’t you forget that men. I discovered the new world all by myself!”

Yolanda jokingly slapped him on the arm, “You know what I mean!”

He grabbed his arm as if he were really hurt, “Oh ho! So that’s the thanks I get for discovering America, eh? See if I ever offer you another country again!”

Murray nursed his finger after he’d hit it with a hammer, “So, we’re going to have one of those big ‘feasts’, are we? I assume you’ve told Mitch, right?”

“Yes, I have. He knows all about it.”

He clarified, “Now you did tell him AFTER the amnesia, and not before, right?”

“Yes, Murray. I told him after.”

“OK, here’s the only problem I see with this Thanksgiving feast, ladies,” began Mitch as he spoke to the women, “Simply put, we don’t have any turkeys in the Willows. And I know the importance of the turkey in this holiday.”

“What ‘bout wild turkeys? Surely there are wild turkeys in th’ woods,” offered Jill.

Mitch thought for a minute, “Hmmm. Wild turkeys. I never thought about that. I don’t know if we’ve ever seen any here. I’ll talk to the guys and see what we can come up with. But the rest sounds just fine. We have plenty of food stores. I think it’s a great idea, a good way to kick off the winter season.”

Yolanda added, “You know we have to have festivities ... music, dancing. I’ll even share the story of Thanksgiving with everyone that night since most folks here are probably not very familiar with it.”

Snow looked up in thought curiously, “Hmmm, that gives me an idea, actually.”

Mitch gave a look to Snow, “I hope you’ll be singing again Snow. I’d like to hear an entire song this time.”

Snow blushed immensely. Kate had explained to Mitch what happened.

She bit her lower lip, “Actually, I have another idea, a special one. I really should go and plan it out. I’ll see you all later.” She dashed out the door, hoping that she had left before her face turned totally red.

“Stevie!” Snow found Stevie over by the rabbit pen attending to Fred. At the sight of Snow, Stevie immediately thought back to the previous night in her tree house. What a beautiful memory, he thought. He then glanced down at his pet Fred and was taken aback at the rabbit’s obvious ability to quickly adapt to his new role of being a ‘breeding’ rabbit. Stevie was suddenly embarrassed that Snow would come at that particular moment, but there wasn’t much he could do about it, now was there?

“Stevie, how would you like to help me with a little ‘entertainment’ idea I have for the Thanksgiving dinner festivities?”

“Sure, Snow. Like wha?”

“How would you like to put on a small play?”

“A play! That’d be fab! What kind of play?”

“Well, Yolanda is going to share the story of Thanksgiving. Since we don’t know all that much about it, I was thinking perhaps we’d just do something simple, but something funny that will make everyone laugh.” She giggled, “Of course, that is unless you’re averse to acting like a ‘clown’?”

“A clown? Oi, no. I’m always a clown, Snow!”

They spent the afternoon putting their heads together on an idea for the play. After a little rehearsal, it was almost dinnertime. “Snow, I left me book in your treehouse. You mind if I go an’ get it?”

“No. Of course, go ahead.” Stevie didn’t want to be late for dinner. He dashed up the tree and into the house. There it was, right where he’d dropped it the night before when Snow had him so distracted. On his way out, something familiar on her counter caught his eye. “Mitch’s apron! Golly, Mitch’s been lookin’ all over for this! I’m sure he’ll be real glad to get it back.” He grabbed the apron and dashed off to supper.

“You know, Mitch, you’ve been doing an awful lot lately. Maybe you should let someone else cook for a while. You know Kate wants you to rest. For a while now, folks have been sharing the cooking duties, you know,” offered a concerned Duncan as he helped Mitch in the kitchen.

“Really? Hmmm, something else I don’t remember.”

Stevie burst into the kitchen cheerfully, “Mitch! Look!”

Mitch gasped, “My apron! Wherever did you find it?”

“Snow had it. Not sure why.”

Duncan looked away, embarrassed for Snow’s sake.

Mitch nodded with a confused smile, “Oh, OK. Well, thanks Stevie.”

“Sure thing, Mitch. I knew you’d be glad to have it back.” Stevie dashed out of the kitchen as Mitch and Duncan looked at each other.

Not quite knowing what to say, Mitch put the apron on and began his work for supper.

“Here, I’ll set the places.” Duncan gathered the flatware and went out into the hut.

Mitch crouched down to get out a cooking pot when something fell out of his apron pocket. Lying on the floor was a note. He stood up and unfolded the note, and to his surprise it was his handwriting, although he didn’t remember writing it.

'To Snow, my love. Words cannot express my true feelings, but I must try nonetheless. In this journey through life, the most precious thing we can have is love. Although in life we are destined to take crooked roads and wrong turns sometimes. As long as we have love in our lives, anything is possible. For love is life they say. And if that's true, then you are my life, Princess. You are my love and my heart. If I could be granted one wish in this life Snow, it would be to have you as a part of my life forever. It would make me the happiest man alive to have you forever in my life ... to have you forever as my wife.'

As he read the note, his heart grew heavy. He had never in his life known a love so deep. He had never felt that way about anyone, although he wanted to have those feelings desperately. It was almost as if the words on that paper were written by someone other than himself. Maybe Snow was right. Maybe he did turn into a different person. All the experiences in the village and with Snow perhaps gave him a deeper perspective on life, gave him character, made him a better man ... a man he didn't remember, a man he wished he knew.

It was Thanksgiving Day and everyone was busily preparing for the festivities for that afternoon. In the woods, Nicholas and Roger had found two large wild turkeys to everyone's relief.

As Yolanda told everyone, "You can't celebrate Thanksgiving without a turkey!"

The women insisted upon cooking the feast to give Mitch a break. There was lots of fruit, vegetables, rolls, a homemade southern cornbread dressing made by Jill and fresh pumpkin pie that Snow surprised everyone with. As the women prepared the feast, Snow mentioned to them that the cooks in the castle used to tell her that she was the only princess they'd ever known who had an interest in learning how to cook.

The feast was scrumptious. The conversation at dinner revolved mostly around the Thanksgiving holiday itself and the 'new world'. Bart was able to offer much historical information on the subject ... how the world was discovered, the events leading up to the voyage, and the trials they went through once getting there. Snow found all of it fascinating. Hanging on Bart's every word, they exchanged smiles and glances across the table. The exchanges did not go unnoticed by Mitch.

After dinner at Mitch's insistence, Snow began the festivities with a lovely song which she finished in its entirety this time. Then after a few folk melodies on Mitch's guitar, Yolanda introduced the Thanksgiving story to the group. At its conclusion, Snow announced that she and Stevie had a surprise for everyone on a 'lighter' note.

She stood at the front of the hut, "It was mentioned by some that I should start stories like this ... 'Once upon a time', there lived a turkey named Gobbles."

Into the main room from the back bedroom came Stevie dressed in feathers much like a turkey. He was walking to and fro hunched over and 'gobbling' like a turkey.

Snow continued, "Gobbles lived on a farm with lots of other animals and was a happy turkey."

Stevie began dancing about as he gobbled happily. There was much laughter around the room as Stevie soaked in the spotlight.

"The farm caretakers were the farmer and his wife."

Stevie quickly put on an apron and the hat he'd borrowed from Nicholas.

"There was only one problem, the farmer was blind."

Stevie began to walk about the room pretending to be blind. He began to study the faces of the men in the room with his hands. At one point he poked Thomas in the eye.

As he approached Donnie, he warned Stevie "Don't even think about it, mate!"

The room chuckled. Stevie proceeded to stumble into the wall a few times and then tripped over a chair.

Snow smiled at Stevie's antics, "Then one day, Gobbles saw the farmer with a scary-looking instrument."

Stevie removed the hat and apron and became 'Gobbles' once again, looking at an imaginary farmer with curious caution.

"In fact, it was the same instrument the farmer used to chop firewood. He carried it about the yard calling his name. 'Gobbles! Gobbles! Where are you? Here Gobbles!' Gobbles thought to himself that this couldn't be good."

Stevie put his fingers up to his mouth in fear and shone a look of pure terror on his face.

"As the blind farmer came near him, Gobbles stood perfectly still and didn't make a sound."

Stevie did just that.

"But the farmer stopped, sensing an animal was nearby. 'Gobbles, is that you?' So, in sheer panic, Gobbles did the only thing he could think of to do..."

Stevie, standing perfectly still, let out a very hearty, "Moooooo!!!"

Suddenly, uproarious laughter filled the room. Snow in fact had to wait for everyone to quiet down in order to finish the story.

"Thinking Gobbles was a cow, the farmer continued looking. Well, Gobbles knew he couldn't fool the farmer forever, so he began to think very hard on what to do."

Stevie stood, resting his chin on his hand, appearing to think very hard.

"He spotted a pumpkin over by the barn."

Stevie pointed to the wall as if it were a pumpkin and excitedly ran over to it.

"Then he leaned over the pumpkin and gobbled a few times."

Stevie leaned close to the floor and gobbled.

Snow took a step forward, "The farmer headed toward the sound of the gobbling. He stood near the pumpkin looking around, waiting for Gobbles to gobble again."

Stevie looked up at the imaginary farmer.

"Then he gobbled once more and quickly jumped out of the way."

Stevie gobbled once and leapt through the air across the hut landing at Kate's feet, who was trying to keep her laughing as quiet as she could.

"The farmer swung his hatchet toward the pumpkin thinking it was Gobbles and smashed the pumpkin all over the yard!"

Stevie pretended to watch the farmer smash the pumpkin and ducked to avoid incoming pumpkin parts.

"Disappointed that he hadn't caught a turkey for Thanksgiving, the farmer sadly brought his wife the smashed pumpkin. She was very sympathetic. Rather than scold her husband, she made due with what they had and made him a pumpkin pie instead. And Gobbles the turkey had a very happy Thanksgiving."

Stevie jumped up and began to dance around the room, skipping and gobbling merrily.

"The End!"

Everyone in the room clapped and cheered. Stevie, still dancing around as Gobbles, grabbed Snow's hands and began to dance with her. Eddy turned on the music player and everyone began dancing. It was a very enjoyable Thanksgiving for everyone.

Chapter 4

“Treats”

“Hey there little guy!” Snow smiled as she peeked into 24-Carrots pen. “Look what I’ve got for you! Treats!” She pulled two large carrots out of her pocket. She gave one to 24-Carrots who accepted it hungrily. “Goodness, you’d think you were hungry or something?” The little colt dropped part of the carrot, “Gee, you’re as clumsy as I am!” When Snow bent down to pick up the carrot for him, she saw part of the remains of the coffee bean bracelet that she had ripped off of her arm a few nights before. She clutched her wrist as she wished she hadn’t done that. Maybe Mitch would make her another if he knew about the tin full of beans. But it just wouldn’t be the same, she thought. He doesn’t remember.

Snow noticed Nugget, the colt’s mother, nudge closer to Snow as she eyed the other carrot Snow held in her hand. “Yes, Ms. Nugget. Of course I didn’t forget about you,” as the mother eagerly grabbed the other carrot with her large lips. “Now don’t tell me the men are starving you precious things?”

“No way,” came a voice behind Snow. “These horses get plenty of food around here. Humpf, horses? They’re pigs if you ask me! I never saw one creature eat so much, except maybe Brutus the pig!” Bart had brought in a saddle that he had just finished repairing. “Would you like to go for a ride, m’ lady? I just finished the cleaning and repairs on this saddle. It’s all ready to go. We could just take ‘em for a spin for a while. What do you say?”

Snow smiled, “Sure! I love riding. And these horses here in the Willows are so gentle. I’m sure it’s all of the tender loving-kindness they get from all of you caretakers, here. You all take such good care of them.”

Bart prepared two horses with saddles, “Well, I would hope that you ladies are well taken care of as well. You are, aren’t you? Because you all are far more important than these horses.”

Blushing, Snow said shyly, “Of course. Well, at least I know that I am. I’m sure the other girls don’t have too many complaints, either.”

“Which one would you like to ride, Snow.”

“I’ll let you pick Bart, since you know them so well.”

Bart put the saddle on the smaller of the two, “Here, I believe this mare is the most gentle. May I give you a lift?”

“Certainly.”

He put his fingers together to help guide her foot to the stirrup. Once there, she turned her foot slightly to get onto the horse and her foot slipped out of the stirrup. Bart, still behind her as a ‘spotter’, grabbed her around her back and ribcage as she fell, her arms landing around his neck.

“Oh, Bart I’m so sorry! I’m such a klutz!”

Unnoticed by Snow as she gathered herself, Bart was momentarily awestruck for a brief second, as he stopped to study her face. She was such a lovely girl ... her fair skin, her blue eyes, her rosy lips. He had to shake off the brief thought that he wished Mitch were still pursuing Kate instead of Snow since the amnesia. But staying honorable to his Willows brother, he knew where Snow’s heart truly lied.

“Nonsense. It happens all the time. You just slipped is all. Are you alright?”

Snow giggled, “Heavens, yes. Just my pride is hurt. That’s all.”

And such a sweet and caring girl, thought Bart as he helped Snow onto the mare successfully the second time. Bart wondered if Mitch knew what a lucky man he really was.

Bart took Snow through the parts of the woods that weren’t too difficult to travel on horseback, while also choosing the paths with the loveliest scenery. Her mare was gentle and calm, as Snow enjoyed the breathtaking views of the woods around the Willows. Now

that fall was approaching its end and winter was coming into season, the blossoms and greenery had turned to the loveliest combinations of orange and gold and red. The gentle leaves rained down on them as they traveled through pathways and over small hills.

Bart turned a corner to face a breathtaking view of the mountains, "I didn't get a chance to tell you last night how much I enjoyed the Thanksgiving play that you and Stevie put on. You both did such a great job."

"Thank you! Stevie is such a doll! He just ran around like a court jester and it didn't bother him a bit. And I meant to tell you how fascinated I was with all of the tales you told about the discovery of the New World. It was all so amazing!"

Bart smiled, "Oh, I have plenty more stories where those came from ... some good, some bad."

"I'd love to hear more," Snow replied eagerly.

As they roamed the lovely hills surrounding the village, Bart reminisced back and shared with Snow the times he had with his brothers in the New World. They crossed a bridge over the creek that was handcrafted with beautiful wood carvings.

"This bridge is lovely. Which of you men do such beautiful woodwork?"

"Well, many of us are skilled in carving, but honestly that bridge was here before any of us ever came to the Willows. Funny, too, because it doesn't really look very old, does it? Come, I'll show you one of the small cabins built in the woods."

"You have cabins built in the middle of the woods?"

Bart crossed the bridge followed by Snow, "Yes. They were built for emergency purposes really. Donnie thought they might be useful if we ever had to leave the village for whatever reason. But they didn't finish making enough of them throughout the woods in order to make it over the mountains yet. It wouldn't be enough time before dark. And as it's already been mentioned, there is a dark force in the Willows at night that no one has survived outdoors ... well, except you, when that bear chased you up that tree."

"It was my father protecting me. I saw my crest glowing all night. It hasn't glowed since."

"Hopefully someday we'll get around to finishing the emergency cabins project."

Snow nodded, "Yes, since now they say there is a village over the mountain?"

Bart laughed, "Yes, that's what they say."

They soon approached the cabin. It was small and quaint, Snow thought. Since it was getting close to lunchtime, they didn't venture inside. Snow kept the idea in her head, though. Fairly often she needed a place to gather her thoughts away from everyone. The treehouse didn't seem to free her from 'curious guests' sometimes ... mentioning no names of course.

"Well, are you about ready to head back, Snow?"

"Yes. I'm sure you're getting quite hungry, Bart."

Bart laughed, "Well, we don't want anyone waiting on us ... not that they would!"

As they came around to the village Bart offered, "Would you like me to let you off at the main cabin so you can get washed up?"

"Yes, please. That is, if you don't mind."

"Not at all."

They rode to the front of the main hut, near the door. Mitch was beating a few carpet pieces off the side of the hut and saw them ride up. Snow brought both legs to the side of her horse. Bart caught Snow around the waist as he lifted her down from the mare then twirled her around to the steps of the hut.

"There we go. Front door service, m'lady."

"Thank you for the ride, Bart. It was lovely."

"Anytime, Snow." Bart took the reins of the horses as he started walking them back to the barn.

Mitch's jaw dropped when he saw Bart twirl Snow off the horse. Not because of the action itself, but because of the memory it caused to leap into Mitch's mind. He remembered! He remembered twirling Snow around and around and they were laughing. He didn't remember the circumstances, but he did remember the deep love he felt as he twirled her around and heard her sweet laughter in his ears.

As Snow walked up the steps of the main hut, he rushed up to stop her, "Snow, wait!"

Snow was startled by his sudden appearance, but was not at all objecting.

Mitch all but stuttered his words, "Snow, just now when I saw you ... from off the horse ... I remembered! I remembered doing that ... twirling you around. I remember, Snow!"

Snow was speechless as tears began to well up in her eyes.

Mitch took her hands in his, "I know it isn't much, Snow, but it's a start. And I know that things can get better, that I can remember more in time, if you'll give me the chance. I know you're confused and frustrated. And I know you think things can never be the same, but they can. Please don't give up on me, Princess."

Snow's tears, now welled to capacity, began to flow down her face. She gasped at what she heard and then sobbed her words, "Princess! You called me Princess. That's what you used to call me, Mitch. When you stopped, it was just awful."

He took her face in his hands then looked into her teary blue eyes, "Then I shall call you that from now on, Princess." He kissed her forehead, then glanced down at her inviting rosy lips, "Can I ask you a rather frank question? Have I ever kissed you, Princess?"

Snow nodded.

"May I kiss you now?"

Snow smiled and nodded once again.

"Hello there," came a startling greeting as Nicholas walked up to the hut.

Mitch managed a smile, "Hi Nicholas!"

The door shut. Snow was turning to go in as Mitch caught her arm, "Oh, no you don't!" He gently led her back to where he had been beating the carpets. "Now, where were we?" He touched her cheek, gazing into her eyes. His gaze then traveled down her face to her lips. He leaned his face in towards hers.

"There you are!" Kate came stomping around from the back kitchen door. "Yolanda's making that chicken and rice dish for lunch, but she can't find the spices."

Mitch thought for a moment, "Oh, yeah. They're kind of spread out."

Kate just noticed his apron, "Hey, your apron. I saw you'd found it, but I forgot to ask you where it was?"

Snow hadn't even noticed. Her eyes widened at the thought that she had forgotten to return it. How did he get it back? She would just die if he knew she'd had it, thought Snow.

"Oh, Stevie brought it to me. I'm not sure where it was." Mitch fibbed to calm Snow's fears. He knew she'd be embarrassed if anyone knew she'd taken the apron, especially him. Mitch then rolled his eyes, "I really need to make a spice rack for the kitchen. One of these days I'll get around to it. All right, I'll be right there."

Once Kate was out of sight, Mitch turned to Snow, only to find that she wasn't there. She had tiptoed away and into the hut without him even realizing it. "That little sneak! I'll just have to surprise her with that kiss one of these days."

Snow rushed back to the tree house after lunch. She looked in and around the spot where she had laid the apron. It wasn't there! The note he'd written to her before the amnesia wasn't there. She wanted to have the note in her possession, but more than that, she didn't want Mitch to find it. She didn't ever want him to feel 'obligated' to her in any way. If there was any small chance that things could be anywhere remotely close to what they were, she wanted it to be because he had fallen in love with her on his own, without the help of memories told to him by others. How could she find out what happened to it?

Stevie! She had to talk to Stevie! Then she remembered that Stevie was helping some of the men with repairing leaks in some of the draftier cabins for the winter. Drat! She would make it a point to speak to him later.

“OK, I know I’m such a bad, bad girl, but I couldn’t resist!” Snow whispered after she had snuck a few more carrots from the kitchen for her barnyard friends. “I brought some for everyone, even you, Thorn!” Thorn was the largest of the stallions, and sort of a ‘rough ride’.

Suddenly, Snow felt someone behind her grab her around the arms, trapping them at her side.

“Aha! I caught you red-handed!” came Mitch’s voice from behind her, not letting her move. “Now, let’s see who the perpetrator is?” He turned his head around to catch sight of the side of Snow’s face, as she had turned to look at him. Mitch gasped, “No! It can’t be! It can’t be the Royal Princess! Surely, this is an imposter! Her majesty would never steal from the kitchen!”

Still trapped in Mitch’s grasp, Snow teased back at him in Jill’s familiar southern accent, “But couldn’t ya could spare a few table scraps fo’ those less fort’nate in the kingdom, sir?”

Mitch put his face close to her cheek and whispered, his arms still wrapped around hers, “What’s this? Surely, this is the voice of the most beautiful royal Princess, Snow. Has she made it her mission in life to see to those less fortunate than her?”

Snow pouted her lips as she turned her face toward his, their lips only centimeters apart. She continued her southern accent, “Certainly, a gentleman like y’self wouldn’t punish someone for trying ta help those who are less fort’nate?”

Mitch nodded, “True, that wouldn’t be very humane of me, would it? All right. I’ll let you go. However, those things you have taken must still be paid for, miss. You’re not getting away so easily this time.”

“But I haven’t any gold, sir. How shall I pay for them?”

Mitch lovingly tightened his grasp around Snow, as he had been eyeing her rosy lips, “Hmmm. I have it. I shall let you go for a kiss in exchange, Princess. Agreed?”

Snow smiled, “Agreed!”

Mitch removed his arms and Snow turned to face him. He slid his arms around her waist, “No wonder Jill was able to catch Roger so quickly. An accent like that is likely to drive men wild!”

Snow deepened her accent as she put her arms around his neck, “Drive men wild? Now wha’ever does that mean, sir?”

To answer her question, Mitch leaned in to kiss her when the barn door opened. Kate entered with a bowl of apple slices. Mitch grunted and purposely fell back onto the barn floor.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to intrude.”

Lying there, Mitch grabbed a handful of hay and threw it up in the air. The hay fell back down on his head and chest as Snow giggled loudly.

Kate, trying not to laugh, continued, “I just brought the horses some apple slices because we seemed to be low on the large carrots.”

Mitch looked at Snow who giggled some more. “It’s OK, Kate. Mitch is just ... um ... really sleepy is all.”

Snow continued to giggle as Mitch looked at her wantonly then threw a cheeky smile in Kate’s direction, which she saw right through.

Snow bit her lip, “Actually, I was going to check on Tweety, anyway. He’s probably quite hungry himself.”

Mitch peered at her with pleading eyes as if he were begging her to stay.

Snow continued, "I've been thinking about attempting to build him a birdhouse of his very own. I just know I'll need help on a project like that, though." With that, she looked at Mitch.

He quickly got up as Kate began giving the apple slices to the horses, "Hey, you know what? I've been meaning to build a spice rack for weeks now. I'll bet it would be fun ... or rather ... more efficient, to work on the two projects together." He glanced at Kate, then returned his gaze to Snow. "What do you think, Princess?"

She smiled sweetly, "Sounds like a real treat, Mitch."

"Tweety, you've just been so listless lately. Are you feeling alright?" Snow held the little bird in her hands. He looked happy enough but seemed to have no energy. "I know what it is, I'll bet. I'm always feeding you fruits and cereals. You've been getting no protein, like when we used to fish with Edward. So just because I love you, you know what we're going to do? We're going to go hunt for worms! What do ya say?"

Dressed in her work clothes and grabbing a pail, Snow and Tweety ventured into the woods in search of worms for the little blue jay. Snow found herself digging in multiple spots near the river till she found a small bunch of worms. "It just seems to be too cold for them, Tweety. Perhaps we should get you to eat chicken." Frowning, she then shook her head, "No, you're right. That's not a good idea. It's too close to the same family, sorry. Well, what about those nasty wood roaches that are always scurrying out of the woodpile? It would be wonderful to get rid of some of those. Do you think you could go for an entrée like that, Tweety?"

Tweety began squawking loudly up in the tree near where Snow sat on the ground. "Well goodness, you don't have to get upset about it. It was just an idea." Tweety flew from the tree and into the woods. "Tweety, where are you going? Come back! I was only kidding about the chicken!" Snow heard a rustling noise. Then out of the corner of her eye she saw movement in the brush. Her memory flashed back to her wedding day when the bear tried to attack her. Then she saw it. WOLF! Slowly, it emerged from the brush, glaring at Snow, snarling. Its teeth were huge and seemed razor sharp. Snow couldn't run, it was too late. She couldn't even move or breathe or call for help. She sat trembling in horror as the large creature moved closer and closer, never hiding its teeth. Only a few feet from her, Snow wondered if this would be her last encounter, her last thought, her last breath.

Chapter 5

“Warm Potpourri”

Snow was too scared to even cry as she sat motionless whilst the wolf snarled at her with its large sharp teeth and cold black eyes. She held her breath as she helplessly watched the wolf slowly coming closer to her with each step.

“Max! Get back here!”

No sooner had Snow heard the words from the stranger in the woods, than did the wolf quickly turn and run in the direction of the voice. Cautiously, Snow stood up. She looked around, but saw no one.

“Sorry, about that.”

Again, she heard a voice, but saw no one around.

“OK, very funny. I’m down here.”

Snow looked down to the source of the voice. Standing in front of her was a man, a very tiny little man. He did not even come up to her waist in height. He wore a woodsman’s attire and a sheepish grin.

“Sorry about Max. I raised him from a pup. He turned out to be a good guard dog ... too good, sometimes. Name’s Benjamin. Folks call me Ben.” He lifted his tiny hand to Snow as a handshake.

“I’m Snow.”

He shook her hand, “Nice to meet you, Snow.” Max curiously began to sniff Snow.

Ben could see the nervousness in her countenance, “Max, that’s enough. You’ve already had a good long look at the poor girl. Leave her alone!” He looked back at Snow, “Wolves! What do ya do with ‘em, eh? Well, if ya don’t mind my asking, what’s a pretty girl like you doing in the woods all alone?”

“Actually, I live in a village not too far from here. I was just taking a walk with my bird, who seems to have disappeared,” as Snow looked around.

Ben looked into her pail and made a scowling face when he saw the wriggling creatures inside.

“We were hunting for worms actually, for my blue jay. But he flew away when he sensed your wolf.” She looked at the wolf, who was twice the size of his master. She hoped Max didn’t have any old ‘friends’ still roaming the woods.

Ben thought for a moment, “What village did ya say?”

Snow returned her eyes to Ben, “I live in the Whispering Willows. I’ve only been there a few months.”

“Oh yeah, the bunch o’ guys who all look the same.”

Snow giggled, “Yes, that’s it.”

“Yeah, I seen some from a distance. Never met any of ‘em though.”

Snow smiled, “Oh, they’re very nice men ... most of them, anyway.” She quickly threw off a memory of Donnie forcefully grabbing her arm that first day.

Ben rubbed his chin, “Now, let me get this straight. You live in a village with a bunch of men? Just you?”

She assured him carefully, “No, there are other women there, too. Well, a few of us at least.”

“Just a few of you women in a whole village of men, eh? Poor guys! Well, seeing as my Max here scared the daylights outta ya, how’s about a cup of tea? My place is just around the bend. Or perhaps you’d like something stronger after a scare like that. Some ale, maybe? I pride myself on the best homemade ale anywhere in these parts.”

Snow smiled courteously, “Thank you Ben. I’d love to normally, but everyone always gets worried about me if I’m gone too long.”

“Aye, I get it. They got a short leash on ya, eh? Well, next time, maybe. It was nice meeting you, Snow.”

“You too, Ben.”

Stevie spotted Snow coming out of the woods, “Snow! There you are! Tweety just flew over to me and I was worried, ‘cause I thought he was wit’ you.”

“I’m fine Stevie, but I wanted to talk to you. It’s about Mitch’s apron.”

Stevie’s smile faded as he remembered that he forgot to tell Snow about giving it back to Mitch, “Oh yeah, I was gonna tell ya ‘bout that Snow. Really I was. I just saw it in yer tree ‘ouse when I went to get me book. I knew Mitch ‘ad been lookin’ for it, so I brought it to ‘im. I told ‘im you ‘ad it, so I’m sure he knew it had been in a safe place.”

Snow shuddered, “Wait a minute!! You told him I had it?? Are you sure Stevie? Because he told Kate he didn’t know where you found it.”

“Yeah, I told ‘im alright. Maybe he just forgot.”

Snow was stunned. Oh my goodness, he knew! Why did he say he didn’t know? She knew Mitch wouldn’t have forgotten that. Why didn’t he confront her about it? Was he trying to spare her feelings? Snow hated that! See, he was protecting her already. The last thing she wanted was his pity, and the first thing she wanted was that letter back ... a letter written by her ‘true love’ and not this imposter! Will she ever get him back? Will he ever remember?

“Stevie, did you see a letter in the apron’s pocket?”

“No. But then, I wasn’t lookin’ for one.”

That’s it, thought Snow. Mitch had to have it and just didn’t tell her. He’d been so nice to her that day. That’s why. It’s the ‘pity’ thing again. No! She didn’t want it to be that way! She had to have a talk with him. When she got to the main cabin, she found out that he had just left the kitchen to go to his own cabin for a bit. Perfect! She could lay all of this out without interruption. She could talk with him ... alone.

Mitch was reading alone by the fire when he heard a knock at the door. A look of sweet surprise washed over his face and his eyes lit up when he opened the door and saw her. “Snow, what a wonderful surprise. Please come in.”

Snow walked into a warm and comfortable room. Just the smell of it calmed her countenance somewhat. The smell of citrus and cinnamon adorned the cabin. As Snow peered around the room, she saw different baskets filled with homemade potpourri made from a delicate array of dried flowers, apple slices, citrus fruit rinds, coffee beans, and spices. On his walls were crafty pictures that would also serve as potpourri but in an art form made from a various assortment of coffee beans, cinnamon sticks, leaves, dried flowers and fruit pieces all arranged in different shapes. She didn’t remember the pictures before. They were new. But the furniture was familiar to her ... simple, but soft and comforting. On the various tables around the room amongst many of Mitch projects ‘in progress’ were little log cabins made with cinnamon sticks and dressed up with coffee beans for stone roofs and dried flowers along the edges. A few were painted with white to give them a ‘winter’ look. Against one wall was a bookshelf with a few cookbooks and various novels of history mixed in with different jars of spices Mitch used in his potpourri and artwork such as cinnamon and nutmeg.

“Your cabin smells wonderful, Mitch.”

“Thank you, Princess. So do you.”

Snow had worn her honeysuckle perfume as she usually does. His compliment combined with his calling her ‘Princess’ melted her heart and she almost forgot what she went there for. But she was so taken with his artwork, she had to look at each wall hanging. Each one was encased in glass.

“Did you make all of these?”

“Yes. It’s sort of a hobby, I guess.”

“I love the log cabins, Mitch.”

“Thank you. I’m working on an entire replica of the village. Once it’s done, I’ll put it on display inside the main hut. The men are going to make a hollow table with a glass top, so that the table will still be functional, but you can see the village under the glass.”

“Mitch, that’s a wonderful idea!”

“Your treehouse is my next project, Princess.”

She rubbed her fingers across one of the roofs with the white ‘winter’ covering. “I love these winter cabins.”

“Of course you do, Snow. You’re all over them, aren’t you!”

She gave him a teasing sideways glance, then remembered. “Goodness, I hope I’m not intruding here Mitch ... dropping in like this unexpected?”

“Nonsense, Snow. I always enjoy seeing you.”

Snow turned to him and frowned somewhat, not quite knowing where to start.

“Snow, what is it? You look so sad, Love.”

“I’m just not quite sure how to start. I ...” She stopped and looked down at one of the little cabins. Anything to not meet his gaze.

“Would you like to sit down?”

“Alright.”

He motioned her over to a comfortable chair by the fire, and he sat down in the rocker next to her. “What’s on your mind, Love?”

“It’s the apron. Stevie said you knew I had it, that he told you.”

Mitch smiled knowingly.

She continued, “I really was going to give it back. I was just having a rather rough evening when I took it.”

Mitch continued to listen to Snow, watching her earnestly as she spoke.

“You told Kate you didn’t know where Stevie found it. You were just protecting my feelings, weren’t you?”

“Yes, Snow.”

“But Mitch I don’t want you to do that. I don’t want you to feel obligated to have to protect my feelings.”

“Snow, I didn’t feel obligated. I wanted to.”

Snow looked away, “Was there a letter in the pocket?”

“Yes.”

She stared at the floor, “Did you read it?”

“Yes.”

“See Mitch, that’s what I didn’t want to happen. Everyone telling you what you used to feel and should feel ... and then you reading that letter. I didn’t want any outside forces having an influence on this, on us. It didn’t before and it shouldn’t this time.” Her gaze was still glued to the floor, not wanting to look at him, “But it just keeps happening that way. You’ll never know how you truly feel when everyone keeps telling how you *should* feel.”

Mitch kept his voice quiet and soothing amidst Snow’s tone on the edge of tears, “How do you feel, Snow?”

“You know how I feel Mitch. I’ve told you, which I really shouldn’t have done.”

“Why not?”

“Because it just clouds the issue. You can’t love a memory that isn’t your own ... one that is handed to you by others. I have all of these memories and you don’t. I wish I could just transfer them from me to you.” Tears now began rolling down Snow’s face, “I feel like this big burden on you, in that you feel obligated to spend time with me and talk to me and be with me. And I don’t want it to be like that.”

Mitch slowly came down from his chair onto the floor in front of Snow. She was staring into her lap trying not to cry and failing at her attempt. On his knees, he raised her head with his fingers and brushed them against her cheek, wiping one of her tears. He then took her hands in his, "Come down here for a second." He gently pulled her down to the rug next to him.

Snow discovered that finally her butterfly friends had returned to her.

Mitch took her face in his hands and kissed her cheek. "I'm obligated to cook and do chores. I wasn't obligated to do that, Princess. That was my choice to kiss you just now. I make my own decisions in life, believe me Princess. All my life, I've waited for that 'perfect person' everyone says is out there. But I never found her. Then I came to the Willows, and here you were. It was like having that 'perfect person' handed to me on a silver platter."

"But Kate? I know that you liked Kate..."

"Yes, I did. But she didn't return those affections. And she's a good friend now. But that just showed me that my 'true love' was yet to come." He rubbed her fingers in his hands, "I know that it's strange that I can't remember our falling in love, and it's also strange to you that I could feel this close to you without those memories. But believe me, I catch up fast. We guys have a talent for doing that, you know."

Snow halfway smiled at his joking manner then blushed and looked down.

He touched her cheek and she looked at him again, "But seriously Snow ... when I woke up from the amnesia, I had a lot of things thrown at me, it's true. But it was like being, if you'll forgive the expression, a 'kid in a candy store'! Here was this most beautiful Princess just waiting to love me. Many times I really did think I was dreaming. I can't even begin to tell you how often I thought that! I really do want to remember everything that happened. I wish it more than anything. Maybe I could see it through your eyes, Princess. Tell me everything. I want to know every word, every action, every unspoken glance."

"But Mitch, that's just it. Those would be my memories handed to you. They wouldn't be your own."

Mitch nodded, "Alright then, we need to make some new memories, starting right now."

Snow tilted her head, "How funny. That's just what I said on our date in the barn."

"Date? I've heard of this date. I'd like to try that again sometime. Can we? Did you enjoy our date in the barn?"

Snow smiled sweetly, "Yes. But ..." Snow blushed and looked into the fire.

"But what, Princess?"

She looked into his eyes with the boldness she'd searched for days to find in herself again, "But I'm enjoying being here more." Pushing away the doubts her mind held, Snow wanted this to be real so desperately. Her thoughts imagined him taking her into his arms and kissing her, just as he had done before the amnesia.

Mitch became lost in her welcoming gaze as her eyes glowed with the dancing flames in the fireplace, her lips shining in its light. He couldn't stand it any longer, he was going to kiss her. He traced the outline of her face with his fingers down to her cheeks. The butterflies Snow felt had turned into a warm tingling feeling from her head to her toes as she watched him study her face, her lips. He gently held her face in his hands and brought his face to hers slowly. Their lips met just for a few seconds. Snow felt so warm inside, she was almost cold ... as a crisp imaginary breeze blew through her. Mitch didn't want to rush things with Snow and scare her away, so he slowly parted from the kiss, which he had to fight within himself to do. He wanted their first kiss to be a gentle and sweet beginning to something that would last forever, he hoped.

"If that was an obligation, Princess, then 'obligate' me all day long."

Snow smiled and wanted to hug him tightly, but instead just looked into his eyes. Almost as if he could read her mind, he slid around beside her, wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into his chest. As they both sat facing the fire, Snow felt a tingling

sensation all through her. She wished there was some kind of 'magic spell' that could keep them suspended in time like this forever ... forever by the fire, forever alone, forever in his arms. She put her arms on top of his, and he pulled her in tighter.

She felt so natural in his arms, Mitch thought ... like she belonged there, like she was a part of him. He kissed her hair as she rested her head against his neck. He resisted the temptation of kissing her again, and simply rubbed her arms with his hands.

Snow felt herself being lulled to sleep. No, she thought. I don't want to sleep. No dream could be as wonderful as where I am right here, right now. As they both watched the dancing glow of the fire and felt the waves of warmth hit their faces, they were both lulled to sleep.

Chapter 6 "Benjamin"

Snow glided happily through the woods almost in a trance as she thought back to the previous evening. She would have given anything to stay there in Mitch's arms forever. Even though the air was cold with a fresh smell of soon to come snowfall, she could still smell the warm citrus and cinnamon of his cabin. She carefully picked colorful leaves, pinecones, and any wildflower still blooming for a project she was going to start on for Mitch. She was going to attempt, at least, to make a wall hanging for his cabin. Scented with her own honeysuckle perfume, she wanted to use every colorful aspect of the woods she could find. For this was Snow, a child of nature. Perhaps it would remind him of her, of how she loved wildflowers and the colors of the leaves at autumn time. Off to one side, she spotted a pile of particularly colorful leaves. As she stood in the pile digging, she felt the ground beneath her begin to move. Directly below her feet, the ground was sinking, dropping. Suddenly, there was no ground under her and she was falling. Her mind flashed back to the terrible memory of falling down that deep dark hole into the Willows, as she had been running from the huntsman. She wasn't falling back into her own time again, was she? NO! Not now that things were looking so much brighter again for she and Mitch. With a thud, Snow hit the ground. Wincing in pain, she rubbed her backside where she landed and looked up. There she could see the sky and the woods, as she was only about eight feet down. She felt a little better, fairly confident that she was still in the Willows woods, and not anywhere else.

"Gee Snow, nice of you to 'drop in'!"

Snow turned to see Benjamin laughing at his own joke.

"I say, that must be where that darn draft has been coming from. Blast! That's going to be a doozy to patch up. I was just making my rounds, checking for winter drafts and I heard the crash. Are you alright, Snow?"

"Yes. I'll be sore for sure, though."

"Aye, probably. I'd help you up, but I don't think I'd do you much good."

Snow laughed as she stood up and looked down at her tiny new friend, "That's alright Ben. I appreciate the thought. Where are we?"

"This is a section of an old abandoned mine from years ago. I live here. Come, I'll show you around."

He took Snow with his tiny hand and led her out of what appeared to be the upper cavern of a cave and down some stairs made of stone. The walls were of rock with tiny glistening sparkles throughout. Down the stairs were many hallways and chambers made of the same material and lit by stationed torches.

"Did someone carve all this out?"

"Yes, a long time ago. This mine used to belong to seven dwarfs ... that's what I am, a dwarf. Those dwarfs were my descendants. They carved out this mine in order to dig for jewels to trade for food and supplies. I'm the last one left from their lineage, so I inherited the mine. It's a good shelter from weather and wild animals, really."

Snow was fascinated with all of the old mining tools lying around. In the corner she saw the end of what looked like some kind of track with a wheeled cart on it.

Ben eyed her fascination, "That's their old mine cart. They used to ride it all over the mine going to and fro with the jewels they'd find. It still works, believe it or not!"

"Do you still find jewels in the mine?" Snow asked curiously.

"On occasion I do...have a few tucked away. I used to be a monk and live in a monastery performing marriages and ceremonies and the like. But now I'm a woodsman more than anything else, so I fetch my own food. I really don't know what to do with a jewel

when I find one. Nowhere to trade it around here anymore, unless I travel over the mountains, which I don't like to do very often."

Snow was curious to ask about the village over the mountains, but decided to save her questions for later in respect to Ben's tour of the mine. He led Snow to a quaint chamber in the mine with a fireplace, stove and furniture. Over in the corner was a small bed. Lying by the fire was Max. He opened his eyes to look at Snow, then yawned and went back to sleep.

"Yeah, fine watchdog you are! What if our guest here had been a bear, huh? Here ya are, sleeping on the job! Lazy wolf."

He offered Snow a cup of hot tea which she accepted graciously, opting for tea rather than Ben's own homemade ale. He continued with his story as he took a seat with a mug of ale, "The dwarfs here a long time ago were skilled in a lot of things. They had a good deal going with the royal families around the kingdoms for a while. They were pretty close to this one particular kingdom, especially. I can't rightly remember the name. But after the king died, the queen employed the dwarfs to make her mirrors for her."

Snow shuddered, "Mirrors?"

"Yeah. Rumor had it that they were 'magic' mirrors. But that's just a folk tale, really. They'd just dress them all up with different jewels here and there and carve fancy figures into the wood. I guess that's where I got it. I'm a wood carver, myself. I don't know if you've seen the bridge out by the stream, but I carved that a few years back."

Still distracted by Ben's words about the mirrors, Snow managed, "Yes, I did see it. It's lovely."

Ben took a sip from his mug "Thanks. Yeah, funny thing about that whole situation. It's pretty much a mystery except for all the legends. That ol' queen disappeared without a trace, just like her stepdaughter, the princess of that kingdom had disappeared just a short while before that. Folks were starting to think the kingdom was jinxed."

Snow gasped as her eyes widened.

"Ma'am, are you alright? Your face is so white! You look like you'd just seen a ghost. Is there something wrong with the tea?"

Snow swallowed hard, "No. Are you sure you can't remember the name of that royal household? The one with the queen and her mirrors and the missing princess?"

Ben thought for a moment, "Hmmm. Hang on a second. I still have all their documents. That's how I know all of this stuff."

Ben went over to a trunk at the foot of his bed and pulled out a very old leather binder tied with string. He untied it and began sifting through old documents. They looked like scrolls that had been unrolled then pressed into the binder, their brittle edges still curling. "I don't get in here very often because this stuff is so old it falls apart in your hands. Oh, here it is ... bill of sale for mirrors. Queen's name was Margurite of the House of White."

Snow awoke to a wet tongue lapping at her face. Positive that it wasn't Mitch, she opened her eyes to see Max giving her friendly 'wolf' kisses.

"Ack!" Snow turned her head, fairly confident that she had nothing to fear from Ben's pet any longer. Snow thought to herself that she was actually disappointed that it wasn't Mitch after all.

"OK, Max. That's enough. Are you alright, Snow? You passed out cold, there, and you weren't even drinking the ale."

Snow sat up as she took a second to remember where she was, looking around the room, "Sorry."

Ben looked concerned, "We were talking about the mirrors. I lost you when I mentioned the queen, Margurite. Do you know of her?"

Snow muttered under her breath, "Yes, I know of her."

Ben stood up, "Wow! How much do you know about the house of White? I never imagined I'd meet anyone who knew about the history of this area. Do you know about the missing princess, too? Because that was just rumor. I don't have any hard documentation on that, just stories passed down through the years."

Snow half chuckled as she nodded her head, "Yeah, I've heard about her, too."

Ben looked at her with excited eyes, "This stuff just fascinates me. History, kings, queens, and magic. How about you?"

Snow looked at the fire with widened eyes, still fairly dumbfounded, "Oh, I've had my share." She stood up as she watched Ben walk over to the opposite corner of the room.

He stood next to a large object taller than Snow and covered with a large blanket. "There's a lot of history in this mine," continued the dwarf, "and this is one of the most interesting things still here." He pulled the blanket off to reveal a large full-length mirror. It was made of beautifully hand carved wood decorated with different types of stones and gems.

Snow gasped at the sight, and backed up a few steps.

Ben smiled, "Beautiful, ain't it? This here was the last mirror the dwarfs made for the queen. But since it wasn't paid in full before the queen disappeared, the dwarfs reclaimed it and brought it back to their mine, here. Check it out, Snow! It's hundreds of years old, yet still looks new, doesn't it? Boggles the mind."

Snow walked over to the mirror and stared at it, wide-eyed. She remembered this one! This was the last one Margurite had brought into the castle. It was the prettiest out of all of them. Even Snow remembered admiring it when it arrived. To Snow, she saw it just a few months ago, just before she went out that day with the huntsman. It still looked like it did then, still brand new. It was like time had stood still for it. But how? It had to be the magic in the mirror. She reached out to touch it, then shuddered as she changed her mind. As she looked at her reflection in the glass, her soul shivered. There was something not right here, as though the mirror was looking back at her.

Suddenly feeling a chill go through her, she wrapped her arms about her, "Ben, I probably need to get back to the Willows. They're probably searching all over for me."

Ben smiled, "Sure, I'll show you out. Are you sure you're alright? You still look rather pale."

"Yes. I'll be alright. I probably should just go home and get some rest."

As Ben and Snow left the room, neither one noticed the sudden gleam of light being emitted from the jeweled mirror.

Chapter 7

“Tell Me The Story”

Walking back to the village, Snow felt positively sick to her stomach as she pictured the jeweled mirror in her mind and replayed the words of the dwarf in her head. The wind blew briskly as she quickened her pace. Snow wondered about her disappearance. Was she supposed to disappear? Was she meant to be here in the Willows? What if she was supposed to stay in her own time and have children? What if she has changed history by coming here? She may never know, thought Snow. Not being helped much by the winter wind, Snow felt chills go down her spine as she remembered the eerie feeling she got when she looked into the mirror at Ben’s place. She only felt that way when Margurite was nearby. What if Margurite wasn’t dead? Would all of this be for nothing? Everything that she and Mitch had suffered, the amnesia, the tears, the worries. Was it all in vain? She needed some of Jill’s herbal tea to calm her stomach. Kate once told her to quit worrying so much about things or she’d get an ‘ulcer’, whatever that was.

When she arrived at the main hut, to her disappointment, she found the kitchen empty. She began searching through drawers, looking for the tea, as she started the teapot to boil on the stove. Finally, after searching the same drawer three times due to her lack of concentration, she stopped searching and simply leaned against the main pantry door in the kitchen. Her mind raced with the events of the day, combined with terrible visions she just couldn’t shake. Why was all of this happening? Things were finally starting to look up until now. As nice as he was, she almost wished she hadn’t met Ben so she would have never seen that stupid mirror, and all the horrible visions of Margurite and her fury wouldn’t have come rushing back to Snow’s mind. She buried her face in her hands as she tried to shake the thoughts away. Instead, she thought of Mitch and the previous evening. She remembered his warm smile and his loving eyes. Snow could almost feel his kiss from last night. She wished she were there again.

“Snow? Are you alright, Love?”

Snow’s head snapped up almost as a reflex to the voice that would never fail to set her heart racing. As if someone had heard her wish, there was Mitch.

She gasped a quiet sigh of relief, “Mitch. It’s so good to see you. I was looking for Jill’s herbal teas. I couldn’t find them.”

Mitch chuckled, “You and Kate both have trouble finding that tea!” He remembered back to the day when Kate was searching desperately for Jill’s tea whilst trying to tell him about his relationship with Snow at the same time.

Snow winced slightly at his mention of Kate, but then brushed it away in remembering their talk last night.

He went straight to where the teas were as Snow made a mental note. “Which one were you needing, Love?”

“It’s my stomach. I need something to settle it.”

Mitch looked at her with concern in his eyes as he proceeded to make the tea for his Princess. “What’s wrong, Love?”

“It’s nothing, really.”

“Are you sure? You know I’m a good listener, Princess.”

She looked at him for a long time. Should she tell him? She really didn’t want to worry him. What she really wanted was a hug from him. He made her feel safe, always. Before she could stop herself, she stepped toward him and hugged him, wrapping her arms around him. This was a pleasant surprise, thought Mitch. Then he heard Snow’s whimpers that she tried so hard to hold back, and he took a step back to look at her. Snow lowered her head, trying to conceal her crying.

“What’s this? What would make such a lovely princess cry?” In a more serious tone, he put his hand under her chin and lifted her head, “What’s wrong, Love? Please tell me. It breaks my heart to see you cry. Let’s go to my cabin, shall we?”

Feeling better already, Snow nodded and grabbed her teacup as Mitch put his arm around her and led her outside.

Just like the night before, Snow was welcomed by the warm smell of cinnamon and citrus that she had already come to love so much. Mitch led her over to the fire, where they sat on the soft rug before it.

Snow started immediately, eager to get the words out that she may feel free of the burden it had on her. “I met a new friend in the woods. He is very nice. His name is Ben.”

Mitch was taken aback by this. “You met a strange man in the woods?”

“Well, he’s not exactly a man ... I mean, he is, I guess. He’s really little. He said he was a dwarf.”

Mitch chuckled before he caught himself. A dwarf? With Snow? Snow White with a dwarf. He just couldn’t help himself. “I’m sorry. I just couldn’t help myself. It just hit me funny because of the tale.”

“The tale?”

“Yes, you know, *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*. Did no one tell you how it went? I realize you didn’t know when you got here, but I assumed that by now someone would have told you the whole story.”

Snow shook her head.

“Oh, well, then let me tell you the story. But you finish what you were saying about your new dwarf friend first. I’m rather curious now.”

Snow was already lost in thought back to what Ben had told her about the mine. He said he was descended from seven dwarfs!

Mitch noticed that Snow suddenly turned pale as she sat staring into the fire. “Snow ... are you alright, Love? Snow?”

She brought her attention back to Mitch. “Seven dwarfs? You said seven dwarfs?”

“Yes. What is it? What’s wrong?”

Snow swallowed hard. “Ben said he was the descendant of the seven dwarfs that originally carved the mine, and that is why he inherited it.”

Mitch was astounded. “Really?”

Snow nodded and quickly began to sputter the thoughts in her head, “Yes, but there’s more. He said they used to make mirrors for the queen that lived in a nearby kingdom before she disappeared ... just like the princess of that kingdom had disappeared earlier that year! Ben had the original documents from the dwarfs that showed the queen’s name to be Margurite of the House of White!” Snow stopped, averting her gaze to the floor to wipe her tears. “I’m sorry. I don’t know why I’m crying. It just scared me, I guess. But then, Ben showed me the last mirror that the dwarfs made her. They took it back once she disappeared because she hadn’t paid for it yet. It looks just like it did when I saw it. Ben said it’s hundreds of years old, but it still looks like it did in the castle. It was just a few months ago for me. I remember it so well. And then there it was, right there in front of me today. It was such an eerie feeling. Mitch, it was like it was looking back at me!”

Snow was now sobbing as Mitch hugged her close to him. “Shhh. It’s alright. You’re here. Everything’s alright.”

Snow sat back and rubbed her stomach. “It’s just made me so sick to my stomach.” She reached for her cup of herbal tea and took a sip.

Mitch rubbed her shoulder. “Would you like me to make you something to eat? It might help your stomach.”

“No, but thank you. I really don’t think I could eat any...Ouch!” Snow doubled over in pain, her hands grasping her stomach.

“Snow, what’s wrong?”

“I don’t know. It hurts! It really hurts! It’s never hurt this much before.”

“Is it your stomach?”

Snow nodded. Mitch sat helpless, as he watched his princess wincing in pain, “Maybe some milk would help?”

“No, Mitch, there’s something wrong! I don’t know what it is!”

Mitch stood up, “That’s it, we’re going to the Surgery.”

He picked Snow up in his arms and carried her out of his cabin and over to Kate’s. With Snow in his arms, he kicked at Kate’s door, unable to knock.

As soon as Kate opened the door, Mitch sputtered in a panic, “Kate, there’s something wrong with Snow. She’s having terrible stomach pains.”

“Get her to the Surgery,” spouted Kate as she looked back at Donnie sitting over by the fire. They both followed Mitch with Snow next door to the Surgery. Mitch laid her down on the examination bed.

“What are her symptoms? What has she eaten lately and when?” Kate felt around her stomach.

Snow felt her stomach churn and cupped her hand over her mouth. She jumped down from the table, pushing past Kate towards the bathroom.

Kate followed, “Snow?”

After hearing a spout of gagging and heaving, Mitch started for the bathroom but was stopped by Donnie, “Mitch, it’s alright. Kate knows what to do.”

As Kate watched Snow coughing up blood, she heard Donnie’s words. ‘The hell I do!’ She thought.

“Kate, I feel dizzy.” Snow grabbed onto the sink for support as she sank to the floor.

“Donnie, come help me!” Kate didn’t want Mitch to see the blood, but it was too late.

Mitch had already torn past Donnie and into the bathroom. “God! Snow?”

“Mitch, get out!” Kate yelled as she assisted Donnie in picking up Snow and carrying her over to the examination bed. Kate continued to bark instructions. “Mitch, go sit over by the fire. Donnie, please set up that privacy screen for me.”

Donnie unfolded the standing screen to act as a divider between Kate’s exam area and the waiting area by the fire.

Mitch, ignoring Kate’s orders, still lingered by Snow’s bed, “Is she going to be alright?”

“Mitch, I said go sit. You’re in the way!”

Donnie touched his arm, “Come on, man. Let’s get some coffee.”

Mitch threw off his hand. “No! I’m not leaving her!”

Kate yelled over him, “Mitch, calm down! This is not helping!”

Even over the screaming, they all seemed to hear the quiet plea of Snow lying next to them. “Mitch?”

Mitch brushed past Kate and took Snow’s hand. “I’m here, Love.”

She offered a weak smile as she whispered, “Don’t worry. Kate is your friend, remember? She’ll take good care of me. You should do as she says.”

Mitch nodded. “Then you just get better. Alright, Princess?”

Snow nodded, and Mitch kissed her forehead.

Kate asked in a calmer tone, “Can you bring back some milk and some bread with a little honey, please? I think Snow has a gastric ulcer. She’ll need something to eat. Something bland, no spices. Oh, and ask Kristen and Jill if they know if we have any of the herb ‘goldenseal’. It’s used in tea to help speed the healing process for things like this.”

Mitch nodded. Donnie patted him on the back as they left the hut, “She’ll be alright, mate.”

After a little something to eat and some tea with milk and the goldenseal herb, Snow was feeling better. Kate was still concerned about her spell in the bathroom and wanted to keep her in the surgery for another day. Snow was put on a bland diet with no caffeine and lots of tea with milk and goldenseal. Since Snow wasn't in the usual habit of drinking alcohol, there didn't seem to be a need to mention that.

Kate sat with Mitch by the fire as Snow slept in the other room. "She needs to be kept away from stressful situations. Something had to set this off."

Mitch told her about Snow meeting a dwarf in the woods and about the mirror. "The whole history lesson she got today really had her upset."

Kate frowned, "It sounds like it'd be best for her to not go back there."

Mitch nodded. There was a rap at the door, followed by Stevie inviting himself in, "I jus' 'eard 'bout Snow. 'ow is she?"

Kate smiled, "Shhh. She's sleeping right now. She's going to be fine, Stevie. We just have to keep an eye on her."

Mitch added, "Yeah, and keep her away from dwarfs and mirrors."

Stevie met him with a confused look. Mitch told him about the dwarf she met in the woods, the jewel mine, and Margurite's mirror.

Stevie offered loudly, "A dwarf and a jewel mine! That's just like the story!"

"Shhhhhhh!" Kate and Mitch added in unison.

"Sorry," Stevie whispered with an embarrassed look at Kate.

After about an hour, Snow awoke from her nap to find Mitch watching by her bedside in the surgery.

"Hello, Princess."

Snow couldn't think of a lovelier way to wake up. "Hello ..." She started to say 'hello prince', but then remembered that he wouldn't remember that. She really did wish he could remember that he was her prince, from the Halloween festival and beyond.

"How are you feeling?"

Snow started to sit up, "Better."

Mitch pulled up her blanket. "No, don't get up. Just rest."

She touched his hand. "Will you stay with me?"

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it, "I'll sit with you all night if you like."

Snow smiled.

Mitch began a playful tone. "You know, Kate said we have to keep you away from anything stressful. So, I've been thinking about a way to do that."

Snow answered playfully back, "Oh, and how would you propose to do that?"

"I think I should keep you locked up with me for a while with no outside entities allowed in to put stress on you."

Snow giggled, "Oh really? And what if it was you who was putting all the stress on me to begin with?"

Mitch's smile faded. "God ... I am, aren't I? It's all this business with the amnesia that did this to you!"

Snow tried to interrupt. "Mitch, I was kidding! You're not ..."

"Princess, I'm so sorry! How could I be so dense that I didn't see it? All this time..."

Snow quickly sat up and kissed Mitch to shut him up. Then she looked him in the eyes to be sure he was listening, "You're not the one putting stress on me, OK? It's all this stuff with Margurite. You know that. Now, stop being silly, you silly thing!"

As Mitch dreamily watched her lie back down, he thought perhaps he should continue to be silly if it would force her to shut him up like that more often.

"Can you do something for me, Mitch?"

He gently touched her cheek, "Anything for you Princess."

Snow bit her bottom lip like a little girl, then asked, "Will you tell me the story of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*?"

Mitch offered a very large grin, "Of course, Love. Be happy to."

Chapter 8

“Roller Coasters and Ale”

Snow fished around in her plate at the bland chicken and rice dish as she watched the others indulge in Mitch’s famous spicy chili for lunch. He hated to make it now, since Snow couldn’t have any, but it had gotten pretty cold and there were a lot of requests from the men of the Willows for him to make some.

As everyone was chowing down, a sheepish grin formed on Trent’s face as he thought of his next witty statement for the day. “Gee Snow, I sure am sorry that Mitch here gave you an ulcer.”

Mitch’s silent glare at Trent spoke volumes.

“Mitch didn’t give me an ulcer. You all are so silly,” Snow added almost under her breath, then continued, “It’s all this stuff with Margurite and the mirror and everything. I just got spooked, that’s all.”

Kristen set down her coffee. “Well, I think it was bound to happen, anyway. I mean, heavens, look at all you’ve been through already.”

Kate added quickly, “Well, I think it’d be a good idea to just stay away from the mirror and that dwarf.”

“But Ben is my friend.”

Donnie added with a mouthful of bread, “Kate’s right. Why don’t you just blow up the mine? You seem to be pretty good at that stuff here lately.”

Snow lowered her eyes in shame.

“Oi!” Donnie rubbed his shin after a swift kick under the table from Kate.

Mitch was trying to get Snow’s gaze back. “Donnie, that was quite unnecessary. Snow, don’t listen to that ‘barbarian’ over there.”

Snow snapped her head up, but said nothing. Barbarian? How could he have known that used to be her secret nickname for Donnie? Must have been a coincidence. But she thought it refreshing that they thought along the same lines.

Snow set down her fork. “If you all don’t mind, I’m rather tired. I’m going to rest for a while.”

Mitch rose and went to her, “Snow, you alright, Love? You’ve seemed kind of down today?”

She struggled to think, “It’s probably just my stomach still recovering, that’s all. I’m alright.”

Mitch desperately wanted to cheer her up. “I plan on working a little on that new spice rack later. Were you planning on working any on Tweety’s birdhouse?”

Snow smiled weakly, “Sure. I’ll probably do that.”

Mitch gave an encouraging smile. “Well, then we can be creative together, eh?”

Snow smiled sweetly and left the hut.

The wind was rather cold. Thomas had mentioned that morning that he predicted a winter storm very soon, this week even. Well, I picked a fine time to build a birdhouse, thought Snow. I’d never let Tweety sleep out in the cold. I suppose I’ll just hang it in my tree house for the time being until springtime. Snow wrapped her cape in tighter as she walked to her house. She hated to act so strangely that day, but she couldn’t help it. She couldn’t get it out of her head. The dream she had last night was just too real. She climbed into her treehouse, made herself a fire, and laid across the pillows. She would rather have had a dream about Margurite. Even that would have been better than the vision that had been plaguing her thoughts all day. They say dreams get fainter as time goes on and it’s harder to remember them. Well, this one didn’t seem to be ‘fainting’ at all. She could still see it. As she was walking across the village, she rounded a corner and there they were.

Mitch had Kate in his arms, kissing her passionately. Why did she have to have a dream like that? Why couldn't she dream she was attacked by wolves or something? Anything would have fared better to Snow, anything but to see Mitch with Kate. She still worried about it sometimes, even now. Ever since the amnesia, it seemed like they were close in a different kind of a way than before the accident. Before that, it was just playful like with her and Stevie. Mitch couldn't even remember his and Snow's date when they talked about all of that. Snow wasn't worried about Kate, really. It was Mitch. Recently, when he spoke with Kate about Snow's diet and this and that, Snow felt like she was being 'babied' by them. With the two of them bustling around her, they seemed to be closer now, and she was just the 'sick child'.

"Oh!" Snow turned over, trying to clear her thoughts. She knew she was just being silly. She knew that there was nothing between Mitch and Kate, but she couldn't shake that stupid dream. Snow thought perhaps a nap would bring her a better one as she drifted off to sleep.

Fluttering down to Snow's shoulder, Tweety nuzzled her cheek with his beak. Snow opened her eyes and sat up as she yawned. "Goodness, I wonder how long I've been asleep. You want to go work on your house, don't you? Alright, I'm ready." Snow wondered if Mitch was there working on his project.

Later that afternoon, Mitch was out working on the new spice rack for the kitchen.

"Hello, Mitch!" came the greetings of Ivan, Roger, Duncan, Murray and Stevie.

"Where are you men off to?"

"We're working on a surprise for the ladies, for Christmas. We could use an extra hand if you're not busy?"

"I'll join you a little later. I'm going to finish this up."

The men disappeared into the barn and shut the door with Stevie standing guard to make sure none of the ladies entered the barn. He, of course, was reading one of his many books.

Kate was on her way on an 'herb hunt' when Mitch spotted her.

He was just finishing sanding one of the planks. "Hey Kate! Just who I wanted to see."

Kate walked over as she eyed his almost completed spice rack. "Hey, it looks good."

Mitch smiled, "Thanks. I wanted your opinion on the size. Since you'll be using herbs more, do you think I should add another shelf to the top here? I know you'll be coming in to get your supplies quite often for the Surgery. I was thinking that the spot by the door is more than enough room for the rack."

Kate thought for a second. "Yeah, you're right. I'll bet we'll have more than enough to fill it. It'd probably be a good idea to add another rack to the top, there."

"Right-o. Consider it done." He leaned over the rack and blew the dust from sanding the boards. The wind caught the dust just wrong, and some of it blew into Kate's eyes.

"Ah!" She covered her eyes with her hands.

Mitch rushed over to her. "Oh, Kate, I'm sorry! I should have thought about the blasted wind!"

"No, it's alright. I'm alright." She rubbed one of her eyes, blinking violently, "I just seem to have something in this one..."

Mitch took her face with his hands and leaned toward her eye for a closer look as he saw the large splinter dangling in her eyelash. "Here it is ... I got it."

Snow happily bounded toward the wood shop with Tweety in tow. As she rounded the corner, she couldn't believe her own eyes. There it was ... her nightmare! Just like in her dream, there they were. She saw Mitch standing in front of Kate, her face in his hands, kissing her. Her stomach coiled into a knot, killing any butterfly that might have been there. She couldn't look for more than a second before darting away, unnoticed.

Kate stepped back, blinking a few more times, "Thank you, Mitch."

"I'm sorry about that, Kate."

"It's alright, but I think I'll get outta here before I go blind!"

Mitch shook his head, feeling horribly guilty as Kate darted off. Mitch went back to sanding the rack when he remembered, "I wonder if Snow is coming anytime soon? Perhaps I'll go and check on her."

He arrived at the foot of her tree house and called out to her, "Snow! Are you up there, Love?" Just as he was about to start up the ladder, he thought, 'No, let her sleep. She needs her rest. I'll leave her some dinner just inside her door later with some poinsettias. That should make her smile when she wakes up.'

Collapsing to the woods floor in exhaustion, Snow gasped for air. She was almost hyperventilating as she sobbed uncontrollably while trying to catch her breath from running. She had to run away, at least for the time being. She didn't want anyone to see her like this. How could this happen? She even saw it coming in her dream. What do I do now? She sure didn't want to go after Donnie to get back at Kate! That thought was downright appalling. At that point, Snow didn't care if she ever went back to the Willows, but she really wanted to talk to someone, someone NOT involved in all of this, someone NOT from the Willows. She stood to her feet and headed in the direction of the stream. She tried to retrace her steps back to the mine's main entrance as best as she could remember. Snow really wanted to talk to Ben. He was so levelheaded and logical. He'd have some good advice for her. Besides, he was a monk, or used to be anyway. The wind was starting to pick up briskly. She remembered where the carved bridge was, then recalled the tree and landmarks near the main entrance. She wondered if Ben had patched up that hole yet, just in case she had to 'drop in' that way again.

It had started to snow as the wind blew harder and harder, threatening to toss Snow to and fro along the woods path. She could barely see where she was going as the snow whirled around her head, making everything in her vision white. The cold blowing snow felt like needles on her face as the wind slapped the ice crystals against Snow's cheeks. Finally, after a few pushes to the ground by the harsh winds, Snow spotted it ... the main door to the mine. It was unmistakable, a large beautifully carved oak structure built directly into the rock face near the river.

She began rapping at the door. "Ben! Ben, it's Snow. Are you there? Ben?"

After a few seconds, she heard Max barking and then the sound of the latch on the inside. The door opened and Snow looked down to see her tiny friend. "Ben!"

He was surprised, "Snow! What are you doing here? Geez, it's freezing out here. Come on in."

The shivering princess stepped out of the blistering wind and into the mine, which was slightly warmer than the outside, but not much. Max jumped up on her, gave a friendly bark, and licked her cold hand as she petted him. "Hi, Max."

Ben shut the door. "It looks like there's a blizzard coming. I was afraid of that. Come on. Let's grab some warm blankets and tea and head downstairs. When it storms, I like to go down to a lower chamber in the mine for better shelter ... just in case."

They went back to Ben's living chamber and grabbed some blankets and provisions. To Snow's relief, Ben had covered the mirror with a large quilt.

However, Ben headed towards the mirror. "Here, this quilt ought to be pretty warm." As he pulled it off, Snow quietly gasped and tightly shut her eyes. As she opened one eye, she gave a sigh of relief to see that it appeared as a normal mirror. She didn't quite know what she was expecting from the mirror, but was careful not to look at it too long.

Ben grabbed one of the lanterns off a nail nearby and led her to a section of the mine with a small opening and a contraption that looked like the mine cart she had seen on her first visit there. But this one had two carts connected together and were both sitting on a track.

Ben threw the supplies in the back as Max jumped in. "Yeah, Max. I know you love this part!" Ben hoisted himself into the front car and turned back to Snow, "I'd help you in, but I don't think I'd do you much good." He chuckled, "I know I say that to you a lot, don't I?"

Snow stood looking at the cart and then looking at the dark cave the cart was heading into.

"Well, you coming? I know it looks scary at first, but it's fun, really. Beats the stairs. It's kind of like a roller coaster, although I've never been on one myself. Come on, jump in. You'll be OK."

As Snow pondered what in the world a 'roller coaster' was, she cautiously got into the front cart just behind Ben.

He grabbed what looked like a large iron stick that was attached to the cart at the front. "Don't worry. I'm an expert at this thing! Not a word from you, Max!"

He pulled down on the lever and the cart slowly began to move ahead on the narrow iron tracks. As they moved away from the wall lanterns into the dark hole, Snow felt the cart moving faster and faster as they began slanting downward, sliding deeper into the mine.

The dark, damp wind rushed through Snow's hair as she yelped at every bump and corner. They seemed to be taking the corners on two wheels, thought Snow, as they whipped around each one and took rugged sudden turns. Snow's mouth was so dry, she couldn't even muster up enough saliva to swallow. She wasn't exactly frightened, but her nerves seemed to overshadow the exhilaration of the ride at the moment. Her hands gripped the sides of the cart so tightly that her knuckles were surely white, if she had been able to see in the pitch black of the cart's path. Somehow, Ben knew when the end was coming, because he began to pull back on the lever, slowing their pace until they finally stopped. It was pitch dark except for Ben's lantern, which thankfully stayed lit.

Ben jumped out of the cart. "Here, I'll get us a good fire going. I'd help you out of the cart, but ... well, you know."

Snow climbed out of the cart as Ben went over and made a fire in the fireplace in the corner. As the room grew brighter, Snow saw a makeshift bed in the corner with some crates of supplies.

"This is my 'storm shelter' you might say. We're very well protected from the storm down here. And once this fire gets going, it gets pretty warm, too. It'll probably be pretty nasty out there for a while. You'd better stay here for the night. But don't worry, Max will keep me in line." He winked at Snow. "Won't you, Max?"

Max barked as Snow smiled. "That's OK, Ben. I'm not too worried. I think I could take you!"

Ben put up his fists jokingly, "Oh really?"

Snow put hers up, too, "Yeah, really!"

Ben waved his hands at her in surrender. "Ah! I'd never hit a woman!" He went back to tending the fire.

Snow got the extra blankets and supplies from the other cart. "You ever considered getting a roommate?"

Ben poked at the embers, "Why, you know someone lookin'?"

Snow paused a second while she threw a blanket down near the fire, then said sadly as she sat down, "Yes. Me."

Ben turned to look at her. "You? You planning to move out of the Willows?"

"Perhaps."

Ben sat down next to her. "Something happened, didn't it? That's why you're here. Wanna talk about it? You don't have to."

Snow tried to keep from crying, but she couldn't help it. "Yes, I do want to talk to someone, really. Oh, I just hate crying! Seems like that's all I do anymore!" She violently rubbed her tears from her face as Ben looked on sympathetically.

"Hey, it's OK. I don't mind."

Snow leaned back against the wall as she gathered her thoughts.

Ben jumped up suddenly. "Hey! You know what you need?"

Snow shook her head.

Ben puffed out his chest proudly. "You need some of Ben's famous homemade ale, that's what!"

Snow smiled at the pride of her small friend as Ben went over to the provisions he had packed and pulled out a large jug and two mugs. Snow wondered how he was able to carry such a large jug being so small as he lugged the thing over to the fire.

He had a beaming smile. "Here we are! Best stuff this side of the country ... the continent, even!"

Snow took the mug and tasted the brew very cautiously. She never really liked ale all that much. She preferred Mitch's delicious wine to anything, then scolded herself for thinking of Mitch. To her surprise, the stuff was quite good. It had a hint of sweet, which Snow liked better than the usual sour taste of ale.

"So what do ya think?"

"Ben, this is really good. I'm surprised, in that I'm not a big ale drinker. What's the recipe?"

"Ah, afraid I can't tell ya that. It's been handed down for centuries ... originally invented by the seven dwarfs who carved this mine. We dwarfs have been sworn to keep its recipe a secret. Sorry."

Snow giggled, "That's OK. It's probably better that I don't know."

Ben took another large swig and refilled his mug. "So tell me, lass, what brings you here?"

Snow took the next couple of hours telling Ben everything, including the fact that SHE was the missing princess.

"It's YOU?? Jumping gemstones!"

She told him about Margurite sending the huntsman to kill her and then her falling into the Willows. She went on about her royal decree and Edward, and then how Mitch became her real true love. Feeling more relaxed by the ale, she told him of the attempts of Margurite to kill her and her trying to blow up the portal.

"So that's what that noise was? I heard the blast, but didn't know what had happened."

Snow was embarrassed at practically blowing up the woods and looked down in shame at her empty mug, which Ben quickly filled again. She went on to tell him about Mitch's amnesia and about what she saw with him and Kate, and how it was just what she had dreamed.

Ben looked thoughtfully at Snow. "Well, the way I see it, it sounds like you and he have a fine relationship. I don't think he'd go and mess it up like that, you know? Just 'cause you dreamed it doesn't mean it's got to come true, right? You really saw them kissing?"

Snow thought a second. "Well, no. But Mitch was standing right in front of her, and he had her face in his hands right up to his."

Ben shook his head as his speech was a little slurred, "Well, ya never know. It could've been a kiss, but then again, it may have been something else. You should at least talk to him before you make any hasty decisions. Besides, they're all going to be worrying about you now that you ran out in the middle of a blizzard, you know."

Snow nodded. She couldn't help but see Mitch in her mind worrying about her. Feeling a little light-headed and warm from the ale, her thoughts briefly drifted to Mitch ... his eyes, his smile, his kiss. She shook off her daydreaming and thought logically. Ben was right. She'd run out into a blizzard, unbeknownst to her at the time. And now everyone was probably out looking for her.

"You're right, Ben." Snow's speech was now slurred a little as well. "I'm just a coward sitting here. I have to face this ... face him. I really should be getting back." Snow tried to get up, then fell back down.

Ben laughed at her. "You can't go out like that! Besides, it's still storming, and it's already dark by now, you know. It'll wait till morning, lass. Here, have another one for the night. It helps keep ya warm."

"OK." Snow had no objections as her small friend poured her another. Snow leaned in to Ben, almost whispering, "Hey, I have an idea!"

"What?"

"Let's go for another ride in the cart!"

Ben was surprised. "Now?"

Snow's eyes lit up. "Yeah! You think you can do it?"

"Sure! I can shift that thing with my eyes closed! It's just a matter of stopping in time, is all. Done it hundreds of times ... no, thousands! Come on! There's a special water-powered elevator over here that you use to go up, see. And then you use the cart to come down."

Ben stepped into a small wooden shaft. Snow had to duck to get in and then sat down next to Ben.

"You'd better hang on, Snow. This ride is almost as bad as the cart!" He pushed yet another lever and the wooden shaft went sailing upward at an unbelievable speed.

Snow squealed all the way up till they came to an abrupt stop. "Wow!"

Ben smiled, "Yeah! What a ride, huh? That's waterpower for ya. We're right next to the river. Sometime, I'll show you how it works. But see, now that we're here, we just send this back down." He pushed another lever, and the shaft went sailing back down.

They walked over to where they had gotten on the carts originally, but of course, they weren't there. They were still at the bottom.

"So how do you get the carts back up here?"

Ben smiled as he pulled yet another lever. Less than a minute later, they could hear the carts making their way back up the track until they finally stopped in front of them at the end of the line.

Snow looked at Ben with a questioning gaze. "Water power again?"

Ben smiled, "Nope ... magnets!"

Snow laughed as she and Ben jumped into the cart. This time, Snow wasn't so nervous as they sailed around corners and turns laughing and 'whooping' all the way to the bottom.

Chapter 9 “The Blizzard”

“Tie those barrels down!” screamed Duncan, trying to be heard by Trent over the forceful winds. “Bart, did you lock up the barn?”

“Yes!”

“I mean, did you lock it up really good?”

“YES!”

The entire village was scampering about, trying to tie down anything they could before the storm got worse. Pieces of wood and branches were flying around everywhere. The ice crystals nipped at everyone’s noses as the blistering winds blew the snow round about the village. Stevie was busy gathering the rabbits to be put up in the barn. Kristen and Murray gathered the chickens, assisted by Bart, knowing he’d have to lock the barn up again.

Roger and Donnie were hauling extra firewood into the main hut while Kate helped Mitch bring in extra food stores from the storehouse. “Mitch, where’s Snow?”

Mitch picked up a crate. “Isn’t she helping Yolanda?”

“No, I haven’t seen her since lunch.”

A look of sheer terror swept over Mitch’s face. “God! She’s asleep in her tree house!” Mitch couldn’t believe he’d forgotten. For some reason, he was thinking she was in the main hut helping Yolanda making up extra beds for all of them to sleep in till the storm was over. Mitch dropped the crate of supplies and headed toward the tree house.

Kate ran over to Donnie and Roger and had to yell to be heard over the winds, “We have to help Mitch. He went to get Snow. She’s still in her house!”

The two men dropped the firewood and headed in that direction with Kate. The three of them met up with Mitch at the bottom of the tree.

“Snow!” They kept yelling, but there was no answer. Mitch had started up the ladder, battling the winds and swirling snow, when suddenly there was a loud ‘crack’.

Donnie yelled, “Mitch, get down! We’re losing the house! Come down NOW!”

Mitch continued to call up to the house, “Snow!”

The large tree swayed as the main branch holding the house gave way under the forceful winds, cracking and splitting. The house buckled, tumbling down in large pieces.

Kate screamed, “Mitch!” as Donnie grabbed her and pulled her out of the way of the falling treehouse.

After a moment, Kate crawled from the snow and over to the rubble that was once Snow’s house, “Mitch!” Kate was joined by Donnie and Roger as she yelled to them, “We have to get them out of there quickly. They’ll get hypothermia in this wind and ice!”

The three frantically searched for their two friends, lost in the rubble. Donnie yelled out, “Here, I got ‘im!”

Kate rushed over to Mitch, who had been knocked unconscious and bleeding at the head once again. Kate worried that a second head injury made his chances greater for a serious concussion.

“We gotta get him to the surgery! I’ll just stay there for the night instead of the main hut.”

“Then I’ll stay with you,” as Donnie helped Kate try to pick Mitch up. “Argh! Roger, we need another hand!”

Kate reminded them, “No, keep searching for Snow. We have to find her! She’s been out here in this house a long time. We don’t know if she’s alright.”

Donnie spotted Ivan and Bart rushing over to help. Ivan and Roger helped Kate get Mitch back to the Surgery while Donnie stayed and helped search the rubble for Snow with Bart.

Roger and Ivan headed back to the main hut. Kate had Mitch's head bandaged just as Donnie and Bart entered from the menacing storm outside. They could barely get the door closed as Kate frowned at all the snow that had blown in.

"Well, where is she?"

Donnie was out of breath. "She wasn't there. We looked all through that blasted mess."

Kate's jaw dropped. "What do you mean she wasn't there?"

"Just like I said. She wasn't there, Love. We looked all over."

Kate glanced at Bart, who sadly nodded in agreement. "Well then, where the hell is she?"

Donnie shook his head. "You got me on that one. Has anyone seen her since lunch this afternoon? That blasted girl is always runnin' off, ya know. We need ta keep a leash on that one!"

Bart gave off an intense concern. "Donnie, she could be out there freezing!"

Donnie shook his head, "Bart, ya know we can't go out! Nightfall is nightfall, even in a blizzard."

Kate heard Mitch moaning and rushed back over to him to find that he was coming around. "Thank God! Mitch, how do you feel?"

Mitch opened his eyes and saw Kate, Donnie, and Bart all staring at him. "Good Lord! What are all of you doing just staring at me like that?"

All three bystanders laughed in relief. Kate asked again, smiling, "Mitch, how do you feel?"

He reached up toward his head and felt all the bandages, "Like I got the worst headache in the world, that's all."

They chuckled again, trying to keep it to a minimum.

Mitch suddenly remembered and looked at Kate. "Snow! Where is she?"

Kate pulled the covers up closer. "Mitch, you need to rest now. You had a nasty fall, not to mention that you were buried under a house."

Donnie added, "Yeah, in fact we had to make sure you weren't wearin' no striped socks like that 'wicked witch of the east' chick!"

He laughed at his own joke while Kate kept her attention on Mitch. "Mitch, you do remember how you got here, right? You remember going to get Snow out of her house in the blizzard?"

Mitch thought for a second, then smiled and tried to sit up with excitement in his voice. "Yes, but that's just it. I remember! I mean, I remember everything! Everything before the amnesia ... I remember, Kate! I have to see Snow. I have to tell her! Where is she?"

Kate was taken aback by his news. That second blow to the head had reversed his amnesia. How could she tell him that Snow was missing in the middle of a blizzard? "Mitch, you can talk to Snow after you get some rest, and not before." She threw Donnie a concerned look, and he nodded in agreement at her decision not to tell him just yet.

Mitch still felt a little lightheaded and dizzy from his injury, so he took her advice in stride. "Alright. But tell her I love her, Kate. Will you?"

Kate managed a weak smile, "I will, Mitch."

Kate sat by the fire with a hot cup of tea and Donnie in the chair next to her, holding her hand. Mitch had been sleeping peacefully in the next room, along with Bart. They all stayed in the surgery for the night while the others slept in the main hut. Kate wore a worried look on her face all night, unable to sleep. Donnie rubbed her fingers with his.

"Where did she go, Donnie? What if she's ..."

He interrupted, "I'm sure she's fine, Kate. The storm looks to be lettin' up. We'll go at first light, alright Angel?"

There was a knock at the door. They heard Stevie's muffled voice, "Oi, Donnie, Kate ... I'm trying to dig out the snow so I can open the door."

After a moment, he managed to pry the door open, assisted by Donnie, who gave it a good heave. "I come to see 'ow Snow and Mitch are doin'?"

Donnie frowned, "Stevie, why aren't you in the main hut with the others till this storm's over?"

"The storm's lettin' up. I 'ad to crawl out a window of the hut. The main door's really snowed in good. But I jus' 'ad to come an' make sure Snow an' Mitch were alright. Roger said you were still lookin' for Snow when he left. 'ow is she?"

Donnie touched Stevie's arm and gently offered, "Well, she wasn't there. We're going to look for her at first light."

Unnoticed by the others, Mitch had gotten out of bed and was standing in the doorway. "What?! Snow is missing in this storm? Why haven't you been looking all this time?"

Mitch started toward the door and was stopped by Donnie, "Mitch, no! We will all go together! But not now. We have to wait and gather the others. You know that! We've been through this. Come on, man. I know it's your emotions talkin', but we have to use our heads, 'ere."

Mitch backed off, turning away. Kate looked at Stevie, who showed a horrified look, knowing Snow was lost in this blizzard. Mitch headed back toward the bedroom. Kate was worried about Mitch's mental state, coupled with his head injury, and headed toward the bedroom while Donnie consoled Stevie by the fire.

Kate was surprised to find Mitch sitting on the bed crying, his forehead resting on his hand. She sat down slowly on the other side of the bed and gently put her hand on Mitch's shoulder.

"I can't lose her, Kate. I just can't. Where is she? Everything she's been through ... everything I put her through, the amnesia and not even remembering who she is." He looked up at Kate. "She's my soulmate. That's who she is. That night in the barn when she and I had our date, I was going to propose to her. I was going to ask her to be my wife. But we got off subject, and we started talking about other things, and well, ... at the time I just thought it best to wait. Then the amnesia thing happened and ... God, I wished I'd asked her there in the barn. Just to turn around and not even know who she was. It's a wonder she didn't give up on me."

Kate squeezed his shoulder, "But she didn't, Mitch. She loves you, I know she does."

Mitch lowered his head and closed his eyes for a second as tears dropped onto his cheek. Then he took a deep breath and looked at Kate. "I can't lose her. Where is she, Kate? Where is she?"

Kate wished she had anything else to say except, "I don't know, Mitch."

Just a few hours later, the villagers had dug the snow away from the main hut door and were planning a search party for Snow in teams. Mitch hadn't slept since he found out his Princess was missing. He was sick with worry.

Duncan was going through some instructions with the group when Donnie leaned over to Kate, "Ya know, this is all like déjà vu to me. Don't it seem like we're always organizin' search parties to find Snow?"

Mitch glared at Donnie but held his tongue. Duncan continued making the search arrangements. They took the horses and went out in teams, taking blankets, food, water, and medical supplies. They split up in the woods, calling out to Snow. Mitch was searching with Kate and Kristen.

The two ladies were searching around a clearing when Mitch felt something on his shoulder. He looked over, "Tweety? What are you doing here? I hope you weren't out in the

blizzard all this time. Hey, do you know where Snow is?” Mitch chuckled to himself that he was talking to a bird. Why not? Snow did it all the time, and it seemed to work for her.

Suddenly, Tweety flew up and in the direction of the stream, then back to Mitch, squawking. “Are you trying to tell me something, or is that just something birds do?”

Tweety repeated his actions. Mitch decided he had nothing to lose and followed Snow’s blue jay, forgetting, of course, to let Kate and Kristen in on it.

“Thank you so much, Ben, for your hospitality. I so appreciate it. And thanks for letting me cry on your shoulder.”

“Anytime, Snow. You know you’re welcome anytime.”

Snow leaned down and hugged her friend and then rubbed Max on the head. “Now you take care of him, Max. You hear me?”

Max barked as Ben laughed, “What, this lazy mutt? It’s more like me takin’ care of him and he knows it!”

Ben walked Snow to the main door of the mine. “Now, don’t forget what I said. Just talk to him. I know you’ll get it all straightened out. Keep your chin up!”

Snow smiled as she put her cape hood up and went out into the snow.

Ben returned to his chamber and began to light up his fire.

“Why did you let her go, Benjamin? We had a deal.”

Ben gave no response and continued to poke at the fireplace.

“I asked you a question, Mr. Benjamin. Why did you let her go?”

The dwarf kept his gaze on the fire. “Because she’s my friend, that’s why. She told me all about you, you know.”

“We had a deal, Benjamin!”

“I don’t want nothin’ bad to happen to her. I’m not so sure what you have up your sleeve now, *your majesty*,” he said sarcastically, as he turned to face Margurite.

Chapter 10

“Where is your bracelet, Love?”

The storm had all but dissipated, and there were just flurries sailing by here and there as Snow left the mine. The air smelled so clean and the wind was crisp, but not too harsh. Snow replayed in her mind the events that led up to her leaving the previous afternoon. She couldn't help but be bothered about seeing Mitch and Kate. She thought about Ben's words. What else could it have been but a kiss? She started to feel upset again. How could she deal with this on an ongoing basis? She just couldn't. It didn't seem to stop. She felt doomed to be forever paranoid about Mitch and Kate being together. There wasn't really anything she could do. She wished things were like they were before the explosion. She was so much more confident about everything then, and she wasn't even sure why. It must have been everything they had gone through together, Snow thought. It had brought them that much closer. Why do the memories he'd forgotten seem so important to Snow? She really didn't know. She felt like, even though trivial to everyone else, they were important to her.

Standing by the stream, lost in her thoughts, Snow didn't even notice Mitch rush over upon seeing the back of her cloak.

With relief, he grabbed her and turned her around. “Snow! Thank God you're alright!” He pulled her in and hugged her tightly.

Snow was completely taken off guard by his actions. Wide-eyed, she hugged him back, “Mitch, you startled me. What are you doing here?”

He pulled back to look into her eyes, still grasping her arms. “We're looking for you! All of us! The blizzard ... you just disappeared! Where did you go?”

Snow reached up toward the bandages on his head. Mitch motioned towards them. “Yeah, I took a fall during the storm. But I'm fine. But what about you? God, I was so worried! I told Kate that I was afraid I'd lost—”

Snow interrupted, “Ahh! Her again! Kate! I saw you two kissing yesterday. What was I supposed to think about that? That's when I left.”

Mitch wore the most puzzled expression, “Kissing?”

Snow's voice began quivering, “Yes, by the wood shop.”

Mitch chuckled, “Oh, Love ... I wasn't kissing her, some sawdust blew into her eye and I was just helping her get it out.”

Snow pulled away from his grasp. “If that isn't the oldest excuse in the book. Even I know that one! Do you take me for a fool?” Snow turned and ran from him, sobbing.

Mitch ran after her, “Snow!” He caught up to her, grabbing her by the arm. Snow lost her footing and tumbled to the ground, taking Mitch down with her. Sitting on the ground, she turned away from him, crying.

He rubbed her shoulder, “Snow it's true, I swear. I had just finished sanding that blasted spice rack and some of the sawdust blew into her eye. It's the truth.”

Snow was still sobbing, still unable to look him in the eyes. “It's just so different now, everything. You and her now versus then ... what we talked about in the barn that day. Things were different before the explosion. But you don't remember it! I don't know what to feel about that. I just can't deal with it all!”

Mitch grabbed her arms and turned her toward him, smiling with excitement in his voice, “But that's just it, Love! I do remember! It's so crazy! Hitting my head in the blizzard ... the same thing that stole my memory, gave it back to me! I remember everything, Princess!” Mitch brushed her face with the back of his hand.

Snow shook her head, still trembling, “No. You're just saying that. You just want me to believe it.” Snow wanted to believe Mitch's words so badly, but he couldn't remember everything just like that, could he?

Mitch gently took both of her hands in his. "Our date, All Hallow's Eve ... believe it, my love." What could he say to make her believe him, Mitch thought? He rubbed her hands with his when he noticed it. He smiled, knowing this was the one thing that would do it. She would believe him now. "Where is your bracelet, Love?"

Snow gasped once his words actually set in. Her yelp of relief was choked by a sob of sheer joy. She didn't know what to say, so she said nothing. No words could express what she was feeling at that moment. But there was one thing that could.

Tears in her eyes, she grabbed Mitch and pulled him into a passionate kiss, lowering them both to the ground. The blanket of snow beneath them didn't even feel cold as they engulfed one another lovingly. With Snow's arms about his neck, Mitch caressed her face and her hair as he kissed her.

Following Mitch's footprints in the snow, Kate and Kristen had finally caught up to them. "Here you are! Oops! Sorry," Kate said, as she caught sight of the couple kissing in the snow.

Their kiss was suddenly halted. Mitch pulled Snow back up and helped her to her feet. Both of them were looking rather embarrassed as they glanced at Kate and Kristen. Mitch had never received a kiss like that from Snow before. Now, more than ever, he couldn't wait for his opportunity to ask her to be his wife.

Kristen gave a sigh of relief, "Thank God! Snow, where have you been!"

Kate sounded the whistle around her neck three times as the signal that they had found Snow.

Mitch offered, "Let's get back to the village. She can tell us about it later. I'm sure she's freezing."

Snow thought to herself how much she, in fact, didn't feel cold at all. In fact, she felt warm all over as Mitch rubbed her arms.

"OK, young lady!" Donnie's grilling tone sent a feeling of dread into Snow. She knew this was coming, a lecture on 'not leaving the village alone' once again. She knew she had done a bad thing. But they just don't understand what all happened, what she was feeling.

"Spill it, Princess!"

Snow winced at Donnie using Mitch's pet name for her in such a derogatory fashion. "I ran away. I'm sorry. I'm a very bad girl." She gave a teasing side-glance to Mitch, "Perhaps you should lock me up in the jail tonight."

Mitch returned her playful tone. "Yes, fine idea. I'll volunteer to stand guard."

Donnie winked at Mitch, "I'm sure ya would, mate!"

Duncan offered, "I don't think that will be necessary. Besides, it's freezing in the jail now after the blizzard."

Donnie continued his questioning, "Well, here she still hasn't explained 'ow she survived such a fierce blizzard out in the woods all alone."

"Oh, I wasn't in the woods."

Kate raised her eyebrows, "You weren't?"

"And I wasn't alone."

Mitch gave her a quick, concerned gaze. "You weren't?"

"No. I was with Ben in the mine. We were quite safe, I assure you."

Kate frowned. "You went back to the mine? But you were so frightened by that mirror? It upset you so much, it gave you an ulcer ... or at least caused it to act up."

Snow lowered her gaze. "Well, I was more upset by what I saw yesterday."

"What do you mean, Snow?" as Kate gave her a concerned look.

Mitch quickly stepped in. "I can explain later, Kate. I think Snow needs her rest right now. I'm sure she didn't have a very good night's sleep in a cold mine." He turned to her

and smiled lovingly. "You can sleep in my cabin for a while. Then I'll get you something to eat."

Snow looked into his warm brown eyes and smiled back at him. "Yes, well, I guess the treehouse would be awfully cold right now, wouldn't it?"

"You're right about that," Kristen muttered under her breath.

Bart began sadly, "Snow, your treehouse, well ... it was destroyed in the blizzard. The wind knocked it right out of the tree."

Duncan added, "Yes, and thank goodness you weren't in it at the time. That's how Mitch was injured."

Donnie had to throw in his bit, "Yeah, he went after ya. Almost got 'im killed!"

Snow turned to Mitch, and once again touched the bandages on his head, tears filling her eyes. Mitch simply held her hand and smiled at her.

Stevie jumped into the conversation. "Doncha worry, Snow. We'll all pitch in and get yer house rebuilt in no time. Won't we?" He looked about the room.

"No." Mitch said with a huge grin on his face. "We won't be rebuilding Snow's treehouse."

Snow looked at him puzzled, but with a curious look in her eyes. "We won't?"

"No, Snow will be staying with me from now on."

Snow offered innocently, "I will?"

Mitch looked at her with his loving smile. "Yes. Married couples usually live in the same house, you know."

Snow squealed with delight as she threw her arms around his neck and hugged him. He twirled her around as he loved to do, of course. The entire room cheered with hollers and 'congratulations', as even Tweety flew happily about the hut. The tears flowed freely down Snow's cheeks as she hugged her true love. She didn't care that everyone saw her cry. It was the happiest day of her life ... well, at least so far!

Chapter 11

“Second Time Around”

Mitch tucked Snow into his bed. He kissed her on the forehead, fearing that if he kissed her lips, he wouldn't be able to stop. Snow smiled knowingly, as if she could read his mind. With a regrettable 'goodbye', he slowly closed the door of his cabin to let his Princess sleep. Glancing over at the barn, Mitch then decided to give the horses a treat for suffering the cold blizzard. As he stepped into the barn with a basket of carrots and apples, he noticed the hay was wet and packed down from the blown in snow of the previous night's storm. Through the twigs of soggy hay, some color caught his eye. He knelt down and picked up a few colorful beans. They were the coffee beans from the bracelet he had made Snow.

“So that's it ... it's broken. Bless her heart.” Of course, this gave Mitch the most wonderful idea. Finishing the spice rack would just have to wait. After searching the storeroom for fifteen minutes, Mitch decided to try looking in the kitchen. There it was, under one of the cabinets. ‘Figures that someone moved it,’ he thought. He pulled out the tin that he kept his paints in, along with hardened coffee beans. Since Snow was asleep in his cabin, Mitch took his project to the wood shop to finish without interruption.

Kristen was on her way into the barn to reclaim a tablet she left up in the loft the other day when she was stopped by Stevie.

With some embarrassment in his voice, Stevie began, “Aye, sorry Kristen. I got orders to not let any of the women in the barn.”

Kristen put her hands on her hips. “Says who? Who's orders?”

Stevie counted on his fingers as he spouted, “Ivan, Roger, Duncan, Murray, Bart, and Donnie.”

Kristen glared at Stevie, making him very nervous, which was her intention. “And why not?”

Stevie stammered his words under Kristen's glare, “W-well, ya see. They's makin' somethin' for ... for all the ladies 'ere in the Willows. Ya know ... for Christmas.”

With a gleam in her eye, she asked, “Really? What is it?”

“Um ... well, I can't tell ya. It's a surprise. That's why ya can't go in the barn.”

“Hmmm. Well, there's something in there I need. So, if you would be a dear and poke your head in and see if one of the fellows can give me my writing tablet? I left it up in the loft the other day.”

“Sure!” Stevie opened the door just enough to shout through the door crack, “Oi! Kristen's out 'ere and says she needs her writin' tablet in the loft. Can one of ya get it for her?”

About a minute later, while Stevie stood in front of the cracked door so Kristen couldn't see in, Stevie was passed the tablet. He held it right up in front of Kristen's eyes as the men inside shut the barn door, “‘ere ya go, Kristen.”

Kristen chuckled a ‘thanks’ as she walked away, shaking her head. Stevie went back to reading his book.

After a while, the men decided to call it a day and stepped out of the barn. Stevie was excited about his new idea. “Oi! You're all 'ere. I wanted to ask ya somethin'. Do you think we could still take a stab at fixin' the tree'ouse?”

Murray brushed some sawdust from his pants. “Well, you heard Mitch. Snow won't be needing it anymore.”

Stevie nervously kicked some snow around on the ground below. “No, not for Snow, for me.”

“For you?”

“Oi! I'd really like to have a tree'ouse. Snow's was really neat, ya know!”

The men chuckled, and Donnie patted Stevie on the back. "Well, Stevie. We'll have to see about that one. We wouldn't want another blizzard to knock it down again, now would we? Maybe we can plan for that for the springtime, eh?"

Stevie halfway smiled, "Well, OK. But don't forget, OK Donnie?"

"I'm sure ya won't let me forget, now will ya?"

Snow awoke to the sweet smell of raspberry tea. She opened her eyes to see Mitch gently stroking her hair, looking on lovingly as she slept. "Well, hello 'sleeping beauty'. How is my fiancée feeling?"

Snow's heart leapt at the word 'fiancée' coming from Mitch's lips as her butterflies soared once again. "I'm fine," she smiled cheekily and sat up. She looked over at the roaring fire as it tempted her with its brilliance. "Can we sit by the fire like we did the other night?"

Mitch was delighted at her request. "Sounds lovely."

She pushed away her covers as Mitch grabbed a few pillows and a blanket to throw down. The crackling of the fire gave Snow a warm and safe feeling, coupled alongside being here with Mitch ... her Mitch, who now had regained all those memories he had lost. Her fears were now put to rest. She was no longer going to be the silly girl who worried about the least little trivial thing. Kate was a good friend to both of them. In fact, the next time she saw Kate, she made it a point to give her a big hug.

Mitch watched Snow gazing at the fire, lost in her thoughts. "Whatcha thinking about, Love?"

Snow had no reason to not tell him the truth. She turned her full gaze to him, "About Kate, and how silly I've been worrying about you two."

He traced her face with his fingers. "So you do believe me about Kate?"

"Yes, I do."

"Snow, I should tell you this much. When you were missing in the blizzard, Kate was so worried about you, as we all were. But she didn't sleep at all the whole night. And when I found out you were missing, she comforted me and encouraged me so I wouldn't give up. She really cares about you. She cares about both of us, Snow."

"I really want to talk to her and tell her how much I care for her too, and just how silly I've been."

Mitch smiled and took her hand. "Well, that's all well and good, but right now, you're here with me. And I'm not letting you out of my site for a while, Princess."

She giggled.

Mitch's eyes lit up as he remembered, "Here, I have something for you. Close your eyes and hold out your hand." He pulled the new bracelet from his pocket and, instead of putting it into her waiting palm, slipped it onto her arm. As he did so, he whispered, "Open your eyes."

Snow gasped as the tears immediately welled up in her eyes. "Oh, Mitch. You made me another bracelet! It's even lovelier than the first. Thank you!" She sat up and hugged him tightly. As she sat back down, looking at her bracelet, she sniffed. "I feel so guilty, now. I ... I broke the bracelet. I was just so mad this one night about everything ... Margurite, the amnesia, Kate."

Mitch listened earnestly to her feelings. He wanted to comfort her, to take her in his arms. But he knew that right now she needed him to listen.

Snow lowered her gaze in shame as she continued, "And then I go running off during a blizzard, causing everyone to worry about me. And you ... you almost got killed because of me! I'm really quite upset with myself, Mitch. It's like I've been able to take a step back and see what a child I've been. I'm so ashamed." She kept her gaze down, unable to look Mitch in the eyes.

He took her face in his hands as he so often does, gazing lovingly into her eyes, “I don’t see a child, Princess. I see a woman ... the most amazing woman I’ve ever met, in fact. I wouldn’t change anything, Snow ... not even the amnesia. And let me tell you why. Because most people fall in love with someone one time, whereas, I’ve had the privilege of falling in love with you twice, Princess. And I wouldn’t change that experience for the world. I know that it’s hard to understand what I mean.”

Snow smiled and shook her head as a few more tears streamed down her cheeks, and she whispered, “No, I do understand. Because, I fall in love with you every day.”

Mitch melted in her words and in her teary blue eyes. He watched her lips quiver as he wiped a tear from her face. He thought such beautiful lips shouldn’t suffer to quiver so. He indulged to still them with a kiss.

Chapter 12

“Oh, Christmas Tree”

“Whatcha doin’, Stevie?” as Murray eyed Stevie’s busy behavior in the snow near the main hut.

“It’s the first big snowfall ‘ere and I’m makin’ a snowman!”

Kristen smiled. “Well, that’s a neat idea, Stevie! You want any help?”

“Sure!” As Stevie, Murray and Kristen gathered large piles of snow to build into a snowman, they were soon joined by Mitch and Snow as they caught sight of the busy group while on their way to the main hut.

“Well, we definitely need a carrot nose, some eyes and a mouth,” as Mitch headed toward the kitchen to get the snowman some facial features.

Pretty soon, there was a gathering of folks helping with the snowman, and he was done in no time. He had small pinecones for eyes, a carrot nose, and for a mouth they painted some rope a red color and formed a pipe from a corncob. They gave him twigs for arms and threw a blue scarf around his neck.

“Oi! We gotta ‘ave a hat!”

Stevie started off to his cabin to see if he could find anything, when Nicholas offered, “I have an extra one in my cabin. It’s an old one you can borrow for our chilly friend here if you like, since I couldn’t give ya my pipe, of course.” Nicholas returned with the hat that looked very much like the one he always wore, except a little more faded.

“That’s a mighty handsome snowman there, Stevie.”

Stevie gave Murray a large grin at his compliment. “Thanks Murray! I love Christmas! I love makin’ stuff for the holidays, ya know?”

Mitch pulled Snow into him and began to sway with her in a dance as he sang part of the words to *‘Winter Wonderland.’* “*In the meadow we can build a snowman, and pretend that he is Parson Brown. He’ll say are ya married, we’ll say ‘no man’. But you can do the job when you’re in town.*”

Kristen smiled at the blissful couple and then shivered. “Brrrr! I don’t know about the rest of you, but it’s pretty chilly out here! I think I’ll head on inside.”

With nods of agreement, everyone went on inside the main cabin.

“That is the most beautiful Christmas tree I’ve ever seen!” as Murray stood admiring the lovely tree that Yolanda and Kate had spent the last few hours decorating.

Cut by Nicholas that morning, the large eight-foot evergreen stood in the middle of the main hut and was adorned with beauty. Entwined with a garland of sparkling ribbons and strung dried fruit potpourri provided by Mitch, the tree gave off wonderful scents of Christmas while it glistened in the firelight. Perhaps its most unique and special feature were its ornaments. Each inhabitant of the Willows had handmade an ornament of their choice for the tree. Adorned by everyone’s special touch, the holiday evergreen told a story with each branch. Mitch’s ornament was, of course, one of his lovely handmade cinnamon stick log cabins. Snow made a replica of her Tweety bird out of small pine cones covered with tiny leaves for feathers and then painted it blue. Bart created a model of the ship they sailed over on to the New World. Ivan carved a very detailed knight on a horse out of a single piece of wood. Duncan made a tiny replica of his own flute to hang on the tree. It actually worked as he demonstrated its high-pitched sounds. Nicholas glued together an eye-catching wooden chest filled with some of the different shiny small treasures he had found on one of his expeditions. Edward’s ornament was a castle made from the description of Snow’s castle, as he found it more interesting to make than his own old homestead. Thomas put together a lovely nativity ornament that Snow especially admired with Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus as straw figures clothed with felt. Everyone’s ornament was

special, but all agreed that the most interesting ornament was Stevie's. With his love of science fiction, Stevie handcrafted an ornament of the solar system. He had made the moon and every planet from different sized nuts and berries and a prickly sweet gumball for the sun and then hand painted them all in colors coordinating with their colors in the universe and wired them together into a perfect solar system. The moon was even wired to rotate around the earth. Stevie beamed with pride at his creation while everyone gave him their compliments.

With Christmas still a few weeks away, there were a lot of things planned for a Christmas celebration in the Willows. Of course, there was the Christmas dinner, which would be served on Christmas Eve along with the telling of the first Christmas ... a tradition in the Willows. On Christmas day, everyone planned to play some games, dance, and sing Christmas carols. It was a magical time for everyone in the village.

That night, Mitch couldn't help but notice that Snow seemed a little distant as they sat by fire, each with a cup of cocoa. "What's on your mind, Love?"

Snow outlined the rim of her mug with her fingers. "I would really like to be able to sing carols with everyone. You know how much I love to sing. But I'm sure all the carols that everyone will sing will be ones that I probably don't know. I heard Stevie singing some carols today, and I didn't know any of them."

Mitch grinned as he leaned back and reached toward his bookcase. "I think our mysterious 'Willows mailman' must have had you in mind." He presented to Snow a CD of various Christmas carols. "I found this in a crate in the woods today. There are so many carols on here, I think it covers just about all of them. Now, you'll know them by Christmas."

Snow smiled as she took the CD and read the carols listed on the back of the case.

"In fact," Mitch continued, "I think we should plan to do one together. You can sing and I'll play the music for you on my guitar. We can practice it here and surprise everyone on Christmas. Just pick out your favorite after listening to it a while."

Snow bit her lip. "Do you think we should?"

"Sure. But I'm probably more prone to say so because I just love to hear you sing."

Snow smiled and leaned over to rest her head on his shoulder as she looked at the list of carols.

Mitch put his arm around her as he sang to her softly, "*Oh, the weather outside is frightful. But the fire is so delightful. And since we've no place to go, let it snow, let it snow, let it snow.*"

Chapter 13

“A Wolf in Dwarfs Clothing”

Mitch sat leaning against the foot of a chair in front of the fire with his fiancée next to him. Snow looked into his warm brown eyes and couldn't resist. She curled up onto Mitch's lap like a little girl, put her arms around him, nuzzled her face into his neck and began kissing it. Mitch wished so badly that they were already married, as this was driving him absolutely wild.

Knowing she was such a naïve little thing and didn't realize her effect on him, he tried to drum up casual conversation to get his mind pointed in another direction, “So, what's the mine like, Princess?”

She stopped kissing his neck and simply rested her head on his shoulder. “It's fascinating, really. I had a nice time while I was there. I wasn't scared at all. Ben and I rode to the bottom of the mine in a cart on wheels and then soared back up to the top in a wooden shaft he called an ‘elevator.’”

“So, Ben is kind to you?”

“Oh, yes. And so is Max.”

“Max?”

Snow began a playful tone. “Yes. Max is Benjamin's friend. In the beginning he was mean, but now he's a sweetheart ... very friendly and quite handsome as well.”

Mitch leaned back to look at her. “Handsome?”

Snow smirked, “Yes, and he kissed me too.”

“He kissed you?” The jealousy shone through Mitch's tone.

She emphasized, “Yes. Big, wet, sloppy kisses!”

Mitch was dumbfounded, his mouth agape as Snow continued, “Max is Ben's pet dog, silly!”

“Oh!” came a huge sigh of relief from Mitch, as he noticed his heart beating almost as fast as when Snow was kissing his neck a moment ago.

“Actually, Max is a wolf,” Snow continued. “Ben raised him from a cub.”

Mitch raised an eyebrow. “A wolf? Isn't it dangerous to have a wolf for a pet?”

“Well, Ben seems to have tamed him pretty well. He makes a good watchdog for Ben, since Ben is so small. But Max is really a pussycat at heart. Maybe Ben just has that special touch.”

Mitch eyed her playfully. “Well, just don't be letting him give you any of that ‘special touch’. I don't like the thought of you spending so much time with him.”

Snow eyed him back. “Oh, so you think I'm going to run off with a dwarf over you?”

“I don't know. Are you?”

She looked up in thought. “No. Maybe I'll just run off with Max instead!”

Mitch pretended to be hurt. “Oh! That hurt! Here, I'll show you a wolf!” He leaned over Snow on his lap, grabbing her and lowering her down to the floor, while he tickled her and growled like an animal, pretending to bite at her neck. Snow was squealing all the while. Mitch lifted his head from her neck and looked at Snow lying beneath him, giggling. He paused to look into her eyes, then traveled down her face to her lips, then to her neck. ‘She has no idea what she does to me,’ Mitch thought. Her teasing ways, coupled with her naïveté of its effects on him, drove Mitch crazy.

Becoming aware of Mitch's wandering gaze, Snow too began studying his features ... his hair, his eyes, his mouth. She thought how cute it was that his nose was just slightly crooked. It gave her a sense of relief that Mitch wasn't ‘perfect’. She didn't want someone ‘perfect’, as she was not perfect herself. But to her, he WAS perfect ... her perfect prince, and now he remembered. And she, once again, was his ‘Fairy Princess.’

Mitch struggled to shake off his thoughts as he gazed at his Princess lying beneath him. He sat back up, pulling her up as well, "Are you hungry at all, Love? You haven't eaten in a while."

Snow had forgotten about food being lost in her happiness, "Yes, actually I am quite hungry."

They bounded through the snow to the kitchen, made a few sandwiches and grabbed some pieces of fruit, then quickly went back to the warmth of Mitch's cabin.

"So I must ask the future Mrs. Lawrence, when she'd like to set a date for the wedding?"

Snow smiled beamingly. "What are your thoughts on that, Mr. Lawrence?"

He looked down at his cup of coffee. "The sooner the better. I mean ..." he snapped back up to look at Snow, "... whatever you'd like is fine with me, Princess."

Snow giggled at his blunder as she purposely held his gaze. "What about New Year's Day? That way we can have a marvelous Christmas engagement and then start the New Year off in a brand new life together."

Mitch took her hand and kissed it. "Sounds perfect, my love." He tried to quickly calculate in his mind how many days that actually was.

Snow gasped, "Oh, you know what? Ben will want to hear about this! I told him of what happened. And also ..." her eyes shone with excitement as she remembered, "... he said he was once a monk and used to perform marriage ceremonies! Mitch, he could marry us! Come on, let's go ask him!"

Mitch had a mouthful of his sandwich. "Now?"

"Yes! Let's go!" Snow was so excited, she took Mitch by the hand, stood up, and grabbed her cloak. Mitch managed to grab his coat as Snow pulled him out the door.

Snow continued telling Mitch about the mine and the exhilarating cart ride, as she tried to get him to agree to try it out, as well as the elevator. Mitch spotted something up in a tree and stopped in his tracks, pulling Snow to a halt.

"What is it Mitch?" She watched Mitch looking straight up into the branches of the tree above them.

Suddenly, Mitch wore a huge grin on his face. "You know what that is up there, Love?"

Snow looked up, "What? Where?"

"There ... that clump of green that looks like it doesn't really belong there."

"Oh yes. What is it?"

"It's called 'mistletoe'. Do you know what it's for?"

Snow shook her head.

Mitch grabbed Snow around the waist and pulled her close. "The tradition of mistletoe is that you have to kiss when you stand beneath it."

Snow gave a questioning grin. "Oh, I think you're making that up."

"No, It's true. In fact, you can ask Kate or Kristen or anyone when we get back."

"All right, I will." Mitch leaned in as if to kiss her, as she raised a finger to his lips, "Ahhh, but you can't kiss me until I've confirmed it."

Mitch released his grasp, somewhat disappointed, "OK, but that means I get double the kiss next time to make up for missing out, here!"

Snow giggled as she took his hand and continued on to the mine.

As they rounded the bend to the mine's main door, they found it partially open.

"That's strange, it's usually locked. Oh, I know. Ben probably let Max out for a while. You'll have to let Max get used to you first. Then he'll warm up to you."

Mitch didn't sound too thrilled. "Great."

She led Mitch down to Ben's main living chamber. They found Ben sitting by the fire thinking rather intensely about something.

“Ben! Guess who I brought with me?”

Ben snapped his head in the direction of her voice with a horrified look. “Snow, what are you doing here?”

“I brought Mitch to meet you. Mitch, this is my friend Benjamin.”

“How do you do?” Ben nervously shook Mitch’s hand, then averted his attention back to Snow, “Snow, you shouldn’t have come! You have to leave right away!”

“Oh, but we have so much to catch up on. She can’t leave now.”

A wave of sheer terror came over Snow as the voice behind her sent a painful shudder through her body. She was paralyzed with fear. Mitch whirled around to see Margurite standing in the large mirror Snow had described to him. As the queen stepped through the mirror and into the room, Snow found the strength to turn around. There she stood, face to face with her darkest fear. Margurite was still alive, glaring at the shivering girl. Mitch stepped in front of Snow as if to protect his Princess from the menacing witch that stood before them.

Margurite smiled at Mitch’s attempts to shield her stepdaughter. “Mr. Lawrence, do you really think that such a pathetic excuse for a boyfriend such as yourself is any match for me? Remember, I know all of your lame little Willow secrets. There isn’t much left for surprise. What card have you to play, ‘Mr. Coffee Man?’”

Mitch lunged at her, trying to grab her. Margurite caught him in mid-air with a gust of magic wind from a ruby ring on her hand, thrusting Mitch forcefully against the rock wall next to the mirror.

Snow screamed, “Mitch!”

Stunned from the blow, Mitch shook off a dizziness in his head. Then he realized his torso was stuck to the middle of the wall by the queen’s magic, his feet dangling below. He couldn’t pull himself free.

Snow started over to him but was stopped by Margurite. “And you!” Snow yelped as the queen pointed her finger in Snow’s face. “You will do as I say or you can kiss your precious beau goodbye! Understood?”

Snow nodded with fear in her eyes ... not fear for herself, but for Mitch.

Margurite dragged her fingernails through her long hair. Draped on her person was a black and purple satin gown trimmed in gold ribbons and embroidered designs. In addition, she also wore lots of gaudy jewelry. The sheer sight of her made Snow sick to her stomach. Benjamin stood by the fireplace, feeling helpless and guilty.

The queen glided across the room over to Mitch, dragging the train on her satin gown. “Since I paid a short visit to the Willows myself, I discovered something in that repulsive little village that I actually became quite fond of. So I propose a trade. You go back to the Willows and bring what I desire and your boyfriend here goes free.”

Snow seemed to find new added strength in her growing anger at her stepmother. “What is it you want, Margurite?”

The queen folded her arms and ticked her long fingernails against the satin sleeves of her gown. “Since the passing of your father, I’ve become quite a lonely woman. I’ve never been one to associate myself with servants, but then again, I’ve never found one to my liking. It came to my attention while I was in the village, that the Willows men are quite attractive fellows, I will admit.” She reached up and touched Mitch’s chin.

He turned his head in disgust and tried to slug her, but couldn’t move his arms from the wall.

The woman laughed at his reaction. “Oh, don’t worry, I don’t much care for domesticated males, dear. However, I have always followed the idea of uniting with royalty, as I did with your father,” she motioned to Snow, who glared at the haughty queen. “I became quite familiar with that ‘prince’ of yours, Snow, seeing much of the world through

his eyes and the village's mirrors. And after a bit of thought, I have decided that I shall make him a permanent resident in my new kingdom as my own personal servant."

Snow wore a puzzling look. "Do you mean Edward?"

The queen's piercing green eyes shown with pride, giving Snow yet another shudder, "Of course! But it isn't just 'Edward,' now is it? It's 'KING Edward.' And he will make quite a lovely cure to my loneliness."

Mitch forced a chuckle through his fear. "Sorry, Ms. White, but I'm afraid Eddy isn't going to think much of you!"

Margarite turned her green eyes on Mitch, "Well, we shall see about that, now won't we?" She whirled her full dress back around and walked over toward Ben, "Needless to say how grateful I was to Mr. Benjamin here for becoming such good friends with you, Snow. We have this lovely deal going, you see."

As she gave Ben a wicked smile, Ben scowled at her. "You promised you wouldn't hurt anybody! You better keep that promise!"

Snow was shocked and saddened. "Ben, how could you do this? I thought you were my friend?"

Ben lowered his head in shame, saying nothing.

"So, little 'princess'," she said sarcastically, "you have your work cut out for you, don't you? Now, you understand you are to bring Edward with you ALONE, right? If you bring any of those other fools with you, especially that Donnie character, it will have serious repercussions. Do you understand me?"

Snow nodded with a glance at Mitch.

"So I'd say you better be off to fetch my prince so you can return before dark. Go on ... shoo shoo!" Margarite waved her hand at Snow as if she were waving away some kind of pest.

Snow looked at Mitch, who smiled at her and winked to give her some encouragement. What else could he do? He hoped Snow would bring the others secretly. Perhaps they could form some kind of plan to get them all out of there safely ... he just didn't know how.

With a frown at Ben, Snow ran out of the room and out the mine door. 'What do I do,' thought Snow? She slid down against the rock near the mine's entrance, sobbing with fear. "If I bring Edward, he's my stepmother's slave forever, and if I don't, then Mitch is doomed!" After a minute of sobbing, Snow wiped her tears, "Pull yourself together, Snow. This is no time to lose your senses! You've got to think! But I just can't! I can't do this!"

As Snow's face was buried in her arms, Snow felt something licking her hand. "Max!" She hugged her wolf friend. As she petted the wolf, she thought of a plan. "Now, Margarite has no intentions on harming Edward, but she would harm Mitch, so the logical choice is to bring Edward. Then that's where you come in, Max! I need your help with this. You think you can do it?" Max barked and put his paw on her leg. She took his paw in her hand. "Good boy! We can do this together! She won't beat us this time, Max!" Snow crossed her fingers that Edward would still be fishing. He had mentioned earlier in the kitchen while she and Mitch were making sandwiches that he planned to go ice fishing.

Snow and Max rounded a clump of trees by the water and found Eddy relaxing by the partially frozen stream with just his fishing pole.

He glanced in their direction. "God! Wolf!"

He scampered up but stopped when he saw Snow.

"It's OK Edward. He's with me. I need your help. Mitch is in trouble." Snow quickly told him what had happened and ideas she had for a 'plan.'

"Snow, I don't know. That sounds pretty risky. What about the others? I don't want to end up being that witch's slave forever." Eddy shuddered at the thought.

“We have to try, Edward. It’s our only chance! She said something bad would happen if we brought the others and I’m not taking that risk.”

Snow and Eddy headed towards the mine with Max in tow.

Chapter 14 "Shattered"

"Do you think this will work?" Eddy asked Snow as she 'prepped' Max for their plan. "I don't know ... I hope so. Max is a very protective wolf. I would think it would be instinct."

Snow and Edward entered Ben's chamber to find everyone was there, just as she had left them. Snow gave a silent sigh of relief to see that Mitch was still all right.

"Well, for a king's brat, you follow directions rather efficiently."

Mitch was very displeased at Margurite calling his fiancée a 'brat'.

The queen glided over to Eddy, dragging her gown as she inspected him up and down. "Yes, indeed. You will be a dashing member of the court. No one will know you are my servant, except for myself, of course. "

"I am no one's servant, Madame," Edward gave off a tone of disgust.

"Oh, but you are. Don't worry, you'll be treated well."

Snow was watching the door out of the corner of her eye, waiting for Max. The plan was for Max to attack the queen long enough for Edward and Snow to try and restrain her, as much of a plan as it was. But it was the last chance Snow had at a rescue.

Sounds of a wounded rat outside the chamber led Margurite to bark orders at her 'partner in crime', "Ben, could you please see to that mutt of yours!"

Ben went outside and led Max into the room, ordering him to sit by the fire and stay there.

'The plan was foiled by a blasted rat! Stupid wolf!' Edward thought. What now?

The queen turned back toward the mirror, "Alright, let's get this over with." Suddenly, a rope flew out of the mirror through the air and began to tie Snow's hands behind her. She tried to wriggle free, but it was too late. The rope became a solid knot. Then, with a clenched fist, the queen shot a blast of wind at Eddy with her ring, freezing his feet to the floor.

Margurite grabbed Snow and dragged her from the room as Mitch protested, "Where are you taking her?"

"Never fear Coffee Man, my stepdaughter and I are going to have a little chat, that's all."

He could hear Snow's struggling yelps as her stepmother dragged her out of the room.

Seeing Eddy trying to free his feet from the floor, Mitch pleaded to Ben, "You have to do something! You were Snow's friend! How could you just hand her over to that witch like this? How could you make a deal with Snow's life?"

Ben wore a sadness in his eyes. "You don't understand. Besides, she won't hurt Snow. She promised."

Mitch clenched his teeth. "You can't believe anything she says! She's been trying to kill Snow for months!"

Ben knew this. He remembered the horror stories that Snow had told him on that cold night of the blizzard. What could he do? He was just a tiny dwarf. If he broke the deal with Margurite, he would remain that way forever. She'd never give him her spell book then ... the book with the magical spell that would make him a normal sized man and change his life forever.

Snow struggled and fought as Margurite dragged her down the long flights of stone stairs to the belly of the mine. Into a corner lower-level chamber with a large open wooden door, she pulled the Princess over to a chair and thrust her down, magically re-tying the ropes to keep her in the chair. Snow could hear rushing water and smell the dampness in the air.

Again, the queen ran her hand through her long hair, "You hear that, Snow? It's the river. These walls are particularly thin. That's why you can hear the water so well. This chamber always posed a flood risk to the mine, which is why the dwarfs built that heavy wooden flood door. If this chamber ever flooded, they would need to shut the door in order to not flood the entire mine." She smiled menacingly as she picked up a nearby rock chisel tool and dangerously began toying at the rock wall's surface. "This time you have no knight in shining armor to save you, Snow! I'll be rid of you forever ... you and that sniveling dwarf friend of yours. This entire mine will be flooded within hours." She thrust the pickaxe into the wall and a stream of water began to spurt onto the floor.

Snow's eyes pleaded in terror, "You said you'd let Mitch go free."

Margurite glared at Snow with her green eyes while still wearing the smirk on her face. "So, if I were to give you a choice of your life or his. Whom would you choose?"

Snow whispered gently as her tears began to fall, "His."

"Hmmm, alright. Because I'm so forgiving, I'll grant your last wish and release your 'coffee mate'. However, I must be rid of you. You understand, don't you?"

Again, she thrust the axe into the wall a few times until there was a large gust of water pouring in. "Well, if you'll forgive me, I positively hate getting wet. So long, Snow White!" She laughed as she made her exit from the cavern.

The freezing water was rushing in faster and faster as it continued to make the hole bigger, allowing even more water to rush in. Snow frantically tugged at the ropes behind her and tried to move her chair closer to the door. But the chamber was filling quickly, and the chair was nearly impossible to move.

"Snow!" She heard Ben's voice and then saw him round the corner as he stepped into the soggy chamber. The water was up to Snow's knees as Ben struggled to wade through it, which almost came up to his chest.

"Ben!"

He tried to get the knots undone, "I can't untie this, it's too tight!"

Snow wasted no time, "Margurite left a pick axe over there. See if you can find it to cut the ropes."

He waded over to the wall near the door and fished around the water until he found it, "Got it!"

As the water was nearing his shoulders, he found the ropes underwater with his hand and yanked them apart with the sharper part of the axe. Snow felt the release of her hands and headed for the door. A wave of water caught Ben and knocked him off of his feet.

"Ben!" Snow waded towards Ben.

"I can't swim!" he sputtered.

Quickly, she grabbed him and pulled him through the water and out the door onto the upper level of the cavern.

Shivering from the icy water, Ben coughed as he began tugging at the large wooden door. "Help me get this door sealed shut so the mine won't flood."

As the water rushed past them, Snow and Ben furiously tugged at the door until it slid shut, and then they lowered the latch seal, making the chamber watertight.

Ben looked up at Snow, "I know it's no good apologizing about all of this, but thank you for saving me from drowning back there, Snow."

Snow gave him a forgiving smile. "Then we're even now, Ben. You know, she was planning to kill you. She was going to let the whole mine flood."

The dwarf stamped his small, soggy foot. "Figures! I knew she wouldn't keep her end of the bargain! Just like a witch! Ya see, she has this book of spells. She said there was a spell in it that would make me normal. You know, not a dwarf anymore. She said she wouldn't hurt you. I should've known not to trust her. In any case, no spell is worth your life, Snow. I'm so sorry."

Snow smiled as she took his hand. “Come on, let’s get to the elevator. We have to stop her.”

“Alright Coffee Man. I’m letting you go,” said Margurite as she re-entered the chamber to find Mitch and Edward just as she’d left them. She didn’t notice the absence of the dwarf.

Mitch asked immediately, “What have you done with Snow?”

“Well, unless your girlfriend is a ‘mermaid princess’, I’d say she’s out of luck. But I was generous enough to agree to grant her last wish. So you shall fair better than her and escape with your life ... that is, unless you try to test me.”

Edward, still struggling to free himself from his frozen spot on the floor, was stunned, “Mermaid Princess? You drown Snow?”

Mitch hardly even noticed himself fall to the ground, being free from Margurite’s spell, as he swallowed the horrifying thought that his Princess had drowned. ‘Not my Snow, not my precious bride! Not to drown,’ thought Mitch. ‘Such a horrible death! No, it just couldn’t be!’

Margurite watched with delight as Mitch struggled to get up from the floor, too weak to stand. “Oh, don’t worry. You’ll be able to walk before the water gets to this level. I couldn’t risk your trying to be the ‘big hero’ again, of course. Come, my prince! We’ll be off!”

Before Margurite could release Eddy from his frozen spot, Snow came tearing into the room, aiming straight for Margurite’s throat, “You leave them alone!”

Through Mitch’s weakened state, he still managed a most exuberant cry of relief, “Snow!”

Margurite grabbed the princess and tossed her against the wall.

Edward yelled to the queen as he watched Snow slide to the floor in pain, “Let’s just go, Margurite! She doesn’t matter anymore. Release me and let’s go!”

Margurite was furious enough already that Snow had escaped. “You must take me for a fool!”

The queen turned to Edward, not seeing Benjamin enter the room and grab a poker from the fireplace. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the object hurtling toward her abdomen as she jumped aside, just missing Benjamin’s swing. The queen grabbed the poker, trying to yank it from the dwarf’s grasp. Max, still lying in obedience by the fire, saw his master struggling and lunged for the queen. Snow sucked up her pain and ran toward Margurite to try and shove her back into the mirror and away from her friends. Grabbing Margurite, they both went sailing into the mirror, followed by Max, just as Ben was taking another swing at the witch. ‘CRASH!’ The poker hit the mirror, smashing it into hundreds of pieces before Ben could stop his momentum. The only sound louder than the crash of the mirror was the painful cry of Mitch as he watched his bride go through a doorway, only to be shattered forever.

Afterward

Finally, I want to thank you, the reader, for coming along on this ride. I hope you had as much fun as I did, and enjoyed getting to know the heroes and heroines of Whispering Willows. If so, please take a moment to post a review and tell a friend. I would love to read your review!

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