A winter scene with snow-covered trees and a woman in a red and yellow dress. The woman is seen from behind, wearing a red long-sleeved top with a black corset and a yellow skirt. She is standing in a snowy forest with snow-covered trees and falling snow. The scene is illuminated with soft, glowing light effects.

**Whispering Willows:
Book 1**

*Fallen
Snow*

Diana Dawn

Chapter 1 **“Fallen Snow”**

“Run! Hide in the woods! Never come back, or she’ll kill you!”

These words kept booming in her head like a crash of thunder. Never had she run so fast. It was pure adrenaline that kept Snow’s tiny feet running as fast as they could away from the huntsman. It was only his sincere devotion to the little princess that kept him from killing her at the evil queen’s demand. “Why?” Snow thought. What had she done? She was faithful to her many chores and polite to her stepmother. And to never return? Where would she go? She had never ventured very far from her own castle home. And she was surely approaching the enchanted forest, a place she had been warned against time and again ... a place of mystery and doom, she had been told. Yet, she had to keep running ... to where, she did not know. The fear in her eyes turned to grief and as the tears streamed down her face. She wished her father were still alive to comfort her, to hold her.

“Daddy!” she yelled as she kept running ... but to no avail. There was nothing around her, but the trees and the vines that now began to appear menacing and started to grab at her ankles and tear at her dress. The fact that her favorite dress was being tattered did not even cross her mind. She had no family, no friends even ... except the servants with whom she shared chores. For so long, she had dreamt of her handsome prince ... that he would come and carry her off to his castle to live happily ever after. This dream seemed so far away now as she grew weary from running, but did not dare stop. The shadows, growing darker, now seemed to reach out to grab her. At times, they made her jump aside, sometimes tripping over branches and brush. So scared now, Snow leapt from one of the menacing shadows and fell into a brush. But instead of a grounding, she found herself sliding through a deep chasm below the brush’s disguise. She screamed, frantically grabbing at anything and everything her fingers could find. But the moss and dirt delivered no rescue from what seemed like an eternal fall. She saw what she thought was light growing closer, rushing towards her feet. At that moment, her feet broke through a wall of branches and into a padded pile of what felt like leaves, and her fall had come to a stop.

‘Thank God,’ she thought. At that second, a rain of the branches she had just broken through began to fall all around her. And after a painful thump on her head, Snow’s world went black.

When she slowly opened her eyes, Snow found herself still surrounded by the leaves she had fallen into. She moved her hands, but there was something different here. She looked down ... a blanket! She was covered with a blanket. What was this? Where did it come from? It wasn’t one from her own castle homestead. Quickly she sat up, her head now throbbing with pain from where the branch had crashed down on her.

She grabbed her head. “Ouch. Hello?” She called to anyone. “Is anyone there? Hello!”

“Hallo”, a male voice said back to her. Coming out from his hiding place in the bushes was a tall gentleman who wore a black shiny coat and a look of genuine concern. “There now, you ‘ave a nasty bump. That’s why your ‘ead ‘urts.”

The man talked rather strangely. It took Snow an extra second to decipher all of what he said.

“Took a bad fall ya did. Did ya fall off’n yer horse?”

From the words “fall” and “horse”, Snow gathered that the young man had asked her if she had ‘fallen off of her horse.’ “No”, she replied back, never removing her hand from the throbbing spot on her head.

He could see fear in her eyes, but not fear of him. He saw a fear that she possessed as soon as she awoke to recall where she was and how she got there. “M’ name’s Stevie” as he helped her to her feet.

“Good day, Stevie. My name is Snow”, she said in the polite way in which she was instructed at the palace.

Stevie recognized the style and accent in her voice to match closely that of Ivan and was slightly relieved. She seemed very young to him, possessing an innocence that attracted him to her all the more. He felt a desperate desire to protect this lovely young girl from whatever brought her here. “Well, Snow. We should get ya back to the village an’ get some ice fer yer ‘ead there. Don’t want it to swell up any worse now. ‘Ow did ya fall and ‘urt yer ‘ead?”

Snow handed him the blanket. “Well, it’s a rather long story.”

Stevie smiled excitedly, “At’s alright. We have a ways to go back to the Willows.”

“What’s the Willows?” Snow asked with some concern in her voice.

“At’s where we live. Me and my friends. Don’t worry, they are very nice, most of ‘em. You shouldn’t ‘ave any problems. ‘Ow did you get ‘ere, Snow? We don’t get many visitors, and the ones we get usually can’t remember ‘ow they got ‘ere any’ow.”

“Well, “ Snow began slowly, as if trying to remember clearly, “I was running from the huntsman who had orders from my stepmother to have me killed. As I was running through the forest, I fell into some kind of deep hole, or something, and ended up here.”

Stevie had stopped and turned to her. “Wait a minute, you’re teasing wit’ me, aren’t ya? Name’s Snow, runnin’ from a huntsman, stepmother trying to kill ya? C’mon. What really happened to ya?”

Snow backed away from him. “I am telling you what happened. Are you calling me a liar?”

Stevie’s smile disappeared. He didn’t mean to upset this girl, but he really thought she was putting him on. “Sorry. Ya mean ‘t’s what really ‘appened?”

Snow nodded.

“Wow! I can’t believe this, it’s a like a reg’lar like fairy tale this is! So that must mean you’re a princess, right?”

Snow’s doe-eyed expression became even wider. “Yes, but how did you know that?”

He grabbed her hand, “C’mon, I can’t wait to tell th’ others!” He quickened their pace.

Puzzled, Snow offered, “Tell the others about what?”

But Stevie was already lost in his own excitement at bringing Snow to Whispering Willows. It was like he was bringing his own personal fairy tale to their world, something he thought the village needed. In turn, Snow was intrigued by this stranger pulling her through the woods. He possessed an excitement about life that she thought was a rare sight to behold. She pondered back to her dreams of her handsome prince and realized what a strange resemblance this young man had to the prince in her dreams ... she just noticed that! Although, his nature reminded her more of her favorite servant playmate since childhood. In any case, she thought to herself that this man could be the makings of a very good friend.

“OK, so how much more do we have to cut?” Murray inquired to Roger as he looked down at the lumber they had been cutting for the new rabbit pen they were planning to build.

“Probably about twice that amount”, Roger replied back as he eyed the stack of wood.

“Well, for Pete’s sake, Roger, how many rabbits are we planning to have?”

“Murray, have you ever seen a litter of rabbits? Believe me, you’ve never seen so many babies come out of one creature. Besides, it seems like lately we’ve been adding a new mouth to feed around here every day. We’ll need as much meat as we can get.”

As Murray was about to leave for more wood, he caught a glimpse of Stevie heading their direction. “Oh, good God!” Murray exclaimed as he realized Stevie was not approaching with a familiar face.

Roger rolled his eyes at this friend's reluctance, "Murray, quit your belly-aching and let's just go get some more wood."

Murray motioned to Stevie, "No, not that ... THAT!"

Roger dropped the piece of lumber he had been inspecting. "Well, what do you know about that, another mouth to feed. Next time I'll be sure and keep my mouth shut! "

"Hey, guys!" Stevie cried, "look wha' I found in the woods. Those are some woods, aren't they? This is Snow. Snow, this is Murray and Roger."

Snow found herself face to face with two other men that looked practically identical to her guide, had it not been for the differences in clothing and hair. And once again, each man looked like the prince in her dreams ... her prince. But how could this be possible? Besides, she only needed one, not three!

Getting a second look at the lovely young stranger, the two men were not as disheartened as before. "Hello miss," said Murray with a nod of his head.

"A pleasure," stated Roger as he took Snow's hand and kissed it.

She smiled. As the two gentlemen kept their glance on her for what seemed to be an unusually long time, Snow became somewhat nervous.

"What's this, or shall I say WHO is this?" came the booming voice of Ivan. His tone hinted on the 'flirtatious' as he approached the rest of the group.

Eghad, thought Snow, now there are four!

"Ivan, this is Snow. She's a new friend, so we need to treat her right, ya know. I found 'er knocked out cold in the woods. She took a nasty fall, she did."

"Well, Stevie, it appears you have found an enchanting friend, indeed." And then with a bow, "Wilfred of Ivanhoe at your service."

Ivanhoe had, just like the others, stumbled into the Willows magically. But he was from a different point in history. He was from the twelfth century, a time of chivalry along with betrayal.

"But you can call him Ivan. The girls call him both, depending on their mood." chuckled Stevie.

"Girls?" Snow inquired, eager to find companionship, even safety, amongst a female group.

Stevie's eyes lit up "Oh yes! You have to come and meet the girls. I know they'll love you!"

At which point Murray leaned in to Roger, "Let's HOPE they do, that is."

Roger offered back, "Nah, it doesn't matter as long as we do, eh?" Both laughed as Stevie led, or truth be said, pulled the clueless girl toward the huts.

"This material is just too ... what's the word here? Frilly! That's it, it's too frilly", complained Jill as she inspected the bag of material Kate had brought into the cabin.

"Well, I thought it was rather pretty," offered Kate as she spread her hand across a pink silken remnant.

"Me too", offered Kristen.

"Yeah, it's pretty, but ... I'm sorry, Kate. I didn't mean ta complain. I'm sure it'll be good for somethin'." Jill sighed in her southern drawl accent.

Yolanda offered, "It's just not something you go riding in or anything like that, that's all."

Kate put the material back in the bag. "Well, I'll agree with you there. I suppose it would make some nice curtains, though. I still get self-conscious at night wondering who may be walking by and looking in the windows."

Jill laughed, "Amen to that!"

As the women heard a rap at the window, they looked over to see Stevie peering in at them, smiling and waving. All four of them laughed.

“Case in point!” managed Kristen as she went to the door.

Without even a knock or a hello, Stevie burst through the door just as Kristen reached for the handle. “Hey, I got someone for ya t’ meet.”

To all of their shock, Stevie pulled in a woman. She was quite young looking with very light skin, almost pale, but a soft look. She had large blue eyes and dark brown hair, which had soft curls and just slightly brushed across her shoulders. She wore a medieval style outfit ... a burgundy blouse with puffy sleeves, royal blue lace-up corset-style top, and a yellow tattered skirt bottom. She looked like she just stepped out of a fairy tale costume contest, frankly, thought Yolanda. Adding to her youthful look was the ribbon in her hair and her ‘doe-eyed’ facial expression.

“Well, glory be ... another woman! Thank heaven!” , Kate praised.

Jill eyed her curiously. “Where in the world did ya come from, child? You look like you just fell outta Disneyland or something.”

Snow looked puzzled, “Fell from where?”

Stevie offered his own, “Oh no, Jill! She did fall, but she fell down this deep ‘ole, wasn’t it Snow? Then she go’ knocked out cold down th’ woods. I found her. She was runnin’ fer her life, she was.”

“Running for her life?” repeated Kate with much concern.

“Well”, began Snow, but was innocently interrupted by the rest of Stevie’s version.

“Yeah, ya see, Snow’s stepmother got this huntsman fellow to try an’ kill her, see. But he let her go, probably ‘coz she’s so beautiful,” with a glance at Snow, she blushed. “Then he told her to run into th’ woods an’ never return. She can’t even go back ‘ome, see?”

Kristen was taking in the conversation as if she had a notepad in her hand ... in fact, she wished she had, avid writer that she was.

Yolanda giggled, “Oh Stevie, she’s putting one over on you, boy. You’re a sweetheart, but you believe everything you hear.”

Snow frowned, and with a pout on her lips, the disappointment in her voice was obvious. “Why is it that no one in this village seems to believe me? I was not brought up to tell lies!” With tears in her eyes, she brushed past the group and went out the door. She stopped on the steps, as she wiped her tears and tried not to cry. Where was this place? She just wanted to go home, but she couldn’t. She wanted her father back, but she couldn’t have that either.

Stevie looked at Yolanda, “Oh, now look, you’ve gone and made ‘er cry, Yolanda. Why’d ya do that?”

Yolanda’s smile left her face. “I’m sorry Stevie, I didn’t realize. Does she actually believe those things?”

Stevie nodded, “Yes, because they’re true.”

Before Yolanda could reply, Kate offered, “Yolanda, you know anything can happen here. Remember where we are, what we’ve seen? Nothing surprises me anymore.”

Yolanda nodded, “Yes, that’s true. Sorry, Stevie. Let’s go talk to her.”

The five of them headed outside and Kristen quickly glanced around the room as a last ditch effort to find a pen and paper.

“Rein, you’re going to eat all of them. There won’t be enough for the pies!” Mitch and Rein came into view of the cottages with Mitch carrying a large basket of berries and Rein tossing one after another into the air and catching them in his mouth.

“Well, there were plenty more back there. You could always go pick more later if need be.”

He smiled mischievously as Mitch rolled his eyes. “Thanks a lot.”

Rein stopped as they came into view of Jill’s porch. “Whoa, what do we have here? I can’t believe it. It looks like another lovely guest to the Willows.”

Mitch looked in the same direction as Rein and almost dropped his basket as he set it down. The two of them approached the gang on the porch.

Stevie spotted them and smiled with delight. "Aye! Mitch and Rein, this is Snow."

Mitch was about to take her hand when Rein beat him to the punch. He took her hand and kissed it, "A pleasure."

In seeing the two men, Snow had to blink her eyes a few times. Here again were more of these 'look-alike' gentlemen. The one called 'Mitch' was just a little chubbier than the one called 'Rein', and they all had different hairstyles and clothing styles. But still, they all looked alike. What kind of village was this? It was like there were all of these 'twins'. Snow had only seen one set of twins in her life. The two sons of Lord Chamberlain were twins, and she found the concept fascinating. But it was nearly impossible to tell those two boys apart. So this predicament she found herself in now was quite peculiar. What was even more curious is that each and every one of these gentlemen looked just like the prince, the one she keeps dreaming about. Oh, of course ... that was it! That MUST be it! This was all a dream! She was going to wake up any minute in her own bed in her own castle and all of this will have been a dream. A thought which now seemed to almost sadden her, as she thought this village filled with would-be 'prince look-alikes' was something she found most interesting. But alas, she also found comfort in thinking that at any given moment she would awaken in her own bed.

Stevie continued, "I found her in the woods. She 'ad a nasty fall. She was runnin' from..."

Kate interrupted him "It's a long story. Why don't we get everybody together for dinner and we can all hear the story then, mmm? Sound good? Mitch, can you make one of your most famous dishes? Us girls will get Snow cleaned up for dinner."

Stevie offered quickly, "We need t' get some ice for her 'ead, 'ere." He pointed to where the lump on her head was without touching it.

"All right, what's this? We 'ave another female in our midst, do we?"

Stevie's face lit up as Donnie, the ex-SAS soldier, walked up to the group. While his tone gave off an approval to having another female in the village, his look was that of skepticism.

Kristen frowned. She didn't think Donnie would accept her story very graciously and feared for Snow regarding the consequences. "Donnie, this is Snow."

Donnie eyed her up and down, "Why, she's just a kid."

Snow protested, "I turned nineteen years the last moon."

Donnie never took his gaze off her as if he were interrogating her with his eyes. "What's her story?" Donnie had a similar English cockney accent to that of Stevie.

Stevie began his excited tone once again, "She took a bad fall in th' woods and I had to nurse her back. She was knocked out cold." Before anyone could stop him, Stevie proceeded to tell Donnie Snow's whole story. Why not? Donnie was his good friend. Why shouldn't he believe Stevie?

Donnie's face wore a combination of disbelief and laughter. "You've got to be kidding me? You don't actually believe this, do ya?"

Upon hearing another doubter to her story, Snow dropped her eyes and again the pout returned to her lips. Rein and Mitch both found this innocent look to be most appealing. Rein was especially aware of the red full lips that formed that innocent pout.

Stevie approached him, "Donnie, it's true."

"Yeah, and I'm the king of England!"

Snow looked up upon hearing this and her eyes lit up again, "Really, my father was the King of the House of White!"

Stevie was enlightened with a revelation, "Aye! See, she is Snow White!"

Donnie rolled his eyes. Snow's face was one of relief in hearing someone finally believed her. She smiled at Stevie. Why were the others having such a hard time? Perhaps they were used to lying gypsies coming through their village. She hoped she never ran into any of them. Just then she felt someone grab her arm.

Donnie was pulling her down the porch steps. "All right then, Snow White. Maybe you'll tell us where you REALLY came from with a little interrogation. Perhaps with a little trip to the jail, maybe?" As he pulled her down the last step, Snow lost her footing and fell to the ground, with Donnie's hand still firmly and painfully grasping her arm.

"Donnie, stop please! You're hurting her! She's my friend, Donnie!" Stevie pleaded as he saw the painful look in Snow's eyes.

"We need to find out more about her, Stevie. We can't just take her word at face value, ya know."

Kate stepped down to Donnie, "Let her go, Donnie." She was stern, even though Donnie was her lover. "She's just a child. You said so yourself!"

"Yeah, well kids can be strong. Let's find out how strong this kid really is!" He reached down with his other hand and squeezed her face, causing her lips to protrude in an involuntary pout.

Snow was terrified. She didn't know what to think of this 'barbarian', who again, possessed the look of the other men. But this one was rough, missing a front tooth, and had cold eyes that pierced right through her soul, sending a shiver down her spine. Why was he so vicious? What had she done? Trying to think of anything to get away from this barbarian who threatened to take her away to wherever, she grabbed a handful of dirt with her free arm and flung it into her captor's face.

Letting go of the girl he violently rubbed his eyes, "Sod it!", he yelled!

Snow had scampered to her feet, pushed through Mitch and Rein and made a beeline for the woods.

"Snow!" Stevie cried, "Wait!" He went after her, as did the girls.

"Why didn't you two grab her?" Donnie shouted at Mitch and Rein as they stood there, speechless.

As Donnie ran after the others, Rein offered "Man, let her go! She's an innocent child!"

Donnie did not heed his words, his anger still powering his actions as he continued to brush the sand out of his eyes.

At the first large tree she came to, Snow scampered up the very large oak within the confines of the village. She was an avid tree climber ... had been since she was a little girl. Climbing trees was one of her favorite past times, as was picking flowers, sewing and cooking. She was glad she still had it in her, as she had not climbed for a while since her father had died. Safely away from the others, she broke down, burying her face in her hands. She wished her father were here now to save her. Why not? It was her dream. Why couldn't she wish him to be here? She wished very hard, wished him into the very tree she was sitting. But he wasn't there. When was this dream to be over? She even pinched herself to try to awake, but to no avail. She could hear the others down below. They were at the foot of the tree shouting up at her.

"Snow!" said Kate. "Please come down!"

Kristen added, "Yeah, we won't let that Donnie get you! We'll kill him first!"

Kate looked at Kristen, who just shrugged.

"Well, don't put off fer tomorrow what ya can do today!" came Donnie's voice regarding Kristen's remark.

Kristen glared at him, where Jill reminded them, "All right. Look, fight latuh. Let's get her down from there!"

Donnie started up the tree, "Not a problem."

Snow gasped and grabbed a nearby branch, ripping it from its trunk and hurling it at Donnie, hitting him in the arm.

“Oh, that’s it, little missy. Just wait till we get ya down from...”

“Donnie, stop it! Just go. We’ll get her down. Haven’t you done enough?” Kate pulled him back down with her hand on his shoulder. “Please let us take care of her. You’re just scaring her and you know it!”

Donnie backed down, “Well alright, but this isn’t over. There’s more to this than meets the eye, and I’m gonna find out what it is!”

Kristen pulled him away from the tree, “Just give it a rest, will you? Leave her alone.”

Donnie muttered under his breath as he headed back to the Willows.

“Please come down, Snow. Donnie’s a friend of mine. I won’t let ‘im ‘urt ya”, pleaded Stevie as Rein and Mitch joined the band at the bottom of the oak.

“Some friend!” Snow sobbed. “With a friend like that, I would just as soon befriend a gypsy!”

Rein stifled a giggle at her statement as he caught a glimpse of her skirt up in the tree. To his disappointment, all his vision caught were the large white bloomers under her tattered dress.

“Please Snow, come on down. We won’t let him near you again. I promise.” Kate’s voice was soothing, and Snow wanted so desperately to make friends in this village.

“You do promise?” She sniffled, almost too quietly for the others to hear.

“Yes, we do,” promised Kate.

Snow began to make her way down the tree. Upon approaching the bottom, she stepped on one of the branches, and it gave way. Snow gasped and fell the remaining five feet or so and was caught by Mitch in mid-air. Their eyes met for a few seconds before Stevie helped Snow down to the ground and out of Mitch’s arms, not even seeming to notice the moment between them. Rein, on the other hand, did notice.

The girls took Snow back to their cabin to help her clean up and put some ice on her head, which had begun to throb once again. After much argument, Stevie finally stopped insisting he tag along. They all went ahead and planned dinner for that evening so Snow’s entire story could be told. Kristen just hoped that Snow would tell it without the aid of Stevie. And this time, she would bring her notepad. Kate promised Snow to keep Donnie at a safe distance. As Mitch pondered what meal he could prepare that would prove extra special, he glanced in the direction that the women went. To his surprise, he found Snow glancing back at him as well.

Chapter 2

“Breakfast at Whispering Willows”

The villagers had dinner that evening in the main hut, as they did every evening. The main hut was the largest of the cabins with a large kitchen and pantry closet, plus outside store room, a dining room and a living area large enough for all of the residents. Additionally, the main hut also had an extra bedroom and bathroom for guests or for emergencies.

Rein never took his attention away from Donnie’s scowl as Snow was telling her story at dinner that evening. He just wanted to be sure there was no repeat of that afternoon’s performance. Thankfully for Kristen and the others, Stevie allowed Snow to tell her own story as he was too busy feeding his face with the exceptionally delicious supper Mitch had cooked for the occasion. When asked what it was called, he replied that it was a new recipe he invented called “Snow Surprise” and smiled at her as he said it. Snow blushed heavily. They exchanged occasional glances during dinner, which was also noticed by Rein in between his glances at Donnie.

As Snow described her kingdom, its servants, and her childhood with her mother’s death so long ago, she spoke of her favorite hobbies like picking the forest flowers and climbing trees. Her father had even built her a tree house when she was little. She came to tears as she spoke of her father and how close they were. Her ‘little princess’ was what he called her. Pausing for a moment, Kristen handed her a tissue to wipe her tears.

“I’m sorry,” Snow apologized for being so weepy.

Kate offered, “You have nothing to be sorry for. You are still in mourning. We understand. It’s only been a year.”

Ivan pondered how much she reminded him of the women of his time. She really was from his time when he thought about it. They shared similar values, opinions, and memories of what home was like. Duncan, Roger and Bart had similar views as well ... all coming to the Willows from various time periods.

The innocence of this young beauty intrigued Mitch, as he continued to clear the dishes, catching her words here and there. Finally, he decided to finish the dishes later and sat and listened to the conversation.

As the topics led to the subject of chores, Snow’s ears perked up. “I can do many chores. I am not a stranger to housework. I can cook and clean and tend to animals. I can clean your cottages spic and span! I can sew my own clothes and I also do mending. I know I need to earn my keep here. May I please stay? I can no longer return home.” At the thought, she lowered her eyes in remembering her fate, and the pout returned to her lips.

Even though Rein didn’t like to see her sad, this pout of Snow’s enticed him every time. He had to keep his thoughts from wandering. And of course, he had to keep an eye on Donnie.

“Of course you can stay.” There was a cheer from Stevie as Kristen continued, “We don’t want you wandering about the woods,” she offered.

“Especially at night,” added Kate with a quick glance at Donnie, thinking about the dangers of the woods at night.

The Whispering Willows at night. This was a subject that made all of the villagers fearful. There was a magical, almost evil force that would come over the Willows woods at night. It was the reason no one had ever left the Willows. This was just another mystery about the village, along with the ‘look-alike’ men and the mysterious way all of the residents suddenly ‘appeared’ into the village.

“Yeah, that’s the BIG thing. You must NEVER go into the woods at night. So if you decide you ‘ave to go pick yer flowers or climb a tree or whatever, you must always be back before dark,” warned Donnie sternly.

At his words, Snow’s eyes became even larger as she was now always startled at the sound of the “barbarian’s” voice. She reminded herself to never call him that out loud to anyone in the village. However, the title for him would always stick in her head.

As she glanced across the room, she noticed Mitch now sitting with them. Remembering that just a few moments ago, she saw him clearing dishes, “Mitch, would you like some help in washing the dishes? I could start earning my keep right now.” She smiled at him.

Mitch would have loved nothing more than to have Snow help him in the kitchen, just the two of them. But he didn’t want to ask her to help him with the dishes. He wished she could just sit and talk to him, and he could do the dishes on his own.

Rein quickly offered, “No, I’m sure you are tired from a long day and need your rest. You don’t need to be doing any chores tonight.” He didn’t like the thought of Mitch and Snow alone in the kitchen.

Jill then added, “Yes, you should get some rest. You can stay with me if ya like.”

Snow was delighted, “Thank you Jill. I so appreciate your hospitality, all of you.”

The next morning, Stevie showed up to Jill’s cabin before breakfast to take Snow on a tour of the village. Snow had been up even before sunup using the material Jill offered her to sew some new clothes. She managed to alter her white bloomers with some extra material at the top and sides into a pair of ‘riding pants’ at Jill’s suggestion. She had also offered Snow her pick from an assortment of the most lovely shoes. She found a pair that fit perfectly. What were the odds?

Part of the magic of the Willows were the ‘magic crates’ that would mysteriously show up in the woods with an assortment of supplies, clothes, and other odds and ends. The villagers called them gifts from the ‘Willows Fairy’. It was almost as if ‘she’ would know who was coming to the village next, as the items in the crates would fit the next newcomer perfectly.

The first stop on their tour was the stable. Stevie thought this to be appropriate, since Snow had made herself a pair of riding pants. Even though he hadn’t asked permission, he didn’t see any harm in going riding with Snow that morning. After all, she was a guest and he wanted to be hospitable. Snow loved horses. She remembered back home to her horse, Sal. She was a beautiful black mare given to her by her father when she was only of eight years. Oh, I mustn’t think of sad things, thought Snow as she shook away the memory.

This dream had gotten better since yesterday, Snow thought. Although she did think it odd that she had awoken in the village this morning and not in her own bed like she had thought she would. ‘Well, I guess this dream is going to last a bit longer,’ Snow decided as she effortlessly mounted the brown mare, and she and Stevie rode about the Willows. For the structures in the village, Stevie showed her all of the villagers’ different cabins, along with the chapel, library, jail, mill, surgery and woodshop. For the farming and the animals, which was her favorite part, he showed her the chicken coop, orchards, and fields where they gathered crops, and the main pathway to the clearing where Mitch always picked berries.

They again approached Roger and Murray building the rabbit pen, this time joined by Ivan and Rein.

“Aye, mates!” cried a cheery Stevie.

“Hey, Stevie. Looks like you keep good company, there.” Murray smiled as he referred to Snow.

Rein also smiled at Snow and she smiled back, as she petted her mare. Once again, Rein had to catch his thoughts from wandering as he felt a strong sense of jealousy for her

horse. Shaking off the thought, he considered himself being childish and continued with his work.

Stevie told Snow, "We're workin' on buildin' a pen 'ere for the rabbits, like we got for the chickens." And then the idea struck him like a lightning bolt as his face lit up. He had to come back and talk to the guys later when Snow wasn't around. "Come on, then. Let's go an' see how long 'fore breakfast. I think Mitch was fixin' up a special welcome breakfast for ya."

Snow asked, "Does Mitch do all of the cooking here?"

Stevie thought for a second, "Well, yeah. I s'pose he does ... mostly, anyway. And Jill and Kristen cook, too, sometimes."

They rode up to the rear of the kitchen in the main cabin where Mitch was shaking out some towels outside. He stopped and smiled as he saw them.

"Aye, Mitch." Stevie helped Snow down from her horse. "I wondered if you might could show Snow around the kitchen? I have to go check on something."

"Are you leaving?" she asked as he got back on his horse.

"I'll be right back. Just have t' do somethin'."

Mitch smiled. "Don't worry about a thing, Stevie. She won't even notice you're gone." He turned to Snow, "Would you like a tour of the, uh, kitchen?" and he chuckled.

"Yes, thank you. It will go nicely along with the tour Stevie gave me of the village this morning."

He showed her where all of the ingredients and supplies were kept and how the dishes were stored. They swapped cooking stories and versions of recipes of pies and pastries. "I was in fact going to make a pie for this evening of the berries I picked yesterday in our very own berry patch." Mitch picked up a basket of berries and set it down in front of her.

"Please try one, they're delicious."

Just as he reached to pick a berry for her out of the basket, Snow reached in to get one and he incidentally grabbed her hand. How soft her skin was, Mitch thought. And how delicate her hands were, just as lovely as their owner. In fact, he couldn't imagine these hands ever doing housework, or any type of chore, for that matter. He held her hand for a moment and then realized, "Oh, I'm sorry. Here..." He let her hand go and gave her a handful of berries. Nervously, he tried to recover, "Delicious, aren't they?"

She smiled. "Yes, very," Snow also hinted a nervousness in her voice. As she offered to help with breakfast, she thought to herself that maybe she would rather not wake from this dream after all.

"Hey, good job everyone," said Murray as the men looked down at their work. They had completed the rabbit pen in record time.

"ello, again!" yelled Stevie as he rode up on his horse and jumped down.

"Hey, Stevie," Ivan greeted him with a smile, still quite happy about the finished pen.

"Guys, I 'ad this great idea, and I wondered if'n you could 'elp me wit it."

"What is it, Stevie?" inquired Roger with a hint of fear.

"I 'ad this idea for Snow, a place for 'er to stay, ya know. I thought, wha' 'bout a treehouse!"

The men looked at each other with dread.

Stevie continued, "Ya know, ya remember at dinner last night when she talked 'bout her treehouse being her favorite place to go?"

Murray approached him, "But Stevie, I don't think she would actually want to *live* in a treehouse. Do you?"

Stevie lit up with excitement, "Why sure! Why not? She used to love it and she still loves to climb trees, ya know."

Ivan offered, "Well, alright. We can ask her about it at breakfast".

Stevie shook his head, “No, it ‘as to be a surprise, ya know. She can’t know nothin’ ‘bout it, OK? I’m gonna go tell the girls, they’ll love this. See ya!”

Once Stevie was out of earshot, Murray ran his hands through his hair, “What are we going to do with him? Does he have any idea how hard a treehouse would be to build and then hoist into a tree?”

“I’m sure he doesn’t,” offered Roger.

A treehouse! What a wonderful idea, thought the girls as they whispered amongst themselves. Whether Snow decided to live in it or not, the girls decided that a treehouse would make the perfect escape. What better location to have a romantic rendezvous, for example, thought Kate. Kristen was thinking how much closer the treehouse would be than the woods to be by herself for a change, or *not* by herself, perhaps. Jill thought it would make a perfect place to read a book uninterrupted.

Stevie was concerned that the other men wouldn’t help him. “But I dunno that the guys thought it to be such a great idea, ya know. I dunno ‘ow ‘ard a treehouse is to build.” He knew he could never build one by himself ... not one that would actually hold the weight of someone, anyway.

“Don’t you worry your cute little head about a thing, Stevie,” began Jill, “They’ll build it. Heck, if Snow takes to it, we may even get them to build a spare one just for recreation.” She looked at Kate, who then winked back at Jill.

Breakfast was delicious as usual. There was no talk about the treehouse in Snow’s presence, but the news had gotten around. The men seemed a little grouchier than usual to have given in to the request of Stevie and the girls. Jill actually hoped that Snow would hate the thing, so that they wouldn’t have to wait for the men to build another one.

Mitch reminded Donnie that it was his turn to do the dishes.

“Wha’?”

Mitch nodded his head.

“That’s right, Donnie. I remember” Kate said as she giggled.

“Why can’t the new *princess* get the dishes? She needs to earn her keep around here, anyway. Great, now we ‘ave a new ‘Your Majesty’ to tend to,” as Donnie gave Kate a look that she gave right back to him.

Jill must have seen the wide-eyed expression on Snow’s face at the sound of the ‘barbarian’s’ voice discussing her, as she gently put her hand on Snow’s shoulder. “Don’t pay him any attention. He’s just grumpy.”

Stevie’s face lit up and he sprung from the table, “Aye, Grumpy!” Stevie pointed at Eddy, “And he’s Sleepy! And over there is Doc and Bashful!”

“And you’re Dopey!” Donnie cut in.

There was hysterical laughter around the room. Snow smiled at their joy, but hadn’t a clue as to what was so funny. “Did I miss something?” she inquired, which made the room break into hysterics all the more.

“No, you didn’t miss a thing, dear,” offered Kate. “Let’s take a walk. Come on, girls. Let’s all of us have some quality ‘girl talk’.” The women excused themselves and started on a hike through the woods.

The women shared with Snow their experiences here in the village and in turn told how each one happened upon the Willows. They talked about their attractions to the male members of the village, as well as who they were *not* attracted to.

When they asked Snow if she thought her newfound companions attractive, she blushed, “Oh well, yes I would, I guess. But I cannot consider an alliance with someone who is not of royal blood. It is our decree.”

Kristen frowned, "But Snow, you aren't in your kingdom here. You are no longer bound by any decree. You are free to do as you wish here."

Snow added, "But it is what my father would have wanted. So it appears that I am out of luck. The only one of royalty here is not someone that I would ever choose to form an alliance with."

Kristen offered, "You mean Eddy?"

Snow was puzzled, "No the barbar ... I mean that Donnie fellow. Yesterday he said he was the King of England."

The three women burst into a symphony of hysterical laughter.

Jill offered, "Oh, goodness we've had two good laughs today. We're so glad ya came, Snow!"

Kate was on the ground, tears streaming down her face. She couldn't even speak, she was laughing so hard.

Kristen turned back to the puzzled young girl, "No, Snow. He isn't the King of England. That was just a statement of sorts."

Snow looked somewhat relieved, and then inquired, "Then what were you saying about Eddy?"

Kate got up still giggling, "Oh, no, not Eddy. You don't want Eddy."

Jill added with her southern drawl, "No, Eddy is, how shall I put this, not in the 'wife seeking' mode at the moment. I'll just put it that way."

'Eddy' referred to Edward II to be specific, who came to the Willows from the fourteenth century, and preferred men over women ... one in particular who did not enter the Willows with him.

Snow looked somewhat disappointed. "Oh, well. No never mind. I should be waking up from this dream any moment anyhow. So I guess it doesn't matter."

Kristen frowned, "What do you mean by that? Are you saying you think this is all a dream?"

"Of course," Snow replied. "I know these things couldn't possibly happen. My stepmother would never try to kill me, I could not possibly fall through a hole in the woods THAT big, and there is no possible way that a village like this really exists where all of the men look the same."

The other women laughed again.

Snow continued, "But the strangest part about it is that they all look exactly like the prince I keep dreaming about, which is what made me realize this is all just a dream."

Jill retorted, "Well, maybe we're all having th' same dream then. I wouldn't rule it out."

Kristen thought for a second, "Wait a minute, did you just say that all the men look just like someone in your dreams?"

Snow nodded, "Yes. I dream about a handsome prince all the time ... one that someday will carry me away to his kingdom."

Jill leaned in to Kate, "Good thing Donnie isn't here."

Kate nodded in agreement.

Snow was still puzzled by the whole situation.

Kristen tried to reassure her, "Snow, I assure you, you are not dreaming. Believe me, we all had the same thought, that this whole thing was a dream and we would wake up in our own bed at any given moment. Well, it took a while, but we finally were able to come to the realization that it just isn't so. We are really here. And you are welcome to stay as long as you like."

Snow didn't know what to think about it all. Should she believe these women? They seemed to be genuinely concerned for her. She wanted to trust them, she really did.

Jill added, "Oh and about your stepmother, forget her! Believe me when I tell ya that th' whole reason behind that plot was because she was jealous of ya, Snow! You were prettier than she was and th' whole kingdom favored you over her, an' she knew it."

Snow was fighting back tears, "But how do you know that?"

Kate offered, "Jill has special insight into things sometimes, dear. She is telling the truth. You can trust her words. Everything is going to be OK."

Jill giggled, "Yes, and o' course we all couldn't help but notice that Stevie has a mad crush on ya."

Snow looked surprised, "Stevie?"

Kate added, "Oh yes, no way around it!"

Snow sniffled, "Well, I think Stevie is really nice and will probably make a good friend but he isn't..."

"Oh, please don't say he isn't royalty," Kristen interrupted. "That's what you were going to say, wasn't it?"

Snow nodded.

"Well, don't you worry your pretty little head. These men are all 'princes' of a sort, and I would think many of them would fancy you."

Jill smiled, "Yes, I seem ta recall Mitch looking in your direction an awful lot this mornin'."

Kate teased back, "Ah, you noticed that too, Jill?"

Kristen turned to go, "Well, let's head on back and see what the fellows are up to. We gotta make sure they aren't making any trouble, you know."

Kate and Jill laughed. Snow smiled and thought that if this were to not be a dream, that she may be able to be happy here. However, as she remembered the words of her new friends, she couldn't help but think back on her kingdom's decree.

Chapter 3

“The 24-Carrot Dance”

Isn't this a lovely afternoon, thought Snow? Although she appreciated Stevie's company, she didn't have the heart to tell him that the book he was reading to her was quite appalling in her eyes, a brutal story that she found no interest in. She was actually thankful to the 'barbarian' himself for dragging Stevie away to talk about some kind of wood structure, or something like that. It allowed her the chance to drift into her thoughts, taking in all of this newfound excitement and pondering the events of the past two days. What of this 'mad crush' the girls mentioned that Stevie had on her? Could it be true? And what about Mitch? She really enjoyed his company as well, and they have so many things in common. She wasn't sure what she felt about these men, any of them. She didn't want to know, didn't want to allow herself to feel more than a friendship for any one of them. She couldn't betray her decree, betray her father. She loved her father.

Yet still, she felt ... what was that? Snow heard a tiny little chirping noise. Where was it coming from? She lowered her head, lower, lower still. It was coming from somewhere on the ground. There, in that pile ... a patch of blue. It moved! As she drew closer she could see it. It was a tiny bird. A baby blue jay!

“Have you lost your mamma and papa?” She looked all around in the trees and in the air, but saw no signs of any other blue jays. “I've lost my mamma and papa, too.” She knelt down and gently scooped up the baby. “I'll take care of you.”

Wait, what was that? Another noise? She covered the bird with her other hand and walked in the direction of the sound. This sound was deeper and was getting louder and louder with each step. Peering from behind a tree, she saw it. Lying in the distance was a horse, a mare. She sounded hurt. Snow approached the mare and saw that she was about to give birth! Often tending to horses, she had seen this before.

She knew she needed to get help. “Goodness, I'll be right back. Just hang on!” Still holding the bird, she ran back to the village. She recalled that Kate told her of the mare that had run away when Bart accidentally forgot to properly lock the stable. This had to be the one.

She found most of the men discussing a project by a large pile of wood. Thinking that Bart would most probably like to redeem himself for his mistake, she called to him and he rushed over accompanied by Stevie upon seeing Snow.

“Bart, that mare that escaped the other day is about to give birth in the woods! Come quickly!”

“Good Lord! Ivan, Thomas come here!” The two men approached. Bart continued, “Snow says that escaped mare is about to give birth in the woods. We need to hurry!”

The men gathered some supplies and darted into the woods. Stevie, still standing with Snow glanced at her hands with curiosity, “Wha' ya got there, Snow?”

“Shhhh”, hushed Snow. “Come and I will show you.”

Snow headed back for Jill's cabin with Stevie following behind. Snow sat on the bed. “Sit,” she said “and then be careful.” Between them, she set the delicate little bird on the bed.

Stevie's face lit up, “Aye, it's a bird!”

“Yes, it's a baby blue jay. Be very gentle with him.”

Stevie attempted to pet the bird, but then decided not to.

Snow smiled, “I named him Tweety.”

Stevie laughed, “Aye! And what about Sylvester?”

Snow was puzzled, “What?”

“Oh, I forgot that ya don't ... oh never mind. He's a cute bird, there Snow.”

“What’s this?” came Jill’s voice in the doorway.

“What are you two doing on the bed?” joked Kate.

Snow was startled, “Oh Jill, Kate, you gave me such a shock!”

“Why’s that? Ya weren’t doing anything that ya weren’t supposed to, were ya?” Jill winked. “Hey, whatcha got there?” she inquired.

Stevie whispered as though he had to be quiet around the bird, “It’s a baby blue jay. Snow found it in the woods.”

Snow said back to Stevie, “It’s OK Stevie, you don’t have to whisper. The poor thing didn’t seem to have any parents, so I adopted him.”

Kate cooed, “Oh, well isn’t he cute?”

Snow smiled. “Yes, I named him Tweety.”

Jill giggled, “So where’s Sylvester?”

Snow frowned at hearing that name again, “Who is Sylvester? Everyone seems to know but me.”

Jill looked at Stevie who just shrugged. “Sorry, Snow. There is a famous cartoon duo name Sylvester and Tweety.”

“Cartoon?” inquired Snow.

Kate smiled as she watched Snow bond with the little bird. Tweety didn’t even seem frightened anymore.

“You really seem to have a motherly touch, there,” Kate offered.

Snow smiled, then thought back to what little she remembered of her mother.

“I’m sorry, Snow. I didn’t mean to make you sad” Kate said, mentally scolding herself for bringing up the thought.

“No, that’s alright. I like to think about her. I was so young when she died. Funny, my father remarried to try and help me, not hurt me. Margurite wasn’t even his first choice as my stepmother, she was his third. He was truly in love with Cynthia. But my father was shy and not fast enough in proposing, so alas she accepted a proposal from the King of Hughes, thinking that my father would never ask. But she was wonderful. She was kind and we had so much in common. She lost her mother at an early age, too. Her father remarried a woman with two daughters. After his death, they treated her just horribly. They wouldn’t even call her by her real name. Instead they called her...”

“Cinderella!” Jill interrupted.

Snow’s eyes widened, “Yes, how did you know that?”

Jill smiled, “I had a vision.”

Kate giggled.

“What about his second choice?” Jill inquired. “You said your stepmother was his third.”

Snow added, “Yes, he would have proposed to a princess over near Euphrania, but rumor had it that they were all asleep, the entire town! It was very odd.”

Jill and Kate just looked at each other.

“That’s it girl, just one more push.” soothed Ivan as he stroked the mare’s mane.

“I’ve got him!” cried Bart as he pulled the remainder of the colt’s legs free. “It’s a boy!”

“Hooray” cried the others who had joined the birth in the woods when they heard the news.

After the birth, the mare practically sprung to her feet.

“Thank God it was an easy birth for her. She could just have easily been held up for days. I’ve seen it happen too many times,” suggested Ivan. “Looks like you’ve redeemed yourself, there Bart.”

Bart carefully scooped up the colt in a blanket. The group headed back to the village.

The blossoms on the trees are so lovely, not something you see every day, thought Snow as she walked through the Whispering Willows orchard.

Just then she saw Mitch. "Mitch, hello! Fancy meeting you here!"

Seeing Snow thrilled Mitch to no end. "Snow, what a most pleasant surprise. What are you doing in the orchard?"

She trotted over to the tree he was picking from, "Oh, I just wanted to see what all types of fruit the village had to choose from. What kinds of pies you can make, things like that. Looks like I picked a perfect time. You are here to show me."

Mitch took her hand to lead her around the orchard, "Very true. Here we have peach, plum, and apricot trees for the warmer seasons. And over there we have the apple and orange trees for the cooler seasons."

"What were you picking just now?" Snow inquired.

"Ah, I was choosing the most perfect peaches to bake a pie for a very special someone."

Snow bit her lip, "Can I help you pick a peach for this special someone?"

Mitch smiled and paused to think it funny that this little 'peach' would be picking a peach for herself. "Of course, my lady. Be my guest, but be careful."

Snow climbed the ladder as Mitch held onto it. She glanced around the tree, looking for the best peach. Then she saw it ... the most perfect plump peach. She reached ... argh! Just out of her reach. She elevated onto her toes on the ladder.

"Careful dear," warned Mitch once again.

She grabbed a branch above her for support and pulled herself up ever so slightly to just touch the peach with her fingertips. Snap! The branch she held onto for support broke, sending her backwards off of the ladder. Thump! An all too familiar scene for Snow, as once again she found herself in Mitch's arms after falling out of a tree. Their eyes met again, their noses almost touching. Snow found herself struggling with her feelings again, specifically her growing feelings for Mitch. One cannot just stifle one's feelings for someone just like that. However, she made a conscious effort to brush them away.

This is such a beautiful and precious girl, thought Mitch. She is so innocent and trusting, that he dared not kiss her, although he wanted to. "Dejavu! We have to stop meeting like this, eh?" joked Mitch as he set her down gently.

"I'm so sorry. I'm such a clutz," Snow offered.

"Nonsense," Mitch assured her. "Happens all the time around here. I have had more falls out of orchard trees than I can count. Had my share of bumps and bruises, too. But I have enough peaches here, I think. Come on. Let's get back to the village. We don't want to be late for dinner. Jill is cooking tonight. Think I'll enjoy the break. I'll make you a cuppa. Sound good?"

Snow nodded. She didn't quite understand the wording, 'cuppa', but coming from a friend like Mitch, it must be a good thing.

"Where is she?" inquired Stevie.

"If I didn't know five minutes ago Stevie, why would I know now?" retorted Kate.

Then seeing his sad expression, "Look Stevie, I'm sure she'll be here any minute. Why don't you go into the kitchen and see if Jill needs a hand with dinner, eh?"

Stevie smiled and nodded and dashed into the kitchen.

Kristen giggled, "I think he's hooked! I also think he's starting to drive Snow crazy!"

Kate looked at her, "You really think so?"

"Well I do," Rein added. "I think he is definitely driving her mad. And if I have anything to say about it, tonight she's getting a break from him for a change."

Kate and Kristen exchanged raised eyebrow looks at Rein's statement. Just then, the door to the main cabin opened and Mitch and Snow entered with a basket of peaches.

"Well, it's about time!" Kate scolded in jest.

“Yeah, I think Stevie was about to send out a search party for you ... namely himself. He’s in the kitchen if you’d like to announce your presence and save his sanity,” Kristen offered as she eyed the basket of peaches. “Nice bushel there, Mitch,” she added.

Snow entered the kitchen to find Stevie drying a cooking pan. “Hey, heard you were looking for me, Stevie.”

“Snow!” Stevie dropped the pan and it crashed to the floor loudly. He ran over to Snow and hugged her tightly. “I was worried about ya. I didn’t know where ya was,” he sighed.

“I was fine Stevie,” Snow coughed, finding it difficult to talk within such a bear hug. “I was picking peaches with Mitch in the orchard.”

Mitch overheard as he passed through with the peaches, “Yes, Stevie. You shouldn’t worry. Snow will always be well cared for around here.”

Jill offered, “Yes, as will the rest of us girls. Right Mitch?” Jill winked at him.

“Right, Jill.” And he winked back.

Stevie showed concern, “Well, I worry ‘bout them woods and all. Didn’t want you to get sucked into ‘nother hole or nothin’.”

Snow smiled, “Well, that is very sweet of you Stevie, and I do appreciate your concern for my well-being. Jill, do you need a hand here in the kitchen?”

“No, but thanks. If Stevie here’ll stop dropping pans and making enough noise ta wake the dead, I think he’ll be able ta help me enough,” as Jill looked at Stevie who took the hint and picked up the pan he dropped.

Snow entered back into the dining room.

“Man, what was all the clattering in there?” inquired Kristen.

Snow smiled, “Oh, Stevie was just a little too glad to see me and dropped his pan to rush over and make sure I was alright ... harmless act.”

“But annoying nonetheless,” Rein said under his breath where only Kate and Nicholas could hear him.

Nicholas, a scholar and explorer of Africa from the early twentieth century, coughed to stifle a laugh.

Dinner was delicious as usual. Jill fixed a wonderful cajun dish with rice and catfish from the river. Jill was from New Orleans, near the bayou and as cajun as you get. Raised in a voodoo family, she was familiar with the customs, but wasn’t practicing, herself.

“This is delicious, Jill. Did you catch the fish at the usual spot in the river?” asked Kristen.

Finishing the bite in her mouth, Jill offered “Actually I can’t take credit fo’ th’ catfish. That was Eddy’s doin’.”

Edward smiled, “Yes, I’m quite fond of fishing, actually. I was pleasantly surprised to discover that we have some nice breeds of catfish down in the river. I find it very relaxing to fish, personally.”

Snow made a mental note of this.

After dinner, it was Stevie’s turn to do the dishes, much to Rein’s delight as he asked Snow if she would like to go visit the newborn colt in the stable.

“Oh yes!” she squealed. She hadn’t seen the newest edition to Whispering Willows as of yet and wanted to very much.

Rein stopped at the door and looked at Nicholas

“It’s all set up,” Nicholas said.

Rein patted him on the shoulder, “Thanks, Nicholas.”

The explorer grinned, “No problem, but you owe me BIG for this one!”

Rein slowly opened the barn door to let the both of them in and then carefully closed the door behind them. He didn’t want to wake the colt if he was sleeping.

“Oh, he is so precious!” Snow cooed as she saw the little colt curled up in the hay. He wasn’t sleeping, but looked like he would be at any moment. “He is such a beautiful golden color.” Snow added.

Rein smiled, “Jill decided on a name for him. She said since he is such a nice golden color and because horses love carrots, she named him ‘24-Carrots’. They judge the quality of gold in a measurement called ‘carats’, now.” After a few moments of gazing at the little fellow, Rein asked, “Do you like dancing, Snow?”

Snow’s face lit up, “I love dancing! However, I haven’t danced in what seems like ages.”

Rein offered his arm, “Then shall we?” As Snow took his arm he led her to an open section of the barn, he said, “Here, I want to show you something.”

He went over to a bale of hay that had a small black box sitting on top of it. The box was strange looking to Snow, as she had never seen anything like it before. Rein had asked Nicholas to set this up for him just before dinner. A few weeks ago, the men in the village found a crate with this box among its contents. Donnie told Rein it was something called a ‘CD player’. Donnie complained that the CD that came with the player contained only waltz music and then mentioned that he hoped the next crate they found had something in it called ‘rock and roll’, whatever that was. Rein, however, found the CD to be perfect music for dancing. After Rein pushed a few buttons on the odd contraption, out of it began to play the most beautiful music Snow had ever heard.

She gasped, “Rein, is that a magical box? How can a box so small hold so many people playing instruments of that sort? I’ve never heard music of that kind.”

Rein smiled, “Yes, we found this little gem in the village a little while back. It is actually quite simple to operate. Shall we?” Rein took her hand in the air and put his other hand on her waist and she rested hers on his shoulder.

Rein was an excellent dancer, Snow thought. This ‘waltz’ music was very enjoyable. After some time of various chit chat and comments on the music, there started to play a rather slow piece that placed the two of them at an almost stand still of a dance pace. Rein hadn’t been able to take his eyes off of her the entire evening. She had made a new dress that afternoon of a soft light blue material that swished around her ankles as she walked. The blue in her dress brought out the blue in her eyes in the most astounding way, thought Rein, that he couldn’t help but gaze into them. At which point, Snow found herself gazing back. What was going on here, Snow thought? What am I doing? She feared now that she was leading this gentleman on in such a way that was just not right. Then why did she feel the way she did? What was it about his romantic nature and sincere attentiveness that attracted her so? She felt drawn as though she were physically unable to retract her gaze from his. It’s true ... she thought that Stevie was a sweetheart, and Mitch was so kind and giving, but Rein had something about him. What was it? It was a special charm that he possessed, in that he knew how a girl wanted to be looked at, or talked to in a certain way...like he brought just the right romantic spark to a conversation. How was that? She had no experience in such things, yet felt something extra special in being in such a romantic presence.

Yet, there was something she couldn’t quite put her finger on, something else going on. Was there another motive in having her in his company, maybe? No, Rein was quite the gentleman and Snow just couldn’t imagine otherwise. He wasn’t like some of those palace guards that she would avoid walking past due to the strange way they stared at her, almost seeming to undress her with their eyes. No, no, no! That was not what this was. Not at all! Rein was not like that, so what was it then? She didn’t quite know the answer.

Then as she compared her visits with Mitch in relation to her talks with Rein, her thoughts were interrupted as Rein leaned in to kiss her. What do I do now, she thought? Do I stop him? Before she could answer her own question, Rein was softly kissing her. It could only barely have been just a few seconds, but seemed like an eternity as her thoughts

screamed through her head. Why is he kissing me? Does this mean he is wanting to be more than friends? Is this like a mad crush? Why did I kiss him back? Why aren't I stopping him now? What is this I am feeling for this gentleman? Wait, gentleman, but not of royalty! The decree ... DADDY!!

Snow gasped and pulled away, "I'm sorry. I..."

Rein gave a look of concern and put his hands on her shoulders, "Snow, are you alright? I didn't mean to scare you. I'm sorry."

Snow was terribly nervous, and her head still screaming its thoughts so loudly, she felt she had to raise her own voice slightly to hear herself over them, "No, Rein, it isn't you. It's my ... I mean it's me. I was in the wrong, not you. I'm sorry."

Rein touched her cheek, "Snow you did nothing wrong. What's..."

She interrupted, "I'm sorry, I should go now. But thank you very much for bringing me to see 24-Carrots."

Before Rein could say anything else, Snow was out the door. She rushed back to the cabin in a dead sprint.

By the time she reached the porch of her and Jill's cabin, she was sobbing uncontrollably. Luckily, Jill was still out with the others. Snow dashed over to where she kept her clothes and pulled out her blue lace-up top from her original outfit from home. She carefully unpinned the broach from the top, and held it tightly in her hand as she slid to the floor. This was her family crest, her father's crest. Did she disappoint him tonight? Was he saddened as he looked down at her from heaven? "I'm sorry, Daddy!" she sobbed. "I will not dishonor the family crest, Daddy. I will not dishonor the decree. I won't! I..." She couldn't talk anymore through her sobs as they were too heavy, causing her to gasp for air. She got up and walked over to the little sleeping bird she had befriended and gave a weak smile. "In fact Tweety," she sniffed, "... tomorrow, I shall go fishing."

Chapter 4

“Go Fish”

“Oh, you gals make such a mess!” Snow scolded the chickens as she cleaned the coop. “I’m going to have to get a fresh bucket of water to do the rabbits. My, my!” As Snow picked up the bucket and turned to leave, something caught her eye over in the corner leaning against the chicken wire. It was a fishing pole and tackle box. It’s still here, she thought. She would have assumed that most fishermen start early, but then of course people don’t fish every day. Stop being silly Snow, she thought. If not today, there will be other days. Her thoughts drifted to the conversation she had the previous afternoon with Yolanda and Duncan. She enjoyed talking with them. At one point, the subject had rolled over into one’s position in society and the like. From there, Snow just couldn’t help but ask about their views on royalty.

Duncan was from the mid eighteenth century as a British soldier during the French and Indian war. With him being under the crown’s military service during his life, he had much to say on the matter. It was through this topic, that Snow was able to get the answers she needed about Edward. He was from a royal bloodline, and he was the only one in the village that was, at least at this current time. What Snow didn’t understand was why all the women in the village, including Yolanda, kept trying to steer her away from him? He seemed like a nice enough gentleman, although she had not yet had an opportunity to get to know him quite yet. What was the problem they saw? She just didn’t see it. Why did Jill say that he wasn’t in a ‘wife seeking’ mode? Why did Yolanda agree when I told her what Jill said? Well, at any rate, he would certainly make a better companion than that Donnie fellow, for example. Who wouldn’t, she thought?

She returned with the new bucket of water for the rabbit pen. “You guys are so cute! And you aren’t nearly as messy as those chickens over there.” An especially fluffy white rabbit caught her eye. “Well, hello there! I wonder where they got you from? You look much too pretty to have been fetched out of the woods. You are snowy white!” Snow laughed out loud hearing the unintentional joke she just made. “I will call you Whitey. I would call you Snowy, but I would be afraid that would get confusing to some folks.” She giggled and put Whitey back into the pen, then continued with her work.

Upon leaving, something made her stop dead in her tracks. The fishing equipment was gone! How did I miss that? Oh, of course. It must have been when I went to get the water. Well, now is my chance. “Oh yuck! I can’t go like this!” Snow looked down at her ‘chores outfit’ of what the girls call ‘jeans’ and one of the men’s shirts, a very large one at that. “I have chicken stuff all over me!” Remembering back to last night when she couldn’t sleep, she finished a dress in the loveliest pink silken material. That would be perfect.

“Wow! That’s beautiful, Snow. Where are you going all dressed up this morning?” inquired Jill as she scanned the lovely pink dress.

“Um, nowhere. I got chicken goop on my chores outfit.”

Jill made a sour face at the thought, “Yuck. Sorry they had ya doing that s’ soon.”

Snow smiled, “That’s OK. I love animals. I think I’ll go check on 24-Carrots, speaking of animals.”

Why not, she thought. He is such a cute little thing, and it’s on the way to the river. As she approached, she caught a glimpse of Rein going into the barn, apparently to check on the colt as well. Snow stopped. Oh dear, she thought. I really can’t run into him again, especially in the barn where they kissed the previous night. She hoped he wasn’t angry with her for leaving so suddenly. She didn’t want to hurt him. She didn’t know how he felt about her. But what frightened her more was that she didn’t know what she felt about him.

Although he had returned the CD player, he could still hear the melody of the waltz as he relived the dance with Snow in his thoughts. She was so lovely, Rein thought. She still is lovely, of course, but it was that innocent nature of hers that had really taken him. Her doe-eyed expression, her full lips that he had seen pout so often that first day she was here. It seemed that she had grown up a bit since then. That scared young girl was now open and friendly with everyone, and in such a short time. She didn't even seem as afraid of Donnie as she was at first. He hoped he hadn't frightened her last night. "Blasted, what was I thinking! Stop rushing things Partridge!" He spoke out loud and awakened the sleeping colt. "Oh, I'm sorry 24-Carrots. I didn't mean to be so loud. I should just keep my thoughts to myself, eh?" He reached down and petted the colt, who quickly went back to sleep.

As she traveled the path to the river, she grew nervous with each passing tree. What am I doing, Snow thought? I don't know this man at all. But that is why I'm doing this, right? To get to know him better? What things will I say? 'Here I am! Whacha doing?' just didn't seem like the right way to approach the situation. He will want to know why I'm there. Oh dear. Why am I here? Oh my, I have to think of something. Mmmm. Well, I haven't seen the river yet and decided to seek it out. I guess that would work. I'm always curious about nature, so that wouldn't be a lie. OK, got that part down. What things will I say? Should I ask about his kingdom? His family? She promised herself not to stay long. This man will be fishing and enjoying his time alone. Don't bother him and make him hate you, Snow! She wished she had one of those contraptions for her wrist that the others called a 'watch' so she could keep the time of her visit.

She could hear the babbling of the brook as she grew closer. With each step her heart pounded louder. She came to a clearing. There! Sitting on a large rock holding the fishing pole, of course, was the prince ... I mean was Edward ... or is it Eddy? She must remember to NOT call him 'prince'. That was just unnatural in this village, even though perfectly acceptable and expected in her kingdom. What was it Yolanda once said? 'We're not in Kansas anymore, Toto'? Wherever Kansas was, and whoever Toto is. But she wasn't too fond of calling him 'Eddy'. She much preferred Edward. It sounded more proper and more like a name she was used to. But what if he likes 'Eddy' better? Sakes, Snow you are making this so difficult. You always do that. Stop it! OK, deep breath ... not too loud, though. Alright, here goes.

"Oh, Edward, hello. I wasn't expecting to find you here." She held her breath just waiting on the lightning bolt to strike her down for such a blatant lie.

"Snow, greetings. How are you this beautiful morning?"

Snow smiled, "Very well, thank you." She hoped against hope that there wasn't a crack in her voice that would give him any indication of how nervous she was. She thought back to the talks she used to overhear at home. She would softly creep down the large staircase and stand just within earshot of her father and the other monarchs. They would speak about the arranged marriages of their sons and daughters. Snow was always amazed at the fact that unions would be planned for people that had never even met. She remembered the sick feeling in her stomach when she would think that she might eventually unite with someone she had never met. Well, it wouldn't be happening this time, she thought.

"Are they biting much?" Snow asked politely. Luckily for her, she had been fishing one time with a noble that was a good friend of her father's. She was able to catch some of the fishing terminology from him. She just hoped she remembered it correctly.

"Ah, not really today. But I guess since we just had fish last night, we wouldn't really be needing any more for a little while. I just find it relaxing. I can just sit and be one with nature. That sort of thing, you know?"

Snow almost panicked, "Oh, well if you would rather be alone, I"

With a laugh, Ed calmed her fears, “No, that’s alright. Please stay and sit for a while. I think I have been ‘one’ long enough this morning.”

As Snow smiled and sat next to Edward, a wave of relief passed over Snow almost like cool water flowing over the top of her head. She had felt so warm. Oh, dear, she hoped her face wasn’t flustering and turning red as it sometimes does. She took a quick glance into the water at her reflection. Her cheeks were slightly pink, but not too red, thankfully.

“Yes, the water is quite clear, isn’t it?” as Ed saw her peering into the water.

“Yes, very.” Snow, embarrassed that she had been caught, tried to recover. “So, what are your favorite kinds of fish?” Oh, gosh, did I just say that, thought Snow? What a stupid and childish question. He’s going to think you’ve the brain of a child!

Edward happily began discussing the different types of fish he had seen in the river along with which ones were the easiest and hardest to catch. “My favorite is shellfish, which of course, is only found in the ocean. Well, other than crawfish. Before I came to the village, my ... um ... friend and I used to trap different shellfish off of the ocean’s coast back home. “

A shudder went through Snow when Edward mentioned ‘back home’. This is my open door, she thought. “Please tell me more about where you came from, your heritage? I am very curious about other royal houses.”

Edward remembered, “Oh yes, I almost forgot. You are of royal blood as well, aren’t you? House of White, wasn’t it? Well, I’m sure we are probably more lax on such things than in your kingdom, but we may share many things in common.”

Upon hearing this, Snow was delighted and soaked in every word as Edward went on about royal customs and history. He was right, in that things were different than where she came from. But nevertheless, Snow found his words fascinating.

As she watched him, she of course couldn’t help but ponder in her mind the similarities of the men in the village. Edward reminded her of Rein who reminded her of Mitch who reminded her of Stevie and so on. Each one possessed qualities different from the others. Rein had a sense of romanticism that was, by her standards, perfected by trade so to speak. Rein knew how to treat a lady and how one wished to be treated. To Snow, this most probably meant that he had many women in the past, which wasn’t the most pleasant thought to Snow. Then there was Mitch. He was so sweet and giving. Women were not new to him either, but she found her opinion of him to be that he was still searching for that certain ‘someone’, and searching very hard for that matter. She’d heard that he seemed to ask just about every woman in the village at some point to dinner or tea or something, which was alright, I guess, Snow thought. She liked his company. They both had much in common. He was charming and easy to talk to. She found herself thinking back to the two times Mitch had caught her in midair falling from those two trees and remembered the gaze into his eyes. That gaze they shared that seemed to last a lifetime, even if only for a second. She found herself watching Edward and looking for similarities in him to that of Mitch.

Snow, stop that! This is Edward, Prince Edward ... KING even! He is his own person. Stop looking for someone else. You haven’t even gotten to know him yet. He seemed sweet and friendly, and also open to conversation. Many of the others weren’t so eager to converse so friendly and freely, like Donnie. Oh, my lands, don’t think about Donnie! Moving right along ... Edward. Right, OK. Edward. Well there was something ... different about him that Snow couldn’t quite put her finger on. She couldn’t say if that was a good thing or a bad thing. Although he was friendly, he was also distant in that he didn’t have the same ... what is the word ... affection in his voice when he spoke with Snow as some of the others did, like Mitch. And in his eyes, although friendly, lacked what the other men had shown within each of their gazes, especially, for example, the gazes of Rein or Mitch. And of course, Stevie was a whole different story altogether. He was fun to be around and his attentiveness was very flattering. However, he wasn’t used to being in a lady’s company for

a long period of time. In that, Snow didn't think he quite knew what kinds of activities a lady preferred or subjects to speak on. Plus, Stevie was just plain shy. She thought if he was ever kissed by a woman, he would probably faint dead away ... well almost.

Snow noticed that Edward had one of those wristwatch contraptions. "Oh, do you have the time?"

Looking at his watch, "Yes, it is nearly twelve, by about ten minutes or so. Perhaps we should head back to the village? I'm sure lunch will be ready soon. I can't remember who is cooking today, though."

Snow thought it would be nice to walk back to the village with Edward, but she in no way wanted Kate, or Jill, or Kristen, or even Yolanda to see her walking with him. What an obvious little plight that would be!

"I believe it is Thomas cooking this day."

Edward's eyes rolled, "Oh good Lord. I hope we make it out alive!"

He laughed at his own remarks, but Snow was so distracted with her own thoughts she merely smiled, "Do you mind terribly if I follow along in a few minutes. I just remembered something I need to do."

Edward smiled, and wondered if perhaps the joke he made was not all that funny, "Yes, of course. I will see you at lunch."

What a nice young girl, thought Eddy. She was sweet and her innocence quite refreshing. He thought that she seemed quite lonely. Perhaps she was homesick, and he, being of a royal background, probably reminds her of home. He enjoyed her company and thought she could probably be a good friend. If he could help her 'homesickness' and make her feel more comfortable here in the village, then he was glad to help.

Thomas had received some help, no doubt, from Mitch in his preparation of their lunch, as the luncheon to everyone's surprise was quite good.

Thomas Kelligan came from the late eighteenth century. His wife and son were murdered by a 'madman' of sorts. He tried to save them, but when the madman came after him, his demise landed him here in the Willows.

The mood in the room was jovial. The weather had been very nice the past few days and seemed to lift everyone's spirits. The biggest topic at lunch was no doubt the Halloween festival, which was suggested by, of course, Jill ... resident 'spiritual specialist'. After a brief explanation on how Halloween is celebrated today, Jill suggested everyone dress up in a costume of sorts. She then offered to help out in any way she could on the costuming.

Snow was also eager to help. In her day, Halloween was referred to as 'All Hallow's Eve' and was considered a day of fear and evildoing. She was glad that things were not that way any longer. It sounded like a fun day in these terms, and she was busy thinking of what she could dress up to be. A bride, maybe? EEEK! Snow, stop it! Stop it right now! Snow scolded herself for the thought. She was glad no one in the room could read her thoughts, especially the men, lest they all run out the door and into the woods screaming!

Stevie was excited about the festival as well, "Donnie, wha' ya gonna dress up as?"

Donnie scowled, "Ow 'bout this. I'll be Donnie, and you can be Stevie, and you can be Ivan, and so on," as he motioned to the others.

Kate gave him 'the look', which this time he did not return. She appeared half disappointed that he didn't.

Duncan added, "In my day, we called these occasions 'masquerades' and everyone wore a mask. You had to guess at who everyone was."

Yolanda squealed and patted his arm, "Oh, what a wonderful idea, dear! Can we do that for the festival?"

Jill thought for a second, "You know, that may not be a bad idea. But of course, you have to consider that the guys are going to have a huge advantage over us there. They

could really mix up their identities and we'd never know who is who, especially under a mask and costume."

Rein lifted an eyebrow, "Sounds like a splendid idea if you ask me."

Nicholas smiled, "I'm game."

Across the room, the others nodded and whispered among themselves.

Kristen and Kate seemed a little apprehensive of the thought, but finally shrugged and agreed.

Snow added, "Well, if we are helping them with their costumes anyway, then we should know who they will be."

"There ya go, Snow. Good point," retorted Jill.

Rein thought to himself how funny it would be if someone were to fool the girls by having someone else fitted for their costume, or even better ... have two men wear 'twin' costumes. Hmmm. Not a bad idea, as he smiled while pondering his clever plan.

Chapter 5

“Faeries and Princes”

It had been nearly a month since her arrival into the village and Snow was adjusting well to her new life. She enjoyed the company of her new women friends in the village. She considered them like sisters to her, the sisters she never had. And of course Stevie was like a brother to Snow. She felt very comfortable around him. He was very non-threatening, so to speak. She was feeling more comfortable with the things they did in the village. And she was still smiling at the most wonderful gift the men bestowed upon her yesterday. A treehouse of her very own! How thoughtful! Stevie's idea, no doubt. It was built in the very oak tree she escaped in that first day. It was lovely and very efficiently crafted. It was simple, yet elegant. It consisted of one room, a split level. The ground ladder led up to a small porch with a front door. You walk directly into the 'kitchen', a collection of cabinets and drawers mainly. There was a small metal inset for a fire one could use in keeping warm or to cook something small. Another small ladder led up to the half-level loft, the bedroom. There was just enough room for a feather bed, and of course a curtain to pull for privacy. Under the loft, an entire section of nothing but pillows, for a floor-type couch. Of course, she would still use the girls' cabins to take a bath or the like. She loved her treehouse, nonetheless. It was another way for her to stay close to nature, and a time to herself when needed.

She had been able to keep her journeys to the river a secret up until now. She preferred that the girls not know about her visits with Edward, since they seemed so against her seeing him for whatever reason. Last night Donnie managed to burst her bubble by ordering that no women go into the woods alone, not even during the day. Who did he think he was? Snow wondered if maybe this was a personal attack on her in order to totally take all of her freedom and privacy away, knowing how important nature was to her. But he couldn't know that. He didn't know her at all, and Snow wanted to keep it that way. He reminded her too much of those palace guards that used to make her shudder.

Snow shook off such thoughts, as she snuggled with her favorite rabbit, Whitey. He sat just as still as you please in Snow's hands, as if he knew she wouldn't harm him. What to do now? She wanted to keep visiting Edward at the river, or anywhere, when she could. Although, she didn't really know why. She was fond of Edward, but her feelings for him weren't ... well, she didn't seem to feel about him like she did for ... oh Snow, stop! There you go again. It's your imagination. Edward is a fine fellow. Of course, you know the real reason you visit him. But things will get better. They have to. You just have to get to know him better, that's all.

“Furry little thing isn't he?” Snow was startled by the soothing voice of Mitch.

She turned to him and smiled, halfway embarrassed that she had just been thinking about him. “Hello, Mitch.” She swallowed, trying to recover, “Yes, he is my favorite. I call him Whitey. Not very original, I know.”

Mitch laughed, “No, it's very cute, really. I thought I might find you here. I was about to start preparing dinner. Everyone's in the main hall discussing the festival and costumes and such. Thought you might like to join in.”

Snow smiled as she put Whitey back in the rabbit pen, “Oh, yes, I would. How thoughtful of you. I hope you aren't slaving away over that hot stove so much so that you can't join in the discussion.”

Mitch winked at her, “Nah, I'm sure I'll get to put in my two bits worth.” Mitch offered her his arm and she took it as he led her back to the dining room.

In the room, she found everyone discussing their costume choices and other plans for Halloween night.

“Hey, Thomas, why don’t you go as the ‘Headless Horseman’?” teased Ivan as Thomas replied with a hard ‘look’ and added, “Well, how about you being ol’ Robin Hood?”

Ivan retorted, “Actually, I had been thinking more along the lines of the ‘Black Knight’, but Robin Hood wouldn’t be so bad. He was an excellent marksman. “

“You knew Robin Hood?” gleamed Snow, “I just adore archery.”

Kate eyed her curiously, “Snow, you can shoot a bow and arrow? I would never have guessed. I’d love to see you shoot sometime.”

“Sorry, I’m late, everyone.” Murray burst in. “Had to bring Mitch the dinner to cook tonight. It was my turn to do the hunting. Not much luck, though. Had to use a couple of our own critters. Don’t worry, Kate. It wasn’t your pig, Brutus,” added Murray, with a look at Kate.

“Yeah, Kate. Are you going to be dressing up that beast Brutus for Halloween, by the way?” laughed Ivan.

Kate simply looked at him.

“That reminds me,” Snow added, “I’m going to be gathering materials and such and need to know what all you would choose in the way of costumes.”

Stevie said shyly, “Well Snow, I don’t wanna be no trouble, so I thought I’d just cut some ‘oles in a sheet and be like a ghost, ya know? That’d be easiest.”

Snow smiled at his courtesy, “Oh Stevie, you know you’re no trouble, but if that’s what you’d like to do. I’m sure we can arrange that.”

“Eddy and I will get with you later about our costumes,” Rein smiled mischievously as he went over the plans in his head to have a little fun this particular ‘Hallow’s Eve’. He had asked Eddy what he thought about having ‘matching’ costumes of a sort. Eddy had agreed thinking it might be a fun idea. Rein formed the idea after a most enlightening conversation with Duncan the other day about a certain ‘royal decree’. When Duncan pondered the idea of Snow’s visits in the woods with Eddy, he mentioned that Yolanda struggled with telling Snow the truth about Eddy and could never quite get the words out.

Curious about the situation, Rein decided to take a stroll in the woods and sure enough, found Snow and Eddy fishing by the river’s edge. He couldn’t help but laugh to himself at how dry the conversation was, and how bored Snow actually appeared, resting her face in her hands, fishing pole on her knee as she listened to Eddy go on and on about fishing and hunting and the like. Of course funnier still was that Eddy wasn’t even as good of a fisherman as Rein was, who had decided to give it a rest when Eddy took a fancy to it. All this talk about ‘royal decree’ and this and that was just plain hogwash, thought Rein. That was the reason for the matching costume idea. His thought was maybe he could get Snow to see that a ‘true love’ is not found within any decree, no matter how ‘sacred’ the tradition is. Besides, it should prove to be jolly good fun, anyway.

After dinner, Snow delighted everyone with a beautiful song. Mitch thought her voice was like an angel.

Everyone clapped when she finished.

Kristen offered, “Snow that was so beautiful! You know, I don’t think anyone would mind if you sang for us every night!”

Mitch touched her hand, “You can definitely sing for me anytime you like.”

Snow smiled, blushing.

“Dinner was delicious, as usual, Mitch. Thanks, man,” sighed Nicholas as he reached for his cup.

“Murray, you said you didn’t have much luck hunting. What did you finally come up with for dinner?” asked Trent.

“Well, luckily, we still have our little rabbit farm out there, so I gotta confess. Those two fat ones did us pretty well, the black one and that furry white one.”

Snow gasped as if she'd been stabbed with a knife. "No!" she cupped her hands over her mouth to stifle a cry, jumped up from the table and ran outside.

"I wish you hadn't said that, Murray!" Added Mitch sadly as he too got up from the table and followed Snow outside.

"What did I say?" asked a confused Murray as he looked around the room.

Mitch found Snow huddled in a heap next to the dining cabin with her knees in her chest sobbing. Mitch crouched down next to her and gently stroked her arm.

She peeked out at him for a second and then buried her face again, embarrassed, "Why do I get so attached to animals? I know that their main purpose is for food for the village"

Mitch brushed back her hair, "Hey, I want to show you something, OK?" He spoke so gently that Snow looked up at him. He wiped one of her tears away, "Come on. It's alright." He took her arm and helped her to her feet. He led her to the back door of the kitchen and lifted a box onto one of the preparation tables. Then he raised the lid.

"Whitey!" Snow gasped with glee. She picked him up and held him in her arms close to her face, "Hello there," she said tenderly.

Mitch for a second wished he was the rabbit. "I went and picked another rabbit when Murray brought him over. I would never cook him knowing how much he meant to you."

Snow looked at Mitch with regret remembering her thoughts of him just a few moments ago. She put Whitey back into the box and looked back at Mitch lovingly, "I'm sorry for doubting. I shouldn't have."

As she hugged him, he wished the moment would last for hours, "It's alright Snow. You didn't know."

She pulled back and looked at him again, "I do now." And she kissed him tenderly on the cheek.

"Aye, you alright, Snow? You ran outta there so upset. We all didn't know wha' ta think, ya know," came Stevie's concerned tone suddenly.

"Thank you Stevie. I'm alright now. It's Whitey, see. I thought they cooked him." She lifted the lid to reveal her furry friend to Stevie.

"Oh, yeah, I remember ya said ya liked him pretty good. I'm glad he didn't end up dinner, there."

Mitch thought for a second, then with a gleam in his eye, "Stevie, would you please be a dear and get Whitey back to the rabbit pen? I'm sure he's pretty tired after a scare like that."

Stevie nodded and took the box, "Sure thing. You're right about that. He's probably plum wore out from all that ruckus."

As Stevie took the rabbit back to its home, Snow smiled at Mitch, "Now you weren't trying to get rid of him, were you?"

Mitch looked shocked, "Of course not. I just know Stevie likes to help out in any way he can around here."

Snow eyed him suspiciously.

"Speaking of help, I'd better go and remind Trent that it's his turn to do the dishes tonight. Are you free this evening, Miss Snow?"

Thinking for a moment, "Well, other than speaking with Rein and Edward about their costumes, yes, I believe so."

'Rein again', thought Mitch ... 'great! He would definitely rather be around if Rein was going to be paying her a visit. The fancy Rein had taken to her lately just seemed to be more than 'friendly' to Mitch's observation. He started, "Yes, costumes. I suppose I should think of something for the festival, shouldn't I?"

"Of course!" Snow cooed, "Why don't you come to the tree house and we will get you fixed up. We'll pick out something perfect I'm sure."

Happily, Mitch offered, "Great. I have been wondering how you fixed up the place."

Snow's eyes lit up, "Oh, it's simply wonderful. You all were such dears to build it for me."

"Well," Mitch's eyes looked down at the ground regretfully, "Actually I'm not too good with woodwork, so I can't take any credit. I'm more of a 'kitchen help' person I guess."

Snow smiled, "Well it does have a kitchen that could probably use a little help ... in stocking supplies, perhaps?"

Mitch caught her gaze lovingly, "I think I can do that." Snow found it difficult to tear her eyes away from his, but managed to do so.

Mitch passed the remainder of the dishes to Trent and packed a basket of supplies for the tree house. Snow went ahead to separate out the materials she gathered before everyone arrived.

"Cheerio!" came Rein's voice at the bottom of the ladder accompanied by Eddy.

Snow's door was open and she peeked down the ladder, "Come on up. I've been expecting you."

Upon their entrance, they found Snow with piles of materials on her 'floor couch' pillows. "What did you fellows have in mind?"

"Well," Rein smiled, "we thought it would be fun to have matching costumes. Like what about the 'brothers Grimm'?" laughed Rein and Eddy while Snow stared at them blankly.

"The brothers what?"

"Never mind." Rein continued, "We thought we would both be the 'grim reaper' in a black cloak and stocking caps."

Snow frowned, "You know, in a costume like that, it will be difficult to tell you two apart."

Rein grinned, "Exactly the idea. After all, it is a masquerade, right? Old Eddy and I thought we would have a bit of fun with everyone."

Snow was thinking how awkward this would be with Rein and Edward in the same costume. She decided that perhaps it would be best to stay away from the both of them the evening of the masquerade for obvious reasons.

Rein continued, "So what do you think, dear? Do you think there's enough black material for the both of us?"

Snow smiled shyly, "Yes, I'm sure we can find enough. Jill also has a lot of material at her cabin as well."

"Well, we would rather our costumes be made by such a lovely princess as yourself," winked Rein.

Snow fidgeted at Rein's flirtatious tone, mainly because it was appealing to her, and she didn't want it to be. Perhaps she'd rather the tone had come from Edward, but couldn't picture that it would have contained the same meaning, somehow.

"Evening, gents." Mitch announced loudly carrying a basket of supplies with one hand, while attempting to climb the ladder with the other.

Rein tried to hide his disappointment. "Oh. Hello, Mitch."

Eddy looked at the basket with curiosity, "What do you have there? More materials?"

"No, this is some supplies for Snow's tree house. Can't have her cabinets bare." Mitch set the basket down on the small countertop against the wall.

"Thank you so much, Mitch. Any thought yet as to what you would like to be for the masquerade?" Snow began sifting the black material out of the piles on her couch pillows.

Mitch came to have a look, "Well, what do you suggest?"

Snow sifted through the rest with some concern, "Well, anything except black, I hope."

Mitch laughed, "Anything is fine I'm sure."

Snow turned to Rein and Eddy, "Oh, stocking caps. Can you be dears and see if Jill has two black stocking caps, or something I could make those out of?"

Mitch looked at Rein, “You guys robbing a bank?”

Rein smiled weakly, “No. Eddy and I are going to be the ‘grim reaper’, the both of us.”

Eddy winked and motioned to Snow, “Yeah, you know the ‘brothers Grimm?’”

Mitch laughed, while Snow still appeared confused and shook her head as though she were fairly used to never getting the jokes around here.

A reluctant Rein along with Eddy left the treehouse in search of two stocking caps from Jill, leaving Mitch at the tree house with Snow. “What is such a beautiful princess as yourself going to dress as?”

Snow blushed, “Well, I don’t rightly know yet, but I was going to let it be a surprise when I’m finished.”

Mitch teased, “Hmmm, I would think such a lovely princess would prefer to be accompanied by a prince at the masquerade?”

Snow was frozen as she stopped sifting through remnants. How did he know about that? Did Yolanda say something? What did he mean by that?

Seeing her discomfort, “Or are you not planning to dress as a princess?”

Snow gave a sigh of relief, “Oh, you mean a costume! Well, I haven’t yet decided, really.”

Mitch smiled nervously as he tried to think of a costume, since his first brilliant idea of a prince didn’t seem to go over like he’d hoped.

“Are you saying you were thinking of dressing as a prince for the masquerade?” Snow asked quickly, trying to sound objective.

Mitch found a particular spot to stare at on her new wooden floor, “Oh well I was just thinking if you needed an escort. But I didn’t know what you were going to dress as.”

Snow gave him an eye, “I see. So the guys here gave you an idea to dress up in matching costumes as well, eh?”

Nervously, Mitch continued his fascination with the spot on the tree house floor, “Oh, well, only if you think it may be something you would like to do. But if not, it’s no big deal, really.”

Snow had finally caught his meaning, although she had been reluctant to admit it to herself what Mitch was doing. He was flirting with her. Although, one part of her desperately wanted to give in and flirt back, another part of her saw the danger in it and said ‘no’. Was it sincere, she thought? Of course, Mitch is always sincere. Why not? It’s a party, right? She decided to meet herself halfway in between. “Well, I had thought about making wings from mesh and chicken wire as I’ve always dreamed of what it would be like to fly, so perhaps I will be a ‘fairy princess’. However, I just don’t think I can quite see you wearing wings, Mitch. Perhaps just a regular prince costume would suit you best.”

Mitch raised his eyes to meet hers upon hearing her suggestion. He was thrilled. It sounded perfect to him. Their gaze met for what seemed to be hours, although Mitch knew it was only for a few seconds when he finally got the words out, “OK. A regular prince it is.”

Both smiled and Snow again felt her feelings for Mitch deepening, something very difficult to fight when Mitch was looking back at her with his warm brown eyes and friendly smile. Mitch was finding that Snow’s treehouse was quite a romantic setting. He wondered what her reaction would be if he kissed her at that moment. Her eyes seemed so friendly and her lips inviting, but he didn’t want to approach the issue too soon, too soon for Snow that is. He had wanted to kiss her that moment she fell into his arms from the very tree they sat in now. How funny life was to bring them back here at this moment in this setting. Of course, Mitch always considered himself a hopeless romantic. He loved cooking romantic dinners and serving fine wines and after dinner coffee. Mitch was finding the temptation more and more difficult to resist. Snow had kissed him on the cheek, earlier. He could just do the same. But could he stop with just a peck on the cheek with her lips only centimeters away? He thought, well, it would be worth a try. No, he should wait until the party at least. Shouldn’t he? Maybe it wouldn’t hurt, just a small ...

“Oi, Snow! Ya up there?” came the unmistakable voice of Stevie once again. “I got a sheet for my costume. Can ya believe this? Rein gave it to me at Jill’s house just now. Wasn’t that nice of him? He said I should bring it to you right away so you can have time to fix it up, like.”

Mitch rolled his eyes, knowing Rein’s sole mission was to send anyone or anything to spoil any time he might have with Snow. It certainly would not take her very long to cut a few holes in a sheet.

“Come on up, Stevie,” laughed Snow, not noticing Mitch’s disappointment.

“I’d better go and make sure Trent didn’t make a complete disaster area out of my kitchen.” He paused to gaze into her eyes once again. “I’ll see you tomorrow, fairy princess?”

Snow smiled and blushed as Mitch departed.

As it turned out, it only took Snow a few minutes to get Stevie’s costume ready. What kept him there for the better part of the next two hours was a book that Stevie decided Snow really needed to hear.

“Are ya kidding me?” came Jill’s reaction as Yolanda told her of Snow’s recent excursions.

Kate added “She’s going for Eddy after all, is she?”

Yolanda frowned, “Now, you aren’t supposed to know this. I wasn’t supposed to say anything, but I just didn’t know how to approach the situation. You know how sensitive she is. How do we tell her about Eddy? I don’t think her time had a lot of that sort of thing. Homo--...well, you know?”

Jill thought for a moment, “Well, maybe we shouldn’t tell her, then. Maybe we should try an experiment o’ sorts. I’ve always wondered if it would work on ol’ Eddy boy, anyway.”

Kristen frowned, “What are you talking about, Jill? You’ve got that mischievous sound in your voice that always scares me.”

Kate added, “Yeah, what are you up to, Jill?”

Jill went to her room and came back with a very small vile of a liquid. “Here’s a sampling o’ my ‘Dixie Love Oil’. I say we let Snow give it a whirl on ol’ Eddy dear. If it doesn’t work, she’s no worse off, but if it does ... well if Eddy’s who she wants, then that’s who she’ll get, against my better judgment. But hey, it’s her life.”

Yolanda shook her head, “I dunno, Jill. It sounds too risky. Besides, I don’t think Eddy is right for Snow. We just gotta get her to let go of that silly decree thing.”

Jill brushed her hair off of her shoulders, “Well, we can’t tell her what ta do or who ta see. She may be young, but she’s still old enough ta make her own decisions and her own mistakes as well.”

Kate gave Jill a look, “Are you doing this to try to help Snow or just because you’re curious of the oil’s effects on someone like Eddy’s persuasion?”

Jill smiled and continued in her typical southern accent, “Well, o’ course I wanna help Snow. I already spoke my peace on how I think Eddy’s all wrong fo’ her.”

Kristen added, “Well, we all think that. But the question is ... do we tell Snow what the oil does?”

Jill thought about this, “True. Well, then I s’ppose we should have a talk with her ‘bout it. I think she could handle it. And if she doesn’t want ta use it, that’s up to her.”

Kate nodded, “That sounds innocent enough.”

Kristen agreed as well.

They all looked at Yolanda, still uncertain. She sighed and finally agreed, “Well alright, but just remember, this wasn’t my idea.”

Jill smiled, “No, I’ll be takin’ full credit fo’ this one. My curiosity will probably get the best o’ me someday,” as the girls all laughed.

The next morning, Snow felt as if her feet were simply floating through the orchard as she stared upward at the trees. The blossoms were now gone and the leaves were beginning to turn multiple colors of yellow and orange as one of them brushed against her hair. She had a dream last night, a wonderful dream. She was here in the orchard, just like she was now. Mitch was with her. But things were different, much different. In her dream, it was the Halloween festival and Mitch was dressed so handsomely as a prince, the prince of her dreams. Only in this dream, he WAS the prince of the Willows. She would no longer need to worry about her decree, that silly decree. Snow quickly apologized under her breath to her father for calling the decree 'silly'. But in her dream, she was so happy. She returned here to the orchard, if just for a moment, to pretend it were true. Her daydream was interrupted by the rumbling of her stomach. She hadn't had breakfast yet and she was starving. Apples! Over by one of the trees was a basket of apples that her prince ... er umm ... Mitch had no doubt been picking that morning. She loved apples, and right on top of the bunch was an exceptionally large red one.

Just as she was about to bite into it, it was snatched out of her hands. "Whoa, wait Snow." Mitch's face looked almost white as he held the apple she was about to eat.

Snow felt a combination of confusion at Mitch's actions and dreaminess in seeing his warm smile so briefly after her previous night's dream about him.

Thinking quickly, "These haven't been washed, yet. But I have some nice clean peaches in the kitchen, probably the last ones till next year. They are just about out of season. You should get them while you can."

Snow smiled, "Sounds lovely."

Mitch felt embarrassed in taking the fruit right out of her hand, but he couldn't help but feel an uneasiness in watching Snow eat ... an apple. He knew it was silly, just a dumb story in a book, but he just didn't feel comfortable.

"OK Kate. Whatcha got up yer sleeve?" asked Stevie as he followed Kate into the orchard.

"There she is. 'Royal archery champion!'" said Kate when she saw Snow. "I found this set and wondered if you would do us the honors?" She presented Snow with a bow and a packet of several arrows.

"Champion? Oh, Kate, I don't know if I'm that good. I'll probably disappoint you."

Mitch folded his arms, "Well, no matter what, I know you'll be better than me. I've never even picked up a set myself. Please go ahead. I would really like to see you shoot."

"Yes, please Snow," came a plea from Stevie with his begging eyes.

"Here, how about shooting at this." Mitch took an arrow and thrust it through one of the apples, then shoved into the tree bark.

"Well, alright, since you are all so insisting." Snow stepped back about six meters. She loaded the bow instinctively and shot at the apple. Bam! The arrow landed almost dead center.

"Oi, Snow! 'at's a dead target center there!" came Stevie's approval.

"Wow! I know who to get for my bodyguard, now." Mitch applauded.

"Well, maybe I was a little close, there. I'll step back a little more. I can't remember how far back I usually practice. I just shoot, is all."

She stepped back to about ten meters, loaded the bow and let the arrow fly. Splat! The arrow hit the apple once again, this time just off to the side, but still making its mark.

"Bravo, girl!" Kate clapped "You are really good at this. We should get a contest going at the festival and put you in it."

“Aye, Kate! That’s a great idea! What if we was to ‘ave a contest with teams and ‘ave different games and stuff and prizes, like that. Ya think we could do that for the festival?” Stevie’s begging eyes were directed at Kate this time.

Kate thought that this was perhaps one of Stevie’s better ideas. “You know Stevie, that’s a wonderful idea. I think that would be great fun, and I’m going to tell the others that it was all your idea.”

Stevie beamed with pride and smiled at Snow, “Well I know this much, Snow. I wanna be on your team, eh?”

“Make that two,” coming from Mitch’s direction.

“Let’s see what different games everyone can come up with and we’ll put it all together. That reminds me,” and with a gleam in Kate’s eye, “Snow, did you decide on your costume yet? I thought maybe you’d like to join us girls in Jill’s cabin and we can compare ideas?”

Snow giggled, “Well, yes, actually,” she glanced at Mitch and then back at Kate, “I did think of something. But I hope you don’t think it’s silly.”

Kate smiled, “Nonsense! Come on then. Let’s go have a little ... girl talk. Shall we?”

Upon arriving at Jill’s cabin, Snow and Kate found Jill, Kristen, and Yolanda picking through different remnants, swapping outrageous ideas and laughing.

“Can you picture Donnie in something like this?” giggled Jill.

Kristen and Yolanda laughed hysterically. Jill quickly shoved the remnant under the pile as Snow and Kate walked in.

“Picture Donnie in something like what?” demanded Kate.

“Oh nothing.” Jill said innocently while Kristen and Yolanda struggled to stifle their laughter, and Kristen unintentionally let out a ‘snort’.

Trying to change the subject, Jill approached Snow, “Ah, Snow. We’re so glad you’re here! Sit down, dear. Have ya thought about what you’ll wear at the festival yet?”

Snow was baffled at the way the girls were fussing over her. Snow never imagined that they had a plan of their own. “Well, yes. I’ve always wondered what it would be like to fly. I thought I could make a pair of wings out of material covered chicken wire and be perhaps a fairy ... or actually, ‘fairy princess’ as Mitch suggested. Is that really silly?”

Yolanda giggled, “No, that isn’t silly at all, Snow.”

Kristen’s eyes widened as she stopped sifting through remnants, “As Mitch suggested, huh? What else did he suggest?”

Snow looked down shyly as she smiled, “Well, he wanted to go as matching ‘prince and princess’, but I didn’t think he would look right wearing the fairy wings.”

The girls all laughed, but Snow was clueless as to the meaning behind it.

Kristen grumbled, “A ‘fairy’ prince? Nope ... wrong person.”

Kate gave her a ‘shush’ look.

“So what did you suggest back?” winked Jill.

“Well, I simply thought he could just go as a regular prince instead. What do you all think?” inquired a curious Snow.

“Oh, well I definitely think that would be a lovely costume,” Jill started, “and also perfect fo’ you. Let’s see, how about this?” Jill pulled out a short white negligee.

Snow frowned, “That’s really short, Jill.”

“O’ course,” Jill continued, “You’re a ‘fairy’ princess, not a regular one. Faeries wear shorter dresses, like Tinkerbell.”

“Like who?”

“Tinkerbell was a magical fairy who wore really short dresses, that’s all. Don’t worry, you’ll have something on underneath it, o’ course.”

“Hey, Jill, maybe we could find something a little longer for her,” inquired Kate, “We don’t want to give her ‘culture shock’.”

“Or the guys, either,” added Kristen, “Some of them still have problems with jeans, remember?”

“Nah!” came Jill’s retort. “The festival will be a perfect place fo’ everybody ta just get a grip. Everyone will be in costume. It will be a time fo’ everybody ta just have fun and hang out ... well not literally of course,” as Jill noticed Snow wincing at the length of the dress. Jill gave her some additional materials to build her wings with and extra trimming for the dress.

“Now, there is another issue we would like ta talk ta ya about, dear” as she hid the potion vile behind her back.

Chapter 6

“Witches’ Brew”

As Snow rubbed the vile in her fingertips, she pondered what the ladies told her. She had never heard of such a substance. “What do you think about it all, Tweety?” The little bird eyed her fingers as if he were inspecting them for food. “Sounds almost barbaric, but still interesting.” She didn’t have any immediate intentions on using the oil in the near future. She hadn’t seen a need for such a thing. “It has always been within my heart to find a gentleman that will love me for who I am.” Although the thought was an interesting concept, she thought it would be almost cruel for her to use a potion such as this on a gentleman. But still, she couldn’t help but wonder what kind of effect it would have. Brushing away the thought, she tucked the oil away in a drawer, gave Tweety a little rub on the head, and then tucked herself away in her new loft bed.

“What about a ‘witches’ brew’, Mitch?” inquired Jill as she helped him decide on the items to be served at the upcoming festival.

“A what?” as Mitch continued writing finger food ideas down on paper.

“A witches’ brew! Ya know, a party punch that really packs a ‘punch’ ... has a kick to it?”

He nodded, “Oh, you mean ‘spiked punch’?”

“Exactly! That’s just what this festival needs! I mean Donnie already has us coming back in here at the end of the evening like prisoners, due to his superstitions about Halloween. Might as well make the best of the situation with some interesting conversation, or possibly games and such over a good witches’ brew.” Jill reached down to pet her black cat that was affectionately rubbing against her leg.

Mitch shrugged, “I guess we can do that.”

“So what ideas have we got so far in the way of Hallow’s Eve treats for the festival?” as Jill leaned over to glance at his paper. “Oh, ya gotta add Dead Sea Soup. I can make that one.”

Mitch eyed her with curiosity, “Dead Sea Soup, huh? OK, this I gotta taste for sure.”

It was wolves. Wolves had been spotted around the village. They were getting braver as it was getting colder ... mostly at night. Therefore, Donnie demanded all residents stay indoors after dark. Hence, this is why everyone would need to stay in the main cabin that night ... festival or no festival. Plus, Donnie was skeptical that Halloween wasn’t going to be such an uneventful night.

“That’s it Tweety, that’s the last step.” As Snow came off of the final rung of the ladder to her treehouse. “Now it’s off we go to find you some breakfast. How about some nice juicy worms, eh? Only for you would I go dig up worms, well and maybe for prince fishing ... I mean fishing with the prince, perhaps.”

Carrying Tweety in a basket-made-bed, the little bird was still not able to fly. Snow made her way over to the rabbit and chicken pens where Edward usually kept his fishing gear. But it wasn’t there.

“Wait a minute. He said he would wait for me. Surely, he didn’t forget.” She went around to the barn to see if he had left his equipment there and ran into Stevie.

“‘allo, Snow. Whatcha doin’ this mornin’?” came his usual happy tone.

“Have you seen Edward this morning, Stevie?”

“Oi, I seen him headin’ toward his usual fishin’ spot just a while ago. I guess we’ll ‘ave fish for dinner, eh?”

He did forget then, thought Snow as her lips involuntarily curled into their usual pout.

“Aye, there. Wha’ ya look so sad there for Princess? Did ya need to speak with ‘im?”

“No, I just thought he was going to take me fishing with him, is all, since I can’t venture into the woods alone due to *Donnie’s* rules.” She emphasized Donnie’s name sarcastically.

“Aye, there Snow. No need ta worry. I’ll take ya out there if ya’d like.”

Snow’s face brightened as though she’d walked into a surprise birthday party, “Oh Stevie, would you? That would be so lovely! Thank you!” She kissed him on the cheek, and he grinned, speechless.

“Hey, now. What’s this?” Mitch had come around the corner to get some more canning jars he’d stashed in the barn. He teased them knowing Stevie was harmless, “Stevie, all the men are going to be jealous of you there, if you’re not careful.”

Stevie didn’t catch that Mitch was just kidding, “Oi, Snow just wanted to go fishing with Eddy, but he forgot to wait for her and I just offered to take her to where he usually goes, that’s all. Ya know, since the girls can’t go out into th’ woods alone from wha’ Donnie said and all.”

Snow looked down at the ground refusing to meet Mitch’s suspicious gaze. ‘I wish he hadn’t spilled all of that,’ thought Snow. She didn’t really want to advertise her visits with Edward, especially to Mitch, of all people.

Mitch, in seeing her uneasiness with Stevie’s explanation, “So, Snow you enjoy fishing?”

Snow petted the little bird in her basket and managed a shy reply, “Well, yes. I do find it quite relaxing.”

Mitch never got a response look back from Snow, “Well, I was just after some more canning jars. A harvester’s work is never done. See you all at lunch, then.”

Snow barely heard a word Stevie said as they trekked into the woods toward the river. She was too lost in her own thoughts, her own feelings of guilt, or was it more of regret? Here just the night before, she had planned to be a fairy princess to Mitch’s prince and then she is caught red-handed in her schemes to visit Edward. ‘You idiot!’ Snow thought, ‘if you had just played it cool and not acted like it was such a big deal, Mitch never would have known. But no! You had to go and not even look at him, like the cat that ate the bird, or um, mouse. Sorry, Tweety.’ She glanced at her feathered friend in the basket. And in fact she was regretting the whole thing, now. Fairy princess with her prince ... she only wished. Only wished like in her dream that Mitch was the prince, the real prince. OK, that’s enough, Snow. You really must get over these little ‘pitty parties’ you keep having for yourself. What’s done is done. You can’t change what’s here. A dream is a dream and what’s real is what’s real. Everything else is...

“Snow?” Stevie had stopped and was looking at her with a questioning stare. “Did you hear what I said, Snow? Are you alright?”

Snapping back to where she really was, “Oh, yes. Sorry, Stevie. I guess I’m still sleeping this morning.”

“ ‘Ats alright. It wadn’t important anyway. “

“Hark, who goes there? I hear voices.” Eddy teased.

“It’s me, Stevie, and I’ve got Snow with me. Did you forget to take her with you this morning?”

“Stevie!” said Snow embarrassed.

“Oh goodness, I’m so sorry, Snow. You’re exactly right. I forgot all about the fact that you can’t go into the woods alone, after the ‘world according to Donnie’ talk there the other night. Here I was, expecting you to pop along any minute. I suppose it’s too early in the morning for me today. Please have a seat, both of you.”

Snow was relieved as she felt those blasted butterflies leave her stomach as they so often come to visit her. So he *did* expect me, Snow thought. And I was afraid he had forgotten.

“What have you got there? A little visitor?” Edward peered curiously into the basket.

“I brought Tweety with me today. Would you happen to have a tiny little extra worm you could spare?”

Edward smiled, “Of course. The fish don’t much go for these little ones. He can have as many as he likes.”

“Stevie!” came the booming voice of Donnie. “I thought I saw you trek into the woods with the pr---with Snow, that is. I’m glad you’re heeding the warning, miss.”

Snow refused to look at the barbarian and continued to feed her bird.

“No never mind, I don’t need any acknowledgement from ya. Just so ya know that I’m watching ya Princess. I know how ya like to go strolling by yourself. But just remember, it’s for your own good. Don’t leave here alone without Eddy, now. Got that?”

“Don’t worry, I wouldn’t dream of it!” Snow finally glared back at him.

Donnie grinned and shook his head, amused at the girl’s defiant spirit against his own authoritative nature. Maybe she had some guts after all, he thought. “Stevie, I wondered if you might come and help me with a couple of things back at the village.”

Stevie followed Donnie like a puppy, as usual.

Hmmm, Snow thought. Donnie actually did me a favor today, and without even knowing it.

After a few moments’ pause, a rather uncomfortable one at that, Snow managed, “Edward, what was your life like before you came here to the Willows? Did you have a family?”

“Oh, yes, I did have a wife and son, respectively the queen and prince along with me and my brother.”

Snow looked out onto the water. “So they were your last memory of home, then?”

Edward winced at the thought, “No, not exactly. I’d rather prefer to not think about my last memory of home, actually. But yes, I guess they were part of the whole picture.”

Snow made designs in the dirt with a stick, “Do you miss having a family, or a companion, for example?”

Edward thought for a second, “Well, not really. Since I arrived here in the village, I have found the other men to be like brothers to me. They have actually become my new family, new companions. So I guess the answer to that is no,” he added innocently.

“So you don’t miss having a wife or child, then?” Snow kept her gaze on her dirt art below.

“Not really, no. It’s kind of nice to have the freedom to just be me for a change. I don’t have to worry about the responsibilities of wearing a crown here in the village. I’m part of a team here where we are just trying to survive.”

She looked up from her artwork, “If I may be so bold, as to get your thoughts on the recent arrivals to the village ... namely, us girls?”

Edward tilted his head, keeping his eyes on the fishing lure out in front of him, “Oh, it’s a fine thing, I suppose. We could use a woman’s touch around here on some things. Plus, it doesn’t hurt to have some help doing chores and cooking and such. But I’m sure I have a different take on the idea than the other men. No doubt, some of them are interested in one thing or another, like being in the company of a woman and the like. But I’m just not after those kinds of things at this point in my life right now, you know? I can only guess that you aren’t the type of girl that likes being ‘chased’ by different men, so you can feel safe with me. I would never do that sort of thing. That is what you were getting at, wasn’t it? In no certain terms, right? You needn’t worry. You’re safe from being ‘hunted’ around me, so to speak.”

"I appreciate that ... uh, I suppose." Snow felt the butterflies had returned, and brought their friends this time. Great, she thought. That's just what she wanted to hear, sure thing Ed. I wonder what that's all about? Perhaps he had a bad relationship with the queen that left a bad taste in his mouth, thought Snow. Maybe she should go have another talk with Yolanda and see if she will tell her more this time ... more about what is really going on with Edward. Then again, maybe Edward just needed a little 'push' like from a certain potion, perhaps? Stop it, Snow. You're not going to use that stuff. I'll bet this wouldn't be so difficult with Mitch. Oh, there you go again with the pity party thing! Quit it!

Edward began to pack in his gear, "Well, I guess we won't be having fish tonight. Doesn't look like they're biting today. They will probably be serving lunch soon. Ready to go back?"

Snow smiled weakly, "Sure." She scooped up Tweety as they hiked back to the village. Snow felt the pout try and return to her lips, so she bit her bottom lip to keep Edward from seeing. Not wishing to speak at all on the way back, lest she give away her disappointment somehow, she asked Edward if he knew what were the different types of trees they passed on their way back to the village. That way, the rest of the hike was composed solely of Edward pointing and reciting the different types of trees and what kinds of spores they produced. Perhaps it had been a silly question, thought Snow, but she didn't care.

Snow found Mitch in the kitchen preparing chicken for lunch that day. "Do you need a hand, there Mitch?" Snow looked at him with pleading eyes.

"Sure, why not. I'd always accept an invitation from you, Snow."

She blushed, "Well, I'm afraid we just didn't catch anything at the river. I just thought I'd tag along this morning. You know, trying to get the hang of fishing and getting to know everyone and, well, you know, everything else like that." Golly, Snow, you're rambling! He's really going to think you're batty, now!

"Snow, you surely don't have to explain yourself to me, love. Besides, you know I'd never worry about Eddy of all people," he laughed.

Now, what did he mean by that? Why not worry about Eddy? What was the deal with everybody regarding Edward!? Alright, now I have to find out, thought Snow.

After lunch, Snow couldn't find Yolanda, but Stevie suggested they go for a walk into the woods, as he wanted to look for 'scary looking' branches to decorate with for the festival.

"Oi, here's some over 'ere. These look pretty scary, don't they Snow?"

But Snow didn't hear Stevie. She was too preoccupied with a strange mist over in a small clearing ahead. She stepped closer and an eerie feeling came over her.

"Aye, Snow ya alright? Ya sleeping again, are ya?" Stevie teased. But as he came closer to her, he could see her face was almost white, her complexion paler than usual, her wide-eyed expression directed in the distance toward the misty clearing.

"Stevie, what's over there?" pointing to the clearing a few meters away.

"Wha'? Well I'll be! Ya know what tha' is? 'Ats where I found you Snow! Right there in that pile of leaves!" He walked towards the clearing.

"No, Stevie, I don't have a good feeling about what's over there."

"It's alright Snow. I've been 'ere 'undreds of times."

Snow reluctantly followed him over to the familiar pile of leaves she began her quest into this new Willows life from.

"See 'ere, Snow. You 'ad to 'ave fallen from outta this tree, maybe. There's no other place you could've come from."

Behind the leaf pile, stood a large tree ... an odd-looking tree with a hollow area at the bottom. Snow wouldn't get too close to the area. She felt a breeze on her face mixed with

the mist in the air and she began to hear something in the wind, a voice almost. It was saying something. It was speaking her name ... she would swear to it!

She grabbed Stevie's arm, "Come on, Stevie. Let's go."

Stevie was peering into the hollow bottom of the tree, "No, let's 'ave a look and see if we can see where you came from, eh?"

The voice in the wind was getting louder saying her name over and over.

She tugged at Stevie's arm, an urgency rising in her voice, "No, come on! We gotta go NOW!"

"It's alright Snow. We're not gonna be late for supper, promise."

She let go of Stevie's arm and backed away from the tree, feeling the mist all around her. It was the same mist that followed her through the enchanted forest as she ran from the huntsman, from her stepmother. She tried to tell Stevie to hurry, but she couldn't speak, she couldn't breathe. What was wrong? She was choking! She tried to gasp, but couldn't. She grabbed her throat. On the outside it felt normal but on the inside, her airway felt blocked. She couldn't get any air at all! 'Stevie HELP!' she thought. She couldn't get his attention. She ran out of the clearing, out of the mist and fell to the ground gasping for air finally able to breath. She clawed at the leaves on the ground as she caught her breath. In her grasp she clutched a large broken branch. She held it for what might come after her, out of the clearing. Whatever that was, she was ready in case it materialized again. She got up, still not able to speak, and so she ran. She ran back to the village as fast as she could. Stevie or not, she had to get away from there, away from whatever that was, choking the life out of her.

"Snow, would you look at this? Where do ya suppose this came from?" He turned around, but Snow was not there. "Snow? Where are ya? Snow!" Frightened that she was in the woods alone, he knew he had to go after her. He went to put the object he just discovered into his pocket, then stopped to look at it once more and wondered if it's purpose had anything to do with Snow in relation to the story behind the fairy tale. He rubbed the shiny object in his fingers, then put it in his pocket, carefully. He didn't want to cut himself ... on the broken piece of a mirror he had just found inside the tree.

Chapter 7

“All Hallow’s Eve”

Snow was putting the finishing touches on her costume. Made from the short satin slip given to her by Jill, Snow had lined the outside with sheer white chiffon and added a large ruffle with a silver ribbon at the bottom of the satin garment. The small straps of the slip were now covered with a lovely lace. Snow also added more strips of lace across the rest of the shoulder down to the arm, giving the dress the look of five straps on the shoulders. Along the neckline, a trim of lace with a silver ribbon to match the hem. Her wings were crafted with chicken wire, covered with white chiffon, and also trimmed in lace and silver ribbon. Of course, pinned to the center of her neckline was her most prized possession, her family crest. As an added touch to her fairy princess costume, she had fashioned a crown of flowers that she had picked near the edge of the woods and fastened it with chicken wire. Hanging down from the back of the crown were more of the lace and silver ribbons she had used in her costume.

Snow held the costume up for Kate to see, “Are you sure you don’t think it’s too short? That garment Jill gave me ... what was it called again? A negligi ... what?”

“Negligee,” finished Yolanda.

“Yes, that was it. I just thought it was really short, so I added some more material to the bottom, here.”

Kate stood up and spun around in her pretty witch costume, “Well Snow, look. Mine is even shorter than yours, so you don’t have to worry. The men will all be staring at me instead,” and she gave a wink to Kristen who smiled and shook her head.

“Well, that’s good I suppose, because Donnie says it isn’t good for me to ‘flunte’ around the gentleman with not a lot of clothing on.”

“Flunte? Oh, you mean ‘flaunt’! Flaunt around!” laughed Kate.

Kristen gave an irritated look at Snow’s statement, “Snow, don’t you listen to Donnie. He’s just talking to hear himself talk most of the time,” with a sideways glance at Kate.

“Ta da!” Jill burst through the door ceremoniously in a lovely crushed green velvet dress. It had a ‘southern belle’ style to it, like ‘Scarlett O’Hara’, Jill had hinted. Of course Snow had no idea who ‘Scarlett O’Hara’ was.

“Well, what do ya think?”

“I think somebody will have to hold Roger down when you enter the party, dear!” said Yolanda teasingly.

“Wow, that’s lovely, Jill. I really think I should have gone with a longer dress, like back home,” as Snow looked at Jill’s long green dress, “However, I made this hooded cape much like one I had at home. Perhaps I’ll just leave it on all night.”

Kristen gasped, “Snow, no! You can’t do that! You worked so hard on your dress. It’s lovely, and it isn’t that short, really. And what about your wings? The cloak will cover your pretty wings. You have to take it off sometime.”

“Well, I’ll think about it. I guess,” as Snow wrapped the white cloak around her shoulders.

“Aye, ya girls in there?” came Stevie’s voice with a knocking at the door. “All the chores are done now, and Donnie says we can start the games and stuff for the party! Are ya ready yet?”

“Poor Stevie, I think he’s just about ready to jump out of his skin. He’s been waiting on this party all week. I’ll bet he didn’t sleep a wink last night.” Kate whispered, then continued to Stevie, “Yes, Stevie. We’re all about done. Tell all the guys to meet us in the main hut. We’d prefer to make a,” she paused to think, “...ceremonious entrance.”

Kate looked to Yolanda who giggled and to Kristen who gave a 'thumbs up' signal. Snow looked at Kristen's thumb wondering if she was hurt.

All of the food was prepared and laid out. Mitch was relieved that he wouldn't have to spend the better part of the festival in the kitchen. He was also glad he hadn't spilled anything on the handsome royal blue velvet 'prince' costume that Snow had made for him. When he picked it up at her treehouse that morning, Stevie was there as usual. He knew that Stevie's relationship with Snow was harmless, but he couldn't help but be jealous. At least, he hoped their relationship was harmless, he thought. Perhaps he should watch their progression more closely. After all, there is a first for everything.

All the men waited in the main hall. It was just about noontime. Ivan adorned a handsomely formed armor of chain mail with a black crest. Just as he had hinted the other evening, he was the 'Black Knight'. He said it was someone he once knew and greatly respected. Thomas did not come as the Headless Horseman, but as a hooded priest or monk ... minus the bald head. Stevie was of course in the 'ghost' sheet that Snow cut out for him, although Rein and Nicholas batted around the idea that he should have been Snow's court jester. Stevie had not quite understood their meaning, and Donnie melted away their teasing with a hard stare.

Nicholas chose the easy route and decided to be a hunter, in his usual attire and unloaded hunting rifle. Rein and Eddy wore the matching grim reapers or otherwise known as 'Brothers Grimm' idea that Rein conjured up for Snow to make them. Trent had decided to be a vampire. He said it was a great excuse to be able to bite the ladies on the neck. His statement received groans from the other men in the room. All of the men could hardly wait to see what the ladies were wearing. Their imaginations ran wild when Stevie came in with his announcement of the girls' entrance shortly.

The CD player 'boom box' was already playing party music awaiting any 'willing soul' to come and dance to its tune. The door to the main hall opened and the men were almost tempted to hold their breaths as the ladies strolled in. Upon seeing such visions of loveliness, it almost took their breath away after all. Even in their 'masquerade masks' it was evident who was who. Stevie all but bounded over to Snow to tell her how lovely she looked. Duncan immediately approached Yolanda and took her hand and kissed it. Her Renaissance noblewoman attire was perfect with his handsome British uniform. Roger quickly followed and asked Jill to dance. After thinking for a second just to torture him, she said 'yes'. As they joined Duncan and Yolanda, Murray took a quick look around the room to be sure no one was going to try and beat him to the punch to ask Kristen to dance, and then strolled over to ask her. Dressed to dance donning her 1920's flapper dress, she pondered maybe there were some early 20th century jazz CD's in the collection.

Stevie wasn't very comfortable at dancing, so instead he offered to get Snow some punch. Seizing his opportunity, Mitch quickly headed in Snow's direction, so as not to give an open door to Rein to dance with Snow first. But it was too late. Rein had appeared almost out of nowhere and asked Snow to dance.

Snow gave a look of concern, still thinking about the fact that she would rather not remove the cloak she wore to hide the revealing nature of her costume. "Well, I'm not sure I'm very familiar with the way everyone dances here. I'm sure it's quite different than I am used to."

Rein smiled at her innocence, "That's alright sweetheart. I'll teach you everything you need to know."

Although she was reluctant, Rein took her hand and started to lead her over to where the others were dancing.

As Snow took a step and turned around, Stevie was coming towards her with a cup of punch for her. They collided and punch flew all down her cloak. "Snow, oh dear I'm s' sorry! I go' punch all over yer pretty white cape!"

"Not to worry, it will wash out I'm sure. Here, Mitch can rinse this out for you. Can't you Mitch?" assured Rein as he untied Snow's cloak before she knew what was going on. As Rein removed the cloak, Snow's fairy princess costume was revealed. Up until now, Snow had never worn anything that hadn't come to her ankles, at least. And now she was wearing a dress that hardly even came to her knees. Realizing she wasn't wearing the cloak now, she stuttered that she could still wear the cloak, punch and all. She turned and found herself face to face with Mitch. As he looked at her, he sighed. She was a vision. The soft skin of her face matched that of her legs and shoulders as he admired the way the lace draped her arms, and the way the ruffle of her homemade dress kissed her legs.

"Aye, Snow! I like yer costume better without that cape, anyway. And I love the wings ya made! 'Ats chicken wire in there, right?" As Stevie wiggled her wings, she turned and saw his fascination with her flying apparatus, and she felt a little more at ease, that perhaps not everyone in the room was staring at her naked legs after all.

"Here you go Mitch. Please be a dear and go wash out this cloak for Snow would you? I haven't a clue where you keep the soap flakes in that kitchen of yours, man." Rein shoved the cloak at a very annoyed Mitch and took Snow's hand. "Now, how about that dance?"

As Snow danced with Rein, she remembered back to their last dance in the barn and what happened afterwards. And it was difficult for her to look into Rein's eyes. She was afraid she would see something ... something she saw that day that would allow her to let her guard down. And she didn't want that to happen again.

Mitch went to the back to put Snow's cloak in some soap and water. As Kate giggled at Mitch's obvious annoyance, she noticed Donnie's eyes on her. Truth was, he hadn't taken his eyes off of her since she came into the dining room.

She looked at him flirtatiously, "Well, aren't you going to ask me to dance?"

"Later Angel," he winked. "Right now I think we'd all better get on with the games outside. There will be plenty of time later for dancing ..." he paused to look Kate over for a second, "or whatever."

The afternoon was filled with delightful games of fun and competition. The 'pumpkin carving' award went to Stevie after much discussion. The winner of the 'bobbing for apples' went to Bart, especially since the ladies forfeited, so as not to ruin their makeup. 'Knife throwing' went to Donnie hands down whereas the 'rifle target shoot' went to Nicholas. The 'archery contest' was very close with first place going to Snow, and Edward coming in a close second. There were many games that afternoon until it was suggested that they start the indoor games as it was starting to get dark.

As they headed inside, Snow happened to overhear a conversation between Kristen and Kate about a date Kate had with Mitch a few months back, before Snow came to the Willows. Once Kate admitted that it was Mitch's idea, Snow didn't want to hear anymore and went on inside, disheartened somewhat. Could Mitch still have feelings for Kate? After all, Snow was having her own troubles trying to get over feelings for some of these men, and she had just met them, practically. So it seems totally possible. Snow, you've got to get a handle on things, it doesn't matter. 'Remember,' she thought to herself as she stroked the crest pinned to the center of her dress. Then she placed her hand in the pocket she added to the dress. She just wanted to be sure that it was still there. She stroked the little vile of 'Dixie Love Oil' as she remembered the words of the other women. Should she use it, Snow thought? Would it even work on Edward at all? And if it did, what kind of effect would it have? She wasn't sure if she wanted to use it here at the party, but she brought it just in case.

“Would you like some punch?” Rein startled Snow as she turned to see him holding out a cup to her. “Yes, thank you.” She took the cup and smiled shyly. He looked at her lips as she smiled, and remembered how soft they were when he kissed her in the barn that day. He wished he could find a moment to try it again. Of course, perhaps he would be lucky enough to get to kiss her during the ‘spin the bottle’ game that evening, but mainly he wanted to find a moment alone with her sometime that night.

The ‘spin the bottle’ game was an unusual concept that Snow had not heard of. To spin a bottle and kiss a person whether you like them or not was a strange idea, but nevertheless, she reluctantly agreed to play. She thought, why not? After all, they all seem to look like the prince of my dreams, anyway. As she was preparing to find a spot to sit, she noticed Edward’s cup unguarded and took the vile out of her pocket. After a second’s thought she hesitated but then remembered her father’s decree. She tipped a little of Jill’s potion into it, but not too much. She wanted to use just enough to see what it would do. She then decided to sit exactly across from Edward to make it easier for her to tell if it was working.

However, Snow noticed that throughout the game, Edward was more of a ‘sipper’ rather than a ‘drinker’, just taking little sips of his cup every so often. Snow thought to herself, ‘it will take all night for this stuff to take effect.’ After a few bottle spin rounds and a few cups of punch, Snow got up to get herself another cup, but fell back to the floor where she had been sitting.

“You alright Snow?” asked a concerned Stevie.

“Yes, I must have just tried to get up too quickly. That’s all.”

“No, it’s probably the cups of punch you’ve been drinking there, dear,” winked Kate. “It’s spiked you know.”

“Spiked? What does that mean?” Snow tried once again to rise to her feet, and she succeeded this time.

“It means the stuff’s got spirit in it.” Muttered Jill as she spun for her turn.

“She means rum, Snow,” Edward clarified as he got up to give her a hand. “Would you like me to get you another cup?”

“No, maybe I shouldn’t have any more then,” Snow smiled at Edward’s courtesy.

“Nonsense! It’s a party, girl! Woooooohooooo!” Jill wailed as her bottle stopped at Roger. “Ya gotta live it up, Snow! Dance it up, drink it up!”

Kate spoke up, “Snow, don’t worry. We’ll make sure you don’t go tooooo overboard.”

“Well, OK.” Snow turned to Eddy, “I guess it would be OK if I had just one more then.”

Rein looked on Eddy’s attentiveness to Snow with concern. Amazingly enough, during her turns, Snow’s bottle never stopped on Rein or Mitch. It did however stop on Eddy, to Snow’s delight. And to her surprise he gave her quite a large kiss. That stuff must be working, she thought!

On her next turn, the bottle stopped on Stevie. Beet red in the face, he looked down and laughed nervously, “What do I do?”

“Ya kiss her, ya nitwit!” yelled Donnie, followed by a roomful of laughter.

Without really looking at her, Stevie hesitated as he leaned into Snow, who smiled at his shyness and kissed him on the cheek. Just then Duncan came in from watch duty, “Who’s next on watch?” Quickly, as if he’d been rescued from an awkward moment, Stevie jumped up, “It’s me! I’m next on watch, Duncan!” And he quickly headed out the door.

The room was filled with laughter as stories of past memories and embarrassing moments became the topic of choice. Snow found herself giggling more than usual and also found an extra added comfort in being around everyone. Also, due to the punch she felt a strange giddiness that she wasn’t quite used to and found herself gazing quite often between Eddy, Mitch and Rein, who she found were gazing back.

The dancing went on into the night and the music choices ranged from rock and roll to waltz to slow dancing. Mitch finally got his chance to ask Snow to dance. There was a lovely slow song playing that set a romantic mood for everyone in the room. As Mitch held her in his arms, he felt just how incredibly soft her satin costume was, or was it Snow that was so soft? Her hair smelled wonderful. Was it honeysuckle or vanilla? Perhaps it was both, Mitch didn't care. He just knew that the 'fairy princess' was dancing in his arms. The tune was familiar to Snow as she had heard it played by the ladies before, and she began to hum to the music. Mitch found her voice lovely and soothing, almost entrancing. The song was over just as soon as it had begun, or so it seemed for Mitch and Snow.

A medieval folk song began to play that was familiar to both Snow and Ivan. As they began to dance to the upbeat melody, they invited the others to join in and taught them the steps to the folk dance. All were in good spirits.

At one point in the evening, Nicholas reached for his glass on the fireplace mantle and accidentally knocked off the basket that Snow's pet bird Tweety was in. Just before the basket crashed to the floor, the little bird clumsily flew out of the basket and over to the end table by the door.

"Tweety! You flew! You can fly! Good Tweety!" squealed Snow as she clapped her hands.

"Snow, why did you bring the bird to the party?" asked an annoyed Nicholas as the bird scared the daylights out of him when it almost crashed into his head.

Stevie, who was on watch outside peered in the door to see what all the fuss was about, "Aye! What's goin' on in 'ere? I 'eard some ruckus!"

Just then the bird flew out the door. "Tweety!" screamed Snow as she ran after him through the door and past Stevie.

Rein followed her, "It's OK, Stevie. I'll go and get her. You just keep on your watch."

"OK Rein. Just be sure that she don't go far!"

Rein pulled his black cap over his head to cover his short hairstyle and only revealing his face. When he and Eddy both did this, it was hard to tell them apart. Rein planned it this way. Perhaps now was the perfect time to take advantage of it.

"Ouch!" cried Snow as she tripped over the rocks by the side of the cabin.

"Are you alright?" Rein crouched near her when he heard her fall.

"Yes, I just scraped my knee. That darn punch won't allow me to keep my balance very well, you know?" Her words were slurred from the rum punch.

"Well, it isn't bleeding, so I guess we don't have to get the first aid kit," Rein assured as he rubbed her knee tenderly.

"But I have to find Tweety. I can't leave him out here all alone. He's just a baby." Snow's voice was filled with concern.

"It'll be alright. We'll find him, or I'm not Prince Edward."

Snow was somewhat startled, as she thought he was Rein, "Edward? How can I be sure you are Edward?" she halfway teased.

"Well, the other day at the river, remember how you told me about your sixteenth birthday? About how the kingdom of the House of Loring threw a joust tournament in honor of your birthday?"

Snow smiled and then paused for a moment, thinking. "Why did you follow me out here, Edward?"

"I wanted to be sure you didn't go off into the woods. You know it isn't safe."

Snow sighed not quite knowing what to say next, "Oh." As Rein brushed her hair from her face and continued to rub her knee, she thought how well the potion was working and she will have to try it again sometime when they aren't faced with a cabin full of people. Perhaps the next time they go fishing. Yes, that would be a good time to try it. They would be all alone. Rein touched her lips with his fingers and then moved in to kiss her, once again. Snow stayed still and after a second of their lips meeting, she kissed him back.

Considering the tingling effect the rum had on her that night and especially at that moment, she began to wonder if someone had used the Dixie Love Oil on her. She began to feel a warmth in her stomach, but it wasn't butterflies this time. It was ... different.

Rein moved from rubbing her knee to rubbing her upper leg. Snow flinched and backed away from the kiss. Then she thought that perhaps she shouldn't use the stuff when it was just the two of them after all. Perhaps it was too strong.

Rein removed his hand from her leg, "I'm sorry, I guess I got a little carried away. Please forgive me."

This gentlemanly statement of his made such an impression on Snow that she leaned in to kiss him all on her own. Or perhaps it was the rum that had made the impression, but nevertheless Snow thought that she had finally gotten her prince. That Edward had finally fallen for her.

"Rein? Snow? Are ya over 'ere? Oh, good. I'm glad you found 'er, Rein. I was worried." Stevie had found the two over by the side of the cabin.

Snow frowned, "Stevie, this is Edward, not Rein."

"Well 'at's strange. I just spoke to Rein a moment ago when he went looking for..."

"We're fine, Stevie. Thank you," Rein interrupted trying to salvage his disguise. "You'd better get back to your watch, Stevie."

After Stevie had left, Snow stood up, "I trust Stevie, and you ARE Rein, aren't you? You tricked me!"

"Snow I can explain. I was only kidding. I was about to tell you, really."

Snow was furious, "Why would you say you were Edward? How would you know about my sixteenth birthday? You were spying on us the other day, weren't you? What else did you hear?"

Rein tried to hold her hands in his, but she pulled away. "Snow, I know that true love can't be found in any royal marriage decree no matter how sacred it is."

Snow's jaw dropped, "You must be eavesdropping on everyone in the village! Aren't you?"

"Snow, I wanted to show you what love really is. You aren't in your century anymore. You don't have to follow those silly rules."

"Silly rules! How dare you! That is my heritage and my family that you are calling silly! This conversation is over!"

Rein tried to say something else, but Snow ran away around to the back kitchen entrance and burst through the door. She shut it behind her and slid down to the floor sobbing.

Mitch had just come in to get some more cookies to fill the trays and was startled by Snow's entrance into the kitchen. He approached her and crouched down beside her, "Snow, sweet Princess, what's wrong honey?"

Through her sobs it was hard to understand her broken sentences, "Rein was Edward, but he wasn't, but I thought he was. He tricked me, he kissed me ... again. He knows about everything. Why? Why is this happening? Why am I here?" She began to sob uncontrollably.

Mitch pulled her into his chest to cry, "It's OK. It's going to be alright. You can cry. I don't mind. You can tell me everything. I'm a good listener. I hate to see you unhappy, Snow. You know that." He brushed her hair with his hands as she buried her face in his shoulder.

She stopped crying as Mitch held her closer to him. She felt that warm feeling in her stomach again. She remembered her dream again about how Mitch was the royal prince and how she had wished it were really so, just as she wished it now. She remembered that tonight he was supposed to be her prince, and she was his fairy princess. She pulled away enough to look into his eyes. She found that loving, soothing look he always had waiting for

her when she would look into his eyes, even back when she fell into his arms out of the orchard or out of the oak tree, the one she now calls home. Home? Is this really her home now? She couldn't go back to her time, or she would surely be killed. Is this a place where she could be happy for the rest of her life? If she were with someone like Mitch, she could. With his soothing words, friendly smile and warm eyes, she felt safe, she felt loved. So there in the kitchen, she spilled everything to him. She told him of her decree and her recent outings with Edward in the hopes that he would see fit to form a union with her to satisfy her family decree. She told him what happened in the barn that night with Rein and also what had just happened before she came in here. She didn't, however, tell him of the Dixie Love Oil. Even with the liquor still clouding her head, she managed to still keep that a secret.

Of course Mitch was angry with Rein, but didn't show this to Snow. He was happy that she trusted him enough to tell him everything. He could also tell that the rum was still having its effects, and feared that this may have led to her kiss with Rein a few moments ago. Snow was vulnerable, too vulnerable. And Mitch didn't like the thought of anyone taking advantage of Snow in any way, no matter how small. He leaned down to wipe a tear off of her cheek and she looked up at him ... their faces, their lips almost touching. Once again he resisted the temptation to kiss her and merely smiled. She smiled back and kissed him on the cheek. In Mitch's thoughts he cursed that silly 'spin the bottle' game for the bottle not landing on him on any of Snow's spins.

She was looking deep into his eyes, "Why is it that you never kiss me, Mitch?" Snow slurred her words still struggling with the effects of the punch. "Do you not like me?"

Mitch was caught off guard and almost stammered his words at hearing her question, "No, dear. You couldn't be farther from the truth, sweet Princess. I ... I have wanted to kiss you since you first fell into my arms that first day, but I never allowed myself to do so. I know that you are from a different time and culture and that it is probably not considered a very proper thing where you come from. Is it?"

"Well," Snow looked at his costume, "since you are dressed as a prince tonight and I'm dressed as a fairy princess, we could just pretend for one night that it's proper, right? That you are my prince and I am your princess?"

Mitch wanted her words to be true so badly. He smiled, "Yes, that sounds lovely. Tonight is ours, Princess." He leaned in and kissed her gently. The warm feeling in her stomach spread quickly all the way down to her feet. As he kissed her, Snow touched his cheek, then brushed her hand through his hair. He pulled her closer, and put his arms around her, having to go underneath her wings.

The kitchen door opened, "Hey Mitch, did you ever find any more of those..." Kate's sentence trailed off as she saw Mitch and Snow on the floor by the back door.

Snow pulled away, upon hearing Kate's voice. Mitch jumped up, helped Snow to her feet and began to stammer an explanation, "Snow is having a bit of a rough night. I was just trying to help calm her down, sort of."

Kate giggled, "Really, you don't have to explain anything to me. I'm just here to satisfy a sweet tooth. Please continue. I didn't mean to bother you."

Snow suddenly remembered what she overheard about them that afternoon. The rum was still kicking her emotions into overdrive ... the good ones and the bad, "No really it's alright. I'm sure Mitch here would much rather set up another date than listen to my sob stories all night. Excuse me." Snow walked back into the dining room, leaving both Mitch and Kate in the kitchen confused.

Snow went to a chair in a back corner of the dining room.

Edward spotted her coming out of the kitchen and went to her, "Snow, I've been looking for you. Are you alright?"

Snow turned away from him, "Leave me alone! You've done enough."

Edward looked puzzled, "What have I done?"

Snow snapped at him, "You tricked me! You pretended to be Edward, or have you forgotten already?"

Eddy removed his black hood revealing the 'pageboy' hairstyle, "Pretended?"

Snow's eyes widened, "Edward, it is you! Oh I'm so sorry! Earlier, Rein tricked me into thinking he was you in order to..." Snow trailed off, having already said too much.

"In order to what, Snow?"

"In order to kiss me. That's what. There, I said it." Snow looked away.

Edward turned her face toward him, "So what you're saying is that you won't kiss him, but you will kiss me?"

Snow looked into his eyes, and couldn't speak without stuttering, "Well, um, yes, I ... I guess so."

"Why is that, Snow?"

She swallowed hard, "Well, because ... well, I don't know."

Eddy began to find her innocence quite appealing, and her appearance was lovely. Why hadn't he noticed before? He wasn't sure, but he noticed her now.

"Aye, Snow look! 'ere he is! Safe 'n sound, he is!" Stevie crouched down next to Snow's chair holding the small bird.

"Tweety!" squealed Snow. "You found him! Oh thank you Stevie!" She kissed him again on the cheek, and this time he wasn't so embarrassed.

He really enjoyed Snow kissing him, actually. Then he remembered that he had brought that mirror piece to show Snow. He hadn't had a chance to tell her about it yet, and thought that the party would be a good place to show everyone. He thought that they all may find it interesting. But as he reached into his pocket to show her, it wasn't there. Oh no! It must have fallen out of his pocket sometime during the party. He began searching around the floor of the dining hall.

"Snow, could we talk outside?" asked Edward while Stevie was searching around Snow's chair.

"Well ya know I'd let ya on my watch, but it's Donnie's watch now, an' I' bet he won't let ya. I s'pose ya can try."

But Stevie was right. Donnie wouldn't let them go outside to talk, so Edward chose to speak with Snow in the kitchen. "I just wanted to find out more regarding what you told me in the dining room, but I thought it best we speak in private. I know that you probably didn't want everyone to hear. Is there something you want to ... tell me, perhaps?"

Snow looked down at the floor.

"Here you are," came Rein's voice coming through the kitchen door.

"Goodness, the kitchen is a popular place tonight." Snow sighed as she took a step away from them, her arms folded.

"Snow told me about what happened, Rein ... about how you tricked her. That wasn't a nice thing to do. Why would you do that?"

"You know, Eddy, I don't have to answer to you about anything I do."

Snow walked between them, "If you'll excuse me, I'm going to leave you gentlemen to talk, while Tweety and I take a little ... what's it called ... bathroom break, I believe?"

As Snow left, Rein continued, "Why do you care at all what Snow and I do, anyway?"

"Because whatever it was that you were doing, you were masquerading as me, which is the only reason she kissed you."

Rein glared back, "And what makes you think that?"

"Because she told me so, Rein!"

"And you expect me to believe that?" Rein turned and took a few steps away.

Edward walked towards him, "Yes I do. Stevie heard it. He could tell you."

Rein turned back to look at Eddy, “Oh, well I’ll bet he couldn’t tell you of a certain royal decree that Snow is trying to set you up for, now could he?”

Edward shook his head, “What the hell are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about this stupid decree that her family has followed by tradition where she can only marry someone from a royal background, namely you Eddy. You’re Prince Charming! God, can you believe that!” Rein laughed. “It’s so blasted ironic, it’s laughable. Not for Snow of course. Because that poor girl thinks she has no choice in the world for a husband but YOU. And that’s the tragedy right there! She’s so loyal to her family that she will put a blasted family tradition before true love. And with someone who would never want her, no doubt!”

“Well, now who said I would never want her?”

Rein pointed his finger, “Now don’t even go there, Ed. Don’t even try and pull something like that over on her!”

Just then there came a painful scream from the bathroom. Edward and Rein went running in that direction. Once there, they found Mitch kneeling beside Snow, unconscious on the floor ... a small pool of blood under her neck.

“God, what happened!” Rein tried to approach her.

“We need the first aid kit now! Right now! Someone get some bandages to stop her bleeding.” Mitch was almost in a panic.

Kate joined him on the floor next to Snow having had Red Cross training, “She must have fainted, but her neck has been cut. Looks like just a nick. It missed her jugular, thank God! She wouldn’t have had a chance without proper medical attention.”

Tweety was sitting on the sink watching everyone.

“Wha’ happened?” sobbed Stevie, crying at the site of Snow in such distress.

“What’s that?” Donnie walked over to the wall and pulled out a shard of glass with blood on it, located at just about where Snow’s neck would have been had she been standing. “This looks like a piece of a mirror. And it’s got blood on it. How did it get here? It was just stuck into the wall ‘ere ... what th’ hell?”

Stevie cupped his hand over his mouth as he saw *his* broken mirror piece in Donnie’s hand.

Chapter 8

“Mirror of Blood”

When Snow opened her eyes, she was in the guest bedroom in the main cabin. In the room with her were Stevie and Yolanda, and Tweety was sitting on the bedpost watching. She jolted up in the bed in a panic.

Yolanda gently put her hands on Snow’s shoulders, “Snow, it’s alright. You’re with friends. You’ve had a rough episode, though.”

Snow winced in pain as she touched her neck. She found a bandage wrapped gently around it. The pain from the cut smarted.

“Your neck was cut. We don’t quite know what happened. We hoped you could shed some light on it. Donnie found a broken piece of a mirror jarred in the wall. It had blood on it. Did it cut you in some way?”

Snow thought back for a moment, then looked up at Tweety. It suddenly all came back to her, and she gasped, “There was a mist ... like in the woods that day, Stevie, remember?”

Stevie frowned as he tried to remember.

“A mist?” Yolanda looked at Snow curiously.

“Yes, and it began to swirl around the room. It scared me just like it did that day in the woods. Then I heard Tweety cry and, as I turned to look at him, I felt a sharp pain in the side of my neck. I touched where it hurt and there was blood. That’s all I remember before waking up here.”

“Sounds like if you hadn’t turned, that mirror shard could have killed you, then. Kate said it nicked you very close to your main artery there,” Yolanda directed to her neck.

“Aye, then it was Tweety who saved you! Saved by the bird, you were Snow!” Stevie picked up Tweety with his hands and held him.

Yolanda frowned. “Then Jill could be right. When Stevie told us about the mirror shard and where he found it, Jill thought maybe it was a piece of the queen’s mirror ... meaning your stepmother, the queen ... the witch!”

“What! No, it couldn’t be. You’re scaring me. I’m in a totally different time and place now. She can’t find me,” gasped Snow.

Stevie touched her hand, “But Snow, you just said yourself about th’ mist in th’ woods, there. Ya saw it in the loo there too, right? That day in th’ woods, I found that piece of mirror in the very spot I first found ya, Snow.” He began to tear up, “I feel s’ guilty Snow. It’s my fault. All of this is my fault!”

“Nonsense! Stop blaming yourself Stevie!” Yolanda looked into Snow’s eyes as if she were going to ask her something very important, “Snow, did you ever overhear your stepmother speak to her mirror back home?”

Snow replied instinctively, “Yes, all the time.”

Stevie and Yolanda looked at one another.

“You don’t think that’s part of HER mirror, do you?” Snow gasped again. “How did she get here? What am I going to do? What’s to become of me?” Snow grabbed Yolanda’s arm and began sobbing uncontrollably.

“Calm down Snow. It’s going to be alright. It was just a shard from a mirror. It probably just fell through the same portal, or whatever, that you did. I’m sure it’s just a fluke.”

Donnie threw it into the fireplace. “It won’t come after you again. Now, you need to get some rest. Stevie will stay here with you and make sure you’re not alone, OK?”

“OK.” Snow sniffed, uncertain about everything. Yolanda smiled and closed the door as she left the bedroom. Snow took Tweety gently from Stevie and cradled him. “Looks like you’re my bodyguard, little Tweety. Please stay by my side. You’re like my guardian angel.”

Stevie began to cry again, "Snow, it looks like I'm no good at guarding ya anymore, so ya need to keep yer bird. It's my fault all this 'appened."

"Stevie, no. Yolanda is right. It's not your fault. You didn't know. We just have to be really careful from now on regarding anything related to the woods. With all the strange things that have gone on, we just don't know anymore."

"Yeah, you're right, Snow. We gotta keep an eye out. But ya gotta rest now, Snow. I promise this time I won't let anything 'appen to ya. Cross my heart, Snow." Stevie made a cross motion over his chest.

Snow smiled and patted his hand and rested Tweety beside her on her pillow. Even though the events of the evening were rushing through her head, sleep and Snow finally found each other.

As Yolanda came back into the main room, she was bombarded by Mitch and Eddy. "How is she?" Mitch managed to sputter.

"She's just gone back to sleep. It would be better if she didn't have any visitors for a while, I think. She's had quite a scare."

"What was the story? What did she say happened?" Edward inquired, almost afraid to hear the answer.

Yolanda paused as she looked down. "It was just as we feared. There was a strange mist in the room, she said, and then the shard flew at her and tried to kill her. If she hadn't moved just slightly the way she did, she'd be dead right now."

Donnie shook his head, "I know Stevie feels real guilty right now, but I do wish he'd 'ave told us about the mirror in th' woods."

"I guess I should have said something," Kristen cowered.

"What are ya talking 'bout, woman?" Donnie eyed her suspiciously.

"Well, the other day Snow told me about the mist in the woods and how it tried to choke her till she ran out of it and back to the village. I just thought she had an overactive imagination with all of this recent 'spooky woods' talk. That must have been when Stevie found the mirror. I guess what she told me really happened to her."

"Dammit woman! Why didn't ya say anything till now!" Donnie stood up from his chair near the fireplace.

"I just told you. I thought she imagined it!"

"Everything around here's important enough ta mention, no matter how small! Does everyone got that?" Donnie shouted as he looked around the room at everyone. The others nodded.

"Well, this whole thing is just too creepy for me anymore," shrugged Rein as he sipped his cider.

"Amen to that. I even let Yolanda take over the nursing duties for me." Kate spouted with a shudder.

"I don't get you people!" flamed Eddy. "This innocent girl, a child almost, comes into this village. You all 'pretend' to be her friend and then one strange thing happens and you all turn on her! I don't get it! Weird things were happening around here long before she ever came here, remember?"

"That's not true Eddy. We're not all turning on..." Yolanda began, but was quickly interrupted by Rein.

"Alright then, Your Majesty! Why don't you just take care of her, then and save us all the trouble! 'Little Miss Innocent' in there ... the whole thing is starting to make me sick!"

Edward glared at him, "I don't EVER want to see you around her again! You got that, Partridge!"

"Fine with me, 'Prince Charming'! I don't know about the rest of you, but I need a drink!"

As Rein exited into the kitchen, Duncan raised his hands. "Alright, that's enough of this. Look, we've all been through a lot tonight, and God knows that alcohol has played its role in the scheme of things. We all just need to calm down and get some rest, all right? Just like Jill and Donnie have said, strange things happen on Halloween and that's why we've all decided to stay here together tonight. This is probably just an isolated incident. I'm sure everything will be fine tomorrow."

Mitch folded his arms. "Well thank you for your enlightened words of wisdom, Duncan, but how can you be so sure?"

"I'm not completely sure, to be honest, but we've taken every precaution to be sure, Mitch. Alright? Now let's all get some sleep before we're all at each other's throats." He gave a quick glance at Yolanda, "Sorry, poor choice of words."

"Who's in with Snow right now?" Eddy approached Yolanda.

"Stevie is in there with her."

"Stevie! He the one that got her in this mess."

Donnie gave him a look.

"That's it. I'll just stay with her tonight, if it's all the same to you people." Edward then headed for the bedroom.

Ivan watched him leave. "What's gotten into him all of a sudden?"

Mitch never took his suspicious gaze off Edward. "I don't know, but I'd sure consider it one of the strange things happening around here. That's for sure."

"Stevie, wake up. I'm taking over Snow's watch."

Stevie rubbed his eyes and pretended to not have been asleep. "No, no. It's OK. I promised Snow that I'd..."

"Stevie, you can go now!" Eddy's voice was stern and Stevie knew he meant what he said.

"Well, you just better keep a good eye out, OK?"

"Don't worry, Stevie. She'll be fine."

Once Stevie was gone, Eddy brushed his hand through the sleeping princess' hair. "What have you done to me, Snow? You're making me crazy. I used to know what I wanted. My desires were black and white, but now ... now everything is more like shades of grey. And you're there in the middle, Snow. You, this night, these strange events that they all seem to blame you for ... but I don't. You, just like the rest of us, are a victim in all of this. What do you really want, Snow? You don't really want someone so hardened as me, do you? Someone whose been around the block way too many times for you, Snow. You're almost untouchable, you know? Maybe not for someone like Stevie, but for me? Would you really want someone like me? I'm not really 'Prince Charming', Snow. But believe it or not, I'm willing to try, I suppose. If I'm able. Remember the archery contest? We have something in common there. And of course there's the royalty thing, which is apparently a bigger deal to you than it is to me, but nonetheless, there you have it. Oh, I don't know what I'm trying to say. I don't even know what I'm thinking. Ever since I got here to the village, I really haven't considered that a relationship with anyone was in my best interests, except for my brothers here in the Willows. Although, sometimes I do miss having a companion, but I just don't think I would know how to treat you. Don't you see? At least not treat you the way you're used to ... or rather, the way you deserve to be treated. I'm used to having, what's the word, a plaything of sorts ... I guess you'd call it. And that's not you, Snow. You aren't a 'plaything', you're a Princess. Argh! I'm not saying any of this right. I'll just shut up. I'm glad you're asleep, Princess. Maybe one of these days I'll figure out what I'm trying to say and say it right."

Turned on her side, Snow faced the window, her eyes as big as saucers. She HAD heard what Edward said ... heard every word. Her heart pounded in her chest so loud that she

was afraid Edward would hear. She felt those silly butterflies come to visit her again in her stomach and she wanted to swallow, but she didn't dare, for fear that he may see and know she was awake.

After about an hour, Ed began to feel his eyelids getting heavy. "You know, I'm going to get some coffee right quick." Eddy peered out the door and saw Stevie sitting reading one of his books, while Ivan and Bart were outside on watch talking to Donnie. The others in the main room were finally asleep.

"Stevie, can you do me a favor?"

Stevie jumped up and rushed over to him. "Sure thing, Eddy. How's Snow?"

"She's fine. I wondered if you could just watch her door here while I get some coffee? But you don't have to go into the room. I don't want anything to wake her."

"Sure, Eddy. I can do that." Stevie sat back over in the corner and continued to read his book, glancing now and then in the direction of the bedroom. As Eddy walked into the kitchen, snoring could be heard in different parts of the room. The fire had died down to a dull flicker, barely lighting the room enough for Stevie to read by, but he was used to it. There was a light billow of smoke coming from the fire. Unnoticed by Stevie, the smoke drifted down to the floor and slowly began to flow toward the bedroom where Snow was sleeping.

Edward stepped out of the kitchen and witnessed the smoke cloud now making its way under the door.

"Stevie, we have to get her out of there!"

Stevie jumped out of his chair now, seeing the smoke traveling under Snow's door.

They both ran outside, passing the men on watch, "ere now, what's goin' on?" as Donnie and the other two followed them.

"We have another situation, men. Just come on!" They approached the window of the bedroom. Snow was still sleeping, and the cloud was now hovering over the bed just below the ceiling.

"Snow!"

She couldn't hear Edward yelling through the window, so he grabbed a large tree branch and crashed it through the window, startling Snow, who upon seeing the cloud above her, ran toward the window. Edward had jumped through the window and grabbed Snow. Ivan helped him lift Snow through the window to safety outside. The cloud, swirling in anger above, lashed out and struck Edward, knocking him down. It then vaporized and was gone. The men pulled Edward outside.

"Eddy? Eddy, are you alright?" Ivan shook Eddy, but he was unconscious.

Stevie touched Snow's arm, "It got 'im instead of you, Snow!"

Snow knelt down to him and wailed, "Not Edward. No!"

"What the blazes is going on in here? Why is the window broken? Hello? Is anyone in here?" Kate went to the window, followed by Kristen and Jill. "What is going on here? We heard glass breaking. Why are you all outside?"

"It's a long story, Kate," Donnie muttered as he and the other men picked up Edward and carried him back around the cabin and into the main hall. They laid him down on the floor, away from the fireplace.

"Alright, I need a canning jar and a cooking pan ... oh, and a heavy hammer or something I can crush this blasted mirror shard with. Here, give me those tongs." Donnie fished the mirror shard out of the fire with the tongs and placed it in the frying pan that Mitch brought in. Then with a meat tenderizer hammer, Donnie smashed the mirror shard several times until it was almost in a powder form. Mitch then poured the powder into a canning jar and sealed it in.

After a brief explanation of what happened from Stevie, Kate looked over at Snow, who was sitting on the floor next to Edward, “Maybe you *are* cursed, Snow.”

Tears welled up in her eyes and she looked down at Edward, still unconscious.

“Hey, can we refrain from name calling please! No one in here is cursed!” Mitch announced as he went to wash the pan in the kitchen.

Ivan picked up the jar and eyed its contents. “What do we do with the jar? We don’t know that it’s safe even bottled up in here.”

Donnie took the jar in his hand, “No, we don’t. And first thing in th’ morning, we’re taking it back ta where Stevie found it. Maybe we can find a clue about what’s going on here.”

“I’m not going back to that place.” Snow quivered as she spoke.

“Under the circumstances, I think that it would be best for you not to.” Yolanda touched her shoulder to try and comfort the frightened girl.

Snow went into hysterics. “It’s her! That witch! My stepmother did this to him ... is doing this to all of us!” She jumped up and grabbed the jar from Donnie and began to vigorously shake it. “Margurite! Leave my friends alone! I’m the one you want, you witch! Here I am! Come and get me! I’m not afraid of you! You hear me! Come and GET ME!”

Donnie grabbed the jar away from Snow, “God, she’s flipped her lid!”

Mitch grabbed Snow and hugged her as she sobbed into his chest.

“Eddy! Look, he’s awake.” Kristen pointed down at Edward with his eyes wide open, peering in the direction of Mitch and Snow.

Snow rushed over to him and dropped to the floor. “Edward, are you alright?”

She looked into his deep green eyes. Green? Edward sat straight up and grabbed Snow’s shoulders. Snow gasped. He closed his eyes and grabbed his head as he lay back onto the floor, moaning. Snow was frozen.

Duncan knelt on the other side of Edward and gently shook him. “Eddy? Are you alright? Eddy?”

“Ow! What happened?” as Eddy rubbed his head where it hit the floor after the smoke cloud struck him.

“You were knocked out. Are you alright?”

Edward looked at Snow, “Yes, but are you alright, Snow? There was smoke ... it was after you.”

“Yeah, it’s gone. We got that mirror shard in th’ glass ‘ere” Stevie pointed to the jar.

Snow was studying his face, his eyes. They were brown. But they were green a moment ago ... or were they? Was she imagining it? Did anyone else see it?

“How do you feel, Edward? Do you feel anything ... strange?” Snow eyed him mysteriously.

“Strange? Why would I feel strange, except for this blasted headache I got now?”

The men helped him to his feet. Duncan suggested they all get some more rest and stay together until the night was over.

“I have a feeling that this isn’t the last we will see of the strange events.” as Thomas looked at the jar that Donnie held in his hand and then at the front door of the cabin.

Chapter 9

“Don’t It Make My Brown Eyes Green”

Snow laughed as she remembered Kristen’s funny ghost story from the night before. She giggled even harder as she thought about the way Stevie jumped when Kristen lunged at him at the end of the story. The scary stories were something that Snow didn’t mind remembering from the evening. However, there were certain events that she would just as soon forget, like the cloud above her bed or the mirror shard. She shivered as she touched the bandage still wrapped around her neck. Donnie and a few of the other men went to take the jar with the mirror’s remains back to the forest. With Stevie leading them to the same spot he found Snow, she opted not to go back, as the girls thought that was best, anyway. Snow’s duties for the day found her cleaning in the barn and feeding the horses. Then her thoughts drifted back to the previous evening. As she petted the young colt, 24-Carrots, she remembered back to her conversation with Mitch, and of course ... their kiss. Even if just for that moment, it was like her life was complete. She remembered that his kiss matched his eyes, warm and tender. But what about Kate, she thought? What was this ‘date’ all about? She wanted to ask Kate but was afraid to. Kate had been rather ‘stand-offish’ since the events in the main cabin, and Snow didn’t dare ask Mitch. And what was up with Rein? Why did he want to impersonate Edward? And how much of their conversation in the woods had he heard? How did he know about the decree? Did he eavesdrop on her and Yolanda as well? She began to worry about Edward. She hadn’t seen or spoken with him since the night before, since she thought she saw him with those deep green eyes. Surely, she imagined that. As badly as she wanted to talk to Mitch, she decided to find Edward instead, at least to make sure he was feeling alright.

“Hey, I wondered if I might find you here, man. Trying for supper?” inquired Duncan as he came upon Edward fishing in the usual spot.

“Yeah, I suppose.”

“Hey, Eddy, what’s the matter? You were acting very strange at breakfast. I don’t think you said a word. And you look rather pale this morning. Are you all right?”

Edward rubbed his brown eyes. “Well, I don’t know. Actually, I’ve felt rather strange ever since last night. But I’d rather you not tell anyone. I don’t want to worry the others and I surely don’t want the girls fussing over me. You know what I mean?”

Duncan chuckled, “Yes, I think I know just what you mean. I won’t mention it. But if you’re still feeling under the weather for too long, you need to let someone know, alright?”

Edward nodded. “Duncan, can I ask you something?”

“Certainly.”

“Well, I know that you talk with Yolanda quite a bit, and, well ...” His voice trailed off, and he looked into the water.

“Ed, what is it?”

“Well, I wanted to get your opinion on this whole ‘decree thing’. You know ... with Snow?”

“My opinion on it how?”

Eddy continued, “Do you think she and I would ...” he hesitated, then quickly spat out, “...make a good match?”

Eyebrows raised, “Well Edward, that’s something you have to decide for yourself. But if I may say that this is rather surprising. In the past, you have always stated that you’re done with relationships.”

Edward gave an emphatic motion with his hands. “Exactly! That’s right, but ... I don’t know how to explain it. Ever since last night, it’s almost like ... like something I really need

to do, or rather ... oh, I don't know. I can't explain it. It's just that I can't get the idea out of my head."

"What idea, Eddy? Marrying Snow?"

"Well, yes." He muttered almost under his breath, "Like voices in my head."

"Edward, it sounds like you're still feeling strange from the events of last night. I think you just need a few days to rest."

"I'm sure you're right. But maybe a companion would be good for me. What do you think, Duncan?"

"I'm thinking that catfish sounds like a fine idea for dinner, Eddy. Why don't you see what you can do?"

"Gotcha, Duncan."

"Why do I keep getting these dizzy spells? They're driving me crazy!" Edward sat down on a nearby stump. He was trying to shoot a few rounds of archery but could barely see the target with his recent sporadic blurred vision. Even though the spells had been going on a few days now, Eddy hadn't told anyone except for Duncan that first day.

Along with the spells, he also could not shake thoughts of Snow from his mind. What was it about her that had him so mesmerized recently? Ever since the party, he couldn't get her out of his head, nor shake the thought of her decree and a royal union out of his mind.

"Oh, hello. I wasn't expecting to find anyone here." Snow was surprised to see Edward by the archery targets. "I thought everyone would be all 'gamed out' now that the festival was over."

Edward smiled, "Oh no. I'll never tire of archery. How about yourself? Here to practice a few?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact. Could you please hold Tweety a second while I prepare my bow?"

"Of course." Edward took Tweety in his hands and began to pet him. Tweety sat happily in Edward's hand.

After a few rounds together, Snow offered, "We haven't spoken since All Hallow's Eve, really. I wanted to make sure everything was all right after what happened. How are you feeling?"

"Oh yes, everything is fine. Thank you for being concerned. I've been ... fine." Edward paused for a second. "Well, actually, that's not entirely true, Snow. I've actually been thinking a lot lately ... about everything. But mostly about you."

Surprised, Snow dropped the arrow that she was trying to load into her bow. "About me?"

"Yes. I know this will sound crazy, but ever since the party, I haven't been able to stop thinking about you, about your decree ... your royal union."

Snow set down her bow for fear she may drop it, too.

Edward continued, "What I'd like to do is perhaps ... get to know one another better, like when we go fishing, you know ... talk more. Explore the possibility of a union, a union between us."

This statement took Snow's breath away to where she almost couldn't breathe or speak. Finally, she managed "Edward, I would never try to suggest something that was against your better judgement..."

He interrupted Snow, taking her hands in his, "I know that, Snow, and this is all my idea, really. And if it is all the same to you, it would probably be better to keep this our little secret for a while, just until we can come to a final decision. You know how the others can be, especially the girls."

Snow smiled and nodded.

"They really look out for you, Snow ... like a little sister."

“Well, I think that since the festival, I’ve got them a little spooked, frankly.” She paused and looked at the ground, hesitating, “Edward, does this mean that we’re ... “

Eddy brushed her hair from her face. “Engaged? Well, that’s up to you, Snow. Of course, I’ll let you make that decision.”

Snow turned and walked toward the target to get her arrows, “Well, if it’s alright, I would like to think about it for a bit, since this is all happening very fast, and also with the rather strange things that have been happening lately.”

While Snow’s back was turned, Edward got one of his spells and had to sit back down on the trunk. Tweety, who was on a nearby branch, squawked and quickly flew away.

“Don’t take too long, my dear.”

The sudden stern tone startled Snow. She turned back toward Edward to once again find those deep green eyes peering back at her. Not again! She was frozen with fear, just like the other night.

From the sky, Tweety swooped down and popped Edward in the back of the head, squawking.

“Ouch!” He lowered his head to rub it and when he raised his eyes back to Snow, they were brown again. “Was that Tweety that just dive-bombed me?”

Snow took a step towards him. “What did you just say?”

“I said was that Tweety that just...”

“No, before that.”

“Nothing. You had said you would like to think about it and I was just about to answer you. I was going to say, take all the time you want, Snow. I think it would be best for us to get to know each other. I want to get to know you, Princess.”

Snow shook her head, “But you just said...”

“Aye, Snow! Whatcha doin’? Oh, ‘allo, Eddy! Ya practicin’ yer bow an’ arrow shootin’, there?”

Edward began to reload his bow. “Yes, Stevie. We were. Would you like to join us?”

Snow felt a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. She needed some water. “I’m going to go on back. But you two please go on ahead. I’m just rather thirsty and need a glass of water. Thank you for the practice, Edward.”

Snow was in a daze. Was she dreaming or had Edward just proposed, sort of? She hadn’t used the Dixie Love Oil since the party, so she couldn’t understand what was happening unless the potion was really that potent. And there were those green eyes again! She was still feeling sick to her stomach.

Snow hesitated before she walked around to the back door of the kitchen. She wanted to get a cup of tea made from some of Jill’s herbs to help settle her stomach. However, she was hoping against hope that Mitch wasn’t in the kitchen. Just as she was about to enter, she heard laughing inside. She pressed her ear to the door. Although she detested eavesdropping lately, she couldn’t resist. She heard Mitch in the kitchen with Kate laughing and carrying on. She didn’t dare walk through that door now. Not wanting to be seen ‘listening’ at the door, she quickly hurried away.

‘Fine’, she thought. Then it was settled ... she would marry Edward. Why not? It didn’t seem like Mitch would miss her company all that much now. She went to Jill’s cabin to gather some material for her dress. Of course, she would keep it secret as long as possible ... just as Edward had said. The others ... they just wouldn’t understand. She would wait and tell them at the last possible moment. In the meantime, it would give her the time to make the preparations. There was only one thing left to do ... tell Edward.

As he crept up the ladder to the tree house, he tried to conceal the weapon he carried. Quietly and unnoticed by Snow, he opened the door. He found her sleeping on her couch pillows, having fallen asleep sewing a dress. He lowered the light in her lantern, dimming

the lighting of the room. Gently, he knelt beside her, his green eyes twinkling with the reflection of the sharpened kitchen knife that he slowly brought to her throat. Suddenly, Tweety began squawking and flying around the sleeping princess. Snow's eyes fluttered as she awoke.

Edward quickly hid the knife. "Hello, Snow. I didn't mean to wake you."

Snow was surprised by his presence, but smiled nonetheless. "Hello Edward."

"I wanted to speak with you, Snow."

With the low light in the tree house, Snow didn't notice Edward's green eyes. "Yes, Edward. I wanted to talk to you, too. I've made my decision. I will marry you."

"Wonderful, my dear. I think the sooner, the better."

She sleepily brushed her hair from her face. "But I thought you wanted to take some time to get to know one another..."

"There will be plenty of time for that, dear. We could definitely use the time alone." He firmly took her face in his hand as he fidgeted with the knife in his other hand behind his back. "I'll arrange everything. It should be as soon as possible." Again, Tweety began squawking and fluttering about the tree house.

Snow was trying to calm him down. "I don't understand this. He's never done this. It's like the other day when he dive bombed you out of the blue, remember?"

Nervously, Edward started backing toward the door, "Yes, I do. Oh, well, he probably just smells Jane's cat on me or something. That's all. I'll let you sleep, my dear. Goodbye."

Snow looked at Tweety. "Tweety, what's the matter with you? Did you have a bad dream or something? Rude bird! Wait ... Jane? Did he say 'Jane's cat'? Surely, he said Jill. I just heard him wrong."

Snow watched the door long after Edward left, thinking. That was very strange. She knew that she should have been happy, but all she felt was confused. He acted so ... different. Maybe he was just tired. But his touch was so cold, not like someone she would marry at all. It was almost ... controlling. It must have been because he was tired. Nevertheless, she began working on her wedding dress again, which she would continue to hide in her tree house.

It had been a long time since Snow had cooked, but she pretty well remembered the castle cook's famous recipe for stew. It was a rabbit stew, although after much argument from Snow, she had some of the men go out to catch some wild rabbits, as she refused to cook any animal she 'knew personally', as she put it. That afternoon before supper, Mitch offered to help her peel the vegetables. Snow was somewhat reluctant, as being around Mitch was difficult for her. But she accepted his offer. She just promised herself she would keep her betrothal in mind.

"So where did you learn to cook?"

"The castle cook, Amanda, taught me. I remember her recipe for rabbit stew the best. By the way, thanks for talking the guys into catching the wild rabbits for me."

"Of course, Snow. I know how much you love the animals around here. Are you planning a dessert?"

"Oh, of course. Gooseberry pie."

Mitch almost shouted, "Your famous gooseberry pie? What a treat we are all in for today!"

"Yes, it was Amanda's favorite, as well."

Mitch watched Snow peeling potatoes and snapping peas. No matter what activity she was involved in, she was so lovely ... with that air of innocence so uniquely hers. "You look so lovely today, Snow."

She blushed, "Oh, Mitch thank you, but I must look a mess, working in the kitchen all day."

Mitch took her hand. "If I had my way, you and I would be together like this every day."

Snow gulped and looked up nervously. Their eyes met for a moment as he rubbed her hand in his.

"Mitch, we should keep working or we will be serving dinner at midnight." Snow went to move the basket of potato peels closer to her to catch her droppings, but instead it started to fall over. She lunged to the floor to catch it. Mitch also lunged, acting like he was going for the basket as well, but instead grabbing Snow into his arms as she gasped quietly and started to get back up.

Mitch held her gently, and wouldn't let her. "Snow, I need to tell you this. Please hear me out. Ever since the party, and even before that, you are always on my mind. No, I mean you are always on my heart. You are my heart, Snow. And I know that you think you have to follow this decree of yours, but you don't. Follow your heart, Snow." He softly touched her face and then her lips, "That night when we kissed, I know it came from your heart, Princess, as it did mine. Please listen to your heart now. I don't want you to feel uncomfortable around me, but I know why. We both know. Don't hold yourself back. We constantly engage in this petty chit-chat in order to keep from sharing our true feelings for one another. But I want us to share those feelings. Perhaps not here on the kitchen floor, but what about tonight? Can we talk later? At the tree house, maybe? Please, Snow. I would really like to talk to you without this 'wall' between us."

Snow lowered her head. She couldn't look him in the eyes. She was already on the verge of tears. If she looked at him now, she knew she would break down and cry in his arms. As much as she wanted to do that, as much as she wanted to talk to him, share things with him, as much as she wanted him ... she couldn't. She knew that. Be strong, Snow. You have to tell him.

"Mitch, you don't understand. It's too late. I'm betrothed now. Edward and I have already discussed it. It's settled."

Mitch lifted her head so he could look into her eyes with his ... those warm brown eyes. She hoped that they would never turn green. However difficult, she was able to hold back her tears a little longer. "Snow, what are you saying? Are you telling me that you and Edward are engaged to be married already?"

Snow nodded.

"When did this happen?"

"Yesterday. He's making the arrangements. We were going to wait before we told anyone."

Mitch let go of her and sat back onto the floor. "Obviously. So no one else knows?"

Snow got up and sat back down in her chair. "Not that I know of yet."

Mitch came over to her and knelt beside her chair and took her hand. "Snow, you cannot marry someone unless you love him. Otherwise, you're just setting yourself up for a life of misery ... a life in hell."

"Don't try to scare me, Mitch. It won't work."

"I'm telling you the truth, Snow. Do you love him?"

"I have to get to work, Mitch. Why don't you just go. Dinner is my responsibility, tonight."

Mitch repeated the question in a sterner tone, "Do you love him?!"

The kitchen door opened and in walked Kristen and Yolanda. "Hey, there. Thought you all could use a hand?"

Snow smiled with relief at their entrance. "Yes, please. Kristen, could you please go with Mitch to the garden to get some more peas? I'm pretty sure we have a few more out there and I'm not sure I have enough for dinner."

“Sure thing. Come on, Mitch.” Mitch frowned as he got up to go with Kristen.

Snow was careful not to look at him as he left.

“OK Snow, Mitch is gone. Now what’s going on?”

Snow couldn’t hide things from Yolanda. She seemed to be pretty in tune with anything bothering Snow.

“I’d really rather not talk about it.” She couldn’t hold it back any longer. She broke into tears.

“Oh honey, here.” Yolanda handed her a clean kitchen towel nearby. “Please don’t cry. What is it? Can’t you tell me?” She took Snow in her arms, quivering, sobbing. “Well, that’s OK. You can tell me later, then.”

“You’re doing what?!” Duncan turned to Edward as they sat outside the cabin after dinner. “I don’t think I heard you right, Eddy.”

“No, you heard right. Snow and I are getting married.”

Duncan couldn’t believe his ears. “When?”

Edward directed his brown eyes down at his cup, “In two days.”

Duncan’s eyes widened even more. “Two days! Have you lost your mind? You two hardly know each other. And this ‘decree thing’ is ridiculous in this day and age. You know that. At least wait a little longer, man. Get to know each other better.”

Edward nodded, “Well, we will. We will get to know each other.”

Duncan added, “You know, I used to think that very same thing ... that two people could just get married first and then get to know each other later. But being with Yolanda more and more, I’ve realized that it’s much better in a marriage for a man and woman to get to know each other first, before they are married.”

Edward wasn’t really listening. “We will have plenty of time alone on the honeymoon with no distractions and no one around to disturb us. We just both feel that we need to do this.”

Duncan shook his head, “Why right now?”

Edward looked up at the stars, “Well, I don’t know, really.”

Duncan was still in disbelief. “You don’t know? Edward, let me ask you this. Do you love Snow?”

Eddy looked at him. “What sort of question is that?”

“An important one that I expect an answer to. Do you love her?”

Edward got up, “Duncan, I don’t have to justify my marriage with Snow to you or anyone else. I’m going to get some more coffee.”

As Edward opened the cabin door, Duncan added, “Take some advice from me then. Don’t ask Mitch for anything under the circumstances. He’s likely to slug you when he finds out, you know.”

The room was silent. You could hear a pin drop. Edward and Snow had just announced their wedding to everyone after dinner. Edward actually did the announcing, while Snow did not dare look in Mitch’s direction.

Edward looked around the room expectantly. “Well? Isn’t anyone going to congratulate us?”

“Congratulations,” spat Nicholas.

“Yeah, way to go Snow ‘n Eddy,” came Stevie’s clueless but cheerful reply.

Kate gave a look over at Jill, unnoticed by the betrothed couple.

Jill simply gave a shrug, “Well, like I said, it’s her life.”

Yolanda shook her head, “So that’s why she was upset in the kitchen ... why she wanted Mitch to leave. No wonder she wouldn’t talk about it.”

Kristen leaned over to Yolanda. "A secret engagement. Well, we know why they kept it secret. She knew we would try to talk her out of it."

Donnie put down his cup on the mantle, "OK, Your Majesty, riddle me this. How you gonna get married? We ain't got no preacher 'ere."

Edward waved his hand. "Everything's been taken care of. Don't worry about anything."

Being the closest in the room to Edward, Snow could see him out of the corner of her eye as he held her to his side. He was squeezing her awfully hard, she thought. As she started to look at him, she stopped. She was afraid of what she would see. No one else was close enough in such a dimly lit room to see it. She couldn't do it. She refused to spoil the evening by looking into his eyes ... his green eyes.

Yolanda fidgeted with a piece of ivy, "All right, the fact remains that Snow is marrying Eddy, and there doesn't seem to be much we can do. She wouldn't even talk to me. So, I suppose the best thing to do is to help her out and make her happy. We really need to be supportive no matter how we feel about it, alright?"

The others nodded. Yolanda was arranging some greenery into a bouquet for the wedding. In the morning, she would add flowers so it would be fresh for the wedding.

"How's her dress?" Jill asked.

Kate shook her head. "No one has seen it. Apparently, she's been working on it herself. She's kept it hidden in her house. I suppose she was working on it before anyone knew of the wedding."

"Oh, this is all so ridiculous!" Kristen threw the arrangement to the floor that she was making for the wedding. "How can you all sit there and let her go through with this?"

"She won't, Kristen. Don't worry." Jill's reply came cool and collected, with no doubts. She hadn't even looked up from repairing one of the shoes she was going to wear tomorrow.

Kristen looked at Jill. "She won't? How do you know?"

"Because I just have a feelin', that's all. It's a bunch 'o strange things happenin' wit' Eddy, see. I can't quite place it, but somethin's goin' on and it ain't over yet."

Yolanda put down the ivy. "You're scaring me, Jill, as usual. What are you talking about?"

Jill continued, "Can't say yet. Don't know, really. But it should prove interestin' to say th' least."

Kristen rolled her eyes. "Oh great! Here we go again with all the weird stuff around here."

Kate added, "And did you notice it always seems to revolve around Snow? The weird stuff, that is."

Yolanda gave her a look. "Give her a break, will ya? You haven't let up since the party."

Kate sighed, "You're right, I haven't. Sorry."

Stevie was about to knock on the cabin where the girls were talking.

"Pssst, Stevie?" Stevie turned to find Snow standing in the shadows near the side of the cabin. She was wearing her white cloak, the one from the party.

"Snow! Oi, what are ya doin' 'ere?"

"Shhh. Come here, Stevie." She spoke very softly, carefully. Stevie approached her. "Stevie, would you come and stay with me for a while, at my house. I don't want to be alone."

"Sure Snow, but what about Eddy? Wouldn't he want to keep ya company since you'll be gettin' married tomorrow?"

Snow thought quickly, "Well, it's bad luck to see the bride before the wedding. Let's not take chances."

When they reached the top of the tree house. Snow closed the door. "Can you at least stay till I fall asleep?"

"Snow, I can stay longer than that if ya want."

She smiled, "You're so sweet. Thank you." And she kissed him on the cheek. He blushed and remembered how he had reacted at the party during the spin the bottle game when Snow kissed him ... when he became embarrassed and dashed out of the cabin to go on watch. He wouldn't do that again. He really did like it when Snow kissed him ... she was his good friend, after all. Snow took her cloak and draped it on one of the pillows.

"Aye, I see Mitch did a good job of washing the stain out of yer cape, there. I'm really glad. I thought I'd stained it for life. I felt really bad about that, Snow."

Snow had been battling her emotions all day. Then to hear Stevie mention Mitch was just too much for her. She sank to the floor and began to cry into one of her couch pillows.

"Snow, I'm sorry. I didn't mean ta make ya cry. What'd I say? Snow?" He hesitantly put his hand on her shoulder.

She turned to him and hugged him, crying into his chest.

Stevie's eyes showed much surprise. "Snow, what's wrong?"

Snow's voice was muffled, "Nothing's wrong, Stevie. Please don't talk, just hold me for a while, OK?"

"OK, Snow."

Snow was in need of an unconditional love that night. She didn't want Mitch's affections, nor did she want the responsibility of Edward's company. What she needed then and there was Stevie. His innocence coupled with her own ... his sincere affection and unconditional companionship were what Snow desperately needed. As he held her, he stroked her hair. He loved her soft hair. He stayed there with her until she fell asleep, until they both fell asleep.

Chapter 10
“Princes and Flowers and Bears, Oh My!”

“Well, how do I look?” With some hesitation and with only a half-smile, Snow spun around in her white wedding dress in the orchard while Mitch was gathering baskets.

The dress was lovely, made with white silk and chiffon, much like her dress for All Hallow’s Eve ... except this one was full length. She even used her original flower crown again with new fresh flowers and a chiffon veil instead of ribbons. She thought it fitting to have her veil made from the same crown she had worn the night that Edward had first noticed her.

“Oh, Snow. You look ... you look beautiful.” He tried to be cheerful and continued, “I’ve been stirring the mix for the wedding cake. It’s going to be delicious...”

“Mitch,” Snow interrupted, “Please, I don’t want you to make us a cake. In fact, I ... I don’t want you to be there today ... at the wedding.”

“You don’t want me to go to your wedding. Why?”

Snow closed her eyes to try to hold back her tears. “I think we both know why, that it would be too hard for both of us. I just think it would be best.”

“Snow, look at you! You’re miserable! Your wedding day is supposed to be the happiest day of your life, yet you are the most unhappy bride I’ve ever seen.” Mitch put his hands on her shoulders. “Don’t do this, Snow. Don’t marry someone that you do not love with all of your heart, someone who isn’t your ‘true love’.”

Snow pulled away and turned from him. “Please understand, Mitch. I have to do this. It’s for my...”

Mitch didn’t let her finish. “What, your family? Your kingdom? Your father? I know it isn’t for your stepmother!”

“Mitch, you just don’t understand...”

“No, I don’t understand! I don’t understand who it is you are trying to please. Who do you owe this great favor to? There isn’t anyone around you, Snow, but us. There are no members of your kingdom here to judge you. Please don’t do this. I love you too much to see you make a mistake like this. I love you! You hear me, Snow? I love you! Don’t go through with this.”

In hearing this, her tears began to freely flow. He said he loved her! Snow couldn’t turn and face him now, not now. She couldn’t let him see her tears, her pain, “I’m sorry Mitch, but I must.” Without saying goodbye, Snow ran out of the orchard.

Stevie walked with Snow to the clearing in the woods where the wedding was to be held. Snow gasped, “My bouquet! Stevie, I forgot it, the one Yolanda made me. I have to have it. I know I’ll be late, but I have to go back and get it.”

“Don’t worry, Snow, I’ll go back an’ get it for ya! You go on ahead an’ join th’ others. Ya can’t be out in these woods alone, ya know.”

“Thank you Stevie. You’re such a dear!”

As Stevie ran back to get her flowers, Snow began to walk toward the clearing. She began thinking to herself ... thinking about Edward, thinking about those strange green eyes. Is it really her imagination? Something strange about it, though, was that there was something familiar about those green eyes, but she just couldn’t put her finger on it.

She thought about Mitch. He said he loved her. No, don’t think about Mitch. Am I doing the right thing, though? I do love Edward, but do I love Mitch more? Oh Snow, stop it! It doesn’t matter. This is your wedding day ... the day you’ve always dreamed of. My duty will be fulfilled according to the decree, and of course, I’ll have my prince, the prince in my

dreams. Now cheer up. It was hard for Snow to muster a smile while she thought of Mitch's broken heart. But she was approaching the clearing and managed to conjure a smile.

As she drew closer to the clearing, Tweety began to squawk and flutter on her shoulder. "Tweety? What's the matter? What's wrong?" Suddenly, Tweety flew from her shoulder and into the woods, away from the clearing. "Tweety!" She chased after him through the brush and trees. She could still hear him, but he wouldn't stop. "Tweety, stop! This is going to ruin my dress, you silly bird! What's wrong with you?"

Finally, she chased him to the river. There he was perched on some rocks that jutted out over the water. She crawled up onto the rocks to the edge overlooking the water and took the little bird in her hand. "Tweety, you naughty thing! What's wrong? You don't want me to marry Edward, do you? You've been acting strangely around him lately. Why? Do you know something I don't know? I wish you could tell me." Something in the water below caught Snow's eye. She peered down and saw her reflection. Suddenly, it began to change. She found herself looking at a reflection of ... her father? "Daddy? Daddy, is that you?"

The reflection spoke back to her as clear as if he were standing in front of her, "Hello my little Princess."

"Daddy!" She reached down to the water, but she was too high up to touch the surface.

"Princess, you look so lovely ... and yet you are so sad, my child. I want you to do something for me. Will you?"

Snow smiled as the tears streamed down her face. "Of course, Daddy!"

"Princess, I loved you with all of my heart. All I ever wanted for you was to be happy. I want you to forget about the decree. I want you to find your 'true love'."

Snow sniffed. "Forget about the decree, Daddy? But..."

"You deserve to be happy, Snow, and not to have to worry about a set of staunch rules. Find true love, Snow. Can you do that for me?"

"If that is your wish, Daddy, of course. I'll be more than happy to do that."

"Snow, always remember that I love you, and I'm watching over you, Princess. Goodbye!"

"Daddy, no! Don't go, please! Come back! I love you, too!" She suddenly remembered, "Wait, Daddy! What about the queen? She's after me. What do I do about Margurite?"

But there was silence in the water, and the reflection was now her own. As one of her tears made ripples in the water below, softly she whispered, "Goodbye, Daddy." She lowered her head and buried her face in her hands.

She began thinking about her favorite things she used to do with her father. She remembered back to the time he taught her to dance and to shoot a bow and arrow. He called her a 'natural'.

Suddenly, her memories were interrupted. Tweety began to squawk and flew off of Snow's shoulder once again. "Tweety, what is it?" Snow heard a rustling in the brush in the distance. "Stevie, is that you? Edward? Anyone?"

She gulped and slowly climbed down from the rocks back to the riverbank. Out of the brush ahead came a shadow. As it moved further out of the brush, Snow was able to make out what it was. Oh God, it was a bear! Without even a breath, Snow dashed back into the woods. The bear saw her and took off after her. She ran as fast as could, stomping through leaves and shoving away stray branches. With the brush tugging at her dress, it slowed her down, and the bear got right on her heels. He lunged at Snow, but only ended up grabbing her veil in his teeth, pulling the flower crown off of her head. She kept running as fast as she could. Then she saw it. A perfect climbing tree ... her only chance. She sprinted up the tree as fast as she could, probably faster than she'd ever climbed a tree in her life. She went as high as the branches would let her. When she looked down, the bear was at the foot of the tree, trying to lunge upward towards her. Snow was so scared, more scared than she

had ever been. She did not take her eyes off of the bear. With her wedding veil in the bear's mouth, she watched it circle the tree and lie down at the foot of it.

It must have lied there for hours, or so it seemed to Snow. Finally, she saw it catch a rabbit and begin to devour it right on top of the chiffon, smearing blood all over the beautiful veil she had made. The sight repulsed Snow. She felt her stomach churn, and for once in her life would welcome those all too familiar butterflies right now. But they weren't there ... just a sick feeling in the pit of her stomach. After an eternity, the bear finally gave up on the entrée in the tree and left with Snow's veil still in its mouth. With mixed feelings of pure terror and relief, Snow began to cry up in that tree ... the tree that had just saved her life.

"Alright, what time was this wedding supposed to start again?" asked Trent as he looked at his watch. "Did they say two o'clock or three?"

Kristen frowned and shook her head. "No, there's something not right here. They should be here by now."

"Here, I got it, Snow!" Stevie came rushing up, out of breath, holding a bouquet of flowers in his hand.

"Snow isn't here. She was supposed to be with you, Stevie? Where is she?" Kristen put her hands on her hips as she glared at Stevie.

"She forgot 'er bouquet an' I told 'er I'd go get it for 'er an' that she would come on over to th' clearing where you were."

Donnie approached Stevie. "Well, Stevie, she never made it. What have I told you about these woods? You know better! You can't leave anyone alone, especially Snow with her track record 'ere lately!" Stevie lowered his head and nodded. Donnie continued, "Alright, we need to create four search teams and search the woods. Let's pray we find her before it gets dark."

When Snow opened her eyes, it was just turning dusk. It concerned her that it was starting to get dark, but it concerned her more that the bear may still be down there waiting for her. She knew bears hunted more at night. She noticed that Tweety was safe and sound perched in her lap, sound asleep. She realized that she must have fallen asleep in the tree, as she had done many times growing up. What could she do, though? She had to stay in the tree till morning ... in the darkness of the woods. She decided to take her chances with the darkness everyone spoke of rather than risk running into her bear 'friend' again. As the air grew darker, the shadows fell in a spooky way. They seemed to creep in on her ... closer, closer. Something suddenly caught her eye. She looked down at her family crest that she had pinned to the neckline of her wedding gown. It was glowing! Of course, then she remembered ... 'Daddy! He said he'd be watching over me. The darkness in the woods can't touch me with a glowing crest, right?' And so it was. The eerie darkness laid not a hand on the little princess as she slept through the night in the safety of the large tree.

Mitch was fixing dinner that evening for the village. He knew that Snow did not want him to come to the wedding. He didn't want to go himself. He thought about her in her beautiful dress and crown veil and again wished that ... argh! I need to not think about it and concentrate on dinner, he thought. He didn't want to think about it, about her, about them.

Harboring no hard feelings, he knew that Snow and Edward were to have a picnic dinner in her tree house to start off their honeymoon, and he went ahead and made them a small wedding cake and left it for them in the tree house. Come to think of it, the wedding was hours ago and everyone else should have returned for dinner by now. That's strange.

Where is everyone? It's beginning to get dark. Mitch began to take off his apron as he saw everyone coming back into the village from the woods. Something didn't look right, not right at all.

He approached the group, heading into the main dining hall. "Is there something wrong?"

Stevie was crying, "Mitch, it's all my fault! I went back to fetch Snow's bouquet an' she said she was going to go on ahead to the weddin', but she never made it! We never found her! We looked and looked! All we found was this!"

He pointed to the object Kate was holding. Sadly, she presented Mitch with Snow's flower crown wedding veil covered in blood.

Mitch gasped, "God! We have to go look for her."

As he started off with the veil, Donnie grabbed his arm. "We've looked all afternoon. You know we can't go back till mornin'. You know that!"

Mitch pulled away from Donnie's grasp, "What I know is that Snow is out there and she could be hurt and in need of our help, especially in the dark!"

"We won't be helping her by getting ourselves killed out there, Mitch! Now back down!"

"No, I won't leave her out there, man. I won't!" Mitch started to take off, but was caught by Donnie and Duncan.

As he struggled, Donnie looked at Duncan, "I think th' only way to settle him down is a night in jail. What do ya think?" Duncan nodded sadly, and the men helped to drag Mitch off to the jail.

As they passed by Edward, Mitch lunged at him. "This is all your fault! You never loved her! You tricked her! Why can't you just leave her alone?" He got in a fairly good punch before Donnie and the others could get Mitch up off of him.

Taken by surprise, Eddy was helped back up by Kristen and Murray. "What was that about?" as he rubbed his jaw, now throbbing from Mitch's blow.

Once they got Mitch to the jail, Donnie locked him up. "Look, mate. We'll get out some more search parties first thing in th' mornin'."

Mitch clenched his teeth. "By then it might be too late! You know that! You don't care about her like I do!"

Donnie tossed the keys to Nicholas, who agreed to stay with him for the night, "Here. See if ya can talk some sense into him."

It's light. It must be morning! As she opened her eyes, Snow thought, despite all the warnings, 'I survived the night in the woods!' She lifted her crest to her lips that was pinned to her wedding dress and kissed it, "Thank you, Daddy!" She looked around down below. No sign of the bear, but no sign of Tweety, either. "Tweety! Where are you? Oh!" Tweety landed safely on her shoulder and surprised Snow. "We have to get going. I know they are probably worried about me!"

As she climbed down the tree, the thought crossed her mind that she had missed her own wedding. But wait, Daddy released me from the decree yesterday, didn't he? I didn't dream that, did I? As she walked back to the village, she questioned her love for Edward. No, there really was no question. Although she was fond of Edward, she didn't love him, not enough to marry him. 'Find true love' ... these words from her father played over and over again in her mind. Snow had been raised in a society full of rules and others telling her what to do and how to do it. She was so used to this ... and now she was to make her own choices for love and marriage. The thought almost frightened Snow. She had always been surrounded by this wall of 'directions'. But now, she had to make decisions on her own ... figure out life by herself. Would she do the right thing, Snow thought? Was she capable of making the right decisions? She'd followed her head for so long ... and now she had to

follow her heart. She remembered those very same words from Mitch, 'follow your heart'. But the heart is such a complicated thing. She was afraid she could get so carried away, she would make the wrong choices. What should she do? With every thought, Snow came back to Mitch's words ... 'follow your heart'. She could see his face, his warm smile, his loving eyes ... brown eyes. Her steps became quicker and quicker until she was in a full sprint toward the village.

There it was ... the edge of the village, but there was no one around. She dropped to the ground just to catch her breath. She had run so fast, she was panting and wheezing. Where was everyone? Were they out looking for her? She hadn't heard anyone calling her name. In the distance, she could see the main cabin. Perhaps everyone was there having breakfast. She was already so exhausted, she just wanted to sit there for a while, but she had to get to the cabin. She had to tell the others what happened, how her father saved her in the woods. Slowly, she got up and started toward the hut.

Everyone was gathered in the main cabin. Donnie had set up the different search parties and was going over the plan of action. Mitch wasn't hearing any of it. Standing by the door and lost in his own thoughts, he grasped Snow's veil in his hand. He wouldn't let go of it. It was possibly the last thing of her. He just knew it was too late. He'd never forgive them for this ... for locking him up ... for keeping him from going after her.

And there was Edward. Mitch glared at him, but Edward didn't notice as he listened to Donnie's instructions, still wallowing in his own confusion over the whole situation. There were so many times during the last few days that he couldn't even remember. There were many moments that were fuzzy to him. He knew that he would have to tell someone soon. Could he have a concussion? He wasn't sure, but he brushed these thoughts away as he came back to Donnie's instructions.

Kate could tell how upset Mitch was as she looked at him with concern. She wanted desperately to speak with him last night in the jail, but Donnie had said he was too angry and probably wouldn't make much sense. She wondered how much of that was true and how much was Donnie just not wanting her to talk to him.

Mitch leaned his head back against the wood wall. Morning had fully broken now, as he peered out the window. "God!" He threw open the door forcefully and sprinted out with purpose.

"What the?" Donnie looked in the direction of the door to merely see it swinging open.

Kate ran to the door. "It's her! Oh God, it's her! She's alive!"

Never had such a sight beheld Mitch's eyes than to see the Princess alive as he saw her heading toward the cabin through the window. He didn't even feel the veil drop to the ground, nor feel the ground under his feet as he flew across the path to meet her. Snow found her ability to sprint return to her as she rushed towards him ... the words 'follow your heart' still resounding in her ears.

"Snow!" He twirled her off her feet around and around before both of them dropped to their knees on the ground. Both in tears, Mitch took her face in his hands. "Snow, you're alive! Princess..."

Snow smiled as she choked out a laugh. With her face still in his hands, Mitch gave her many short kisses until her muffled words stopped him. "In the woods ... it was my father. Mitch, he saved my life. I saw him! It was really him!"

Mitch smiled, not quite understanding her meaning, then grabbed her and hugged her tightly.

"Snow! It's really you!" came Stevie's sobbing voice from behind. "I didn't mean ta leave ya, Snow. I thought you'd go right to th' clearing, I did. You're alright! I'm s' glad you're alright!" He also dropped to his knees on the ground and hugged Snow on top of Mitch holding her.

The others came rushing over, led by Kate and Kristen.

Kate, still surprised, could hardly find the words. "How on earth? The woods ... how did you make it, Snow?"

Donnie was also speechless.

Kristen helped Snow to her feet with the aid of Mitch. "Let's all go in. I'm sure Snow has a lot to tell us. And I know I want a front-row seat for this story!"

With the exception of the part about the decree, Snow told every second of her adventure in detail ... Tweety flying away, her father in the river's reflection telling her he would protect her ... and, of course the bear.

Some were amazed and some were skeptical. Among the skeptical was, of course Donnie. "I dunno. Sounds like it would more likely be one of our usual strange occurrences 'round 'ere rather than your father's ghost, or whatever."

"Oh, no. It was him. I know my father, and that was him ... no question."

"Well, maybe no question to you, Snow."

Donnie was always the paranoid one, Snow thought. But they don't understand. She KNEW that was her father ... no doubt about it. "But he protected me in the woods. There is no other way to explain that, Donnie."

"Well, I guess you can believe whatever ya want. But you were just damn lucky. That's all I gotta say 'bout it. You don't be doing that ever again. I don't care if yer blasted bird's being shredded to bits, you just don't do it! You got it?"

"Yes, Donnie. I got it."

Donnie rubbed his forehead, "Man, I feel like a broken record 'ere ... am I? Cause I know I've given this speech before ... either that or I'm goin' crazy!"

Kristen raised her eyebrows, "No comment."

Donnie pretended not to hear her despite the quiet chuckles around the room.

Snow stood up and began to head toward the front door. "If you all don't mind, I need a word with Edward, please, alone. Edward, may we?"

Mitch felt his heart drop into his stomach as he saw Snow and Edward retire outside. 'To rearrange the wedding, no doubt,' Mitch thought. Kate started over to talk to him, but he slipped into the kitchen too quickly. He wanted to be alone for a while.

"I think he'd rather not be disturbed right now, eh?" Donnie had witnessed the scene as he approached Kate. Tired of Donnie always trying to keep her from talking to her friend, she turned away and went to talk to Jill instead. Besides, she wanted to hear any kind of enlightenment she might have on this whole ordeal. Kate knew Jill would have some kind of opinion.

Chapter 11

"Possession"

Kate peered into the kitchen to check on Mitch. "Are you alright?"

"Yes Kate, thank you. I'll be alright."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No, not really. I mean, maybe later. I'm sorry, Kate. I don't mean to be rude."

"It's OK, Mitch. I understand."

Kate left the kitchen and went back in to talk with Jill and Kristen. Just as Kate thought, Jill said she knew Snow was alive, and that she was OK. She regretted not telling Mitch, but figured he wouldn't have believed her, anyway.

In the main door came Snow, alone. Since most eyes were on her at that moment, she felt like she had to offer an explanation, "Edward said he wasn't feeling well and went on home to lie down."

Duncan was concerned about his strange behavior the past few days and what Edward had told him the day after the party. He knew that Eddy was holding back something. "I'm going to check on him," as he went out the door.

Mitch's back was turned to the door when he heard it open and then close again. The room was silent even after the person's entrance. It must be Kate. He appreciated her concern, but was afraid he wouldn't be much for company tonight. "I'd rather be alone for a little while, if you don't mind Kate."

"I'm not Kate."

Mitch whirled around at the sound of the soft voice to find her standing there. She was so beautiful in her white dress, even though it was a little tattered from her adventures in the woods. His voice quivered a little, "Snow, I thought you were talking to Edward."

"I was. And now I'm talking to you." Her tone was so confident, it made Mitch even more nervous. "Mitch, I haven't yet had the chance to tell you what my father told me in the woods."

"But you told everyone, I thought? Just now."

"No, this is something I didn't mention because I wanted to tell you first. Well, I actually had to tell Edward first."

Mitch lowered his gaze upon hearing Eddy's name.

"It was only for courtesy's sake, considering I was breaking our engagement over it."

He quickly caught her gaze once more with a questioning look. "Breaking the engagement? So you're not marrying Edward?"

Snow smiled, "No, I'm not."

Mitch was speechless as he could hardly breathe, much less speak.

"The most important thing my father said to me was that he loved me very much and wanted me to be happy more than anything else. He said I shouldn't be worried about following any staunch rules, or what have you. He said I deserve to be happy and that I should find 'true love'. With that, he released me from the decree."

At that point, it was Mitch who began to feel the butterflies that so often graced Snow with their presence.

"So you see Mitch, I have to do just what you said, now. I have to follow my heart." Snow began to feel a lump in her throat and tears began to well up in her eyes as she turned slightly away and walked toward the counter. "I'm not quite sure how to do that, you know. I've had to follow the directions of others for so long. I've been following my head. The heart is a complicated thing, whereas following directions was so easy. I just want to be sure that I do the right thing. I don't know if I should follow my heart. I haven't had much practice." Snow wiped the tears from her face. She was annoyed that they were there.

Mitch approached her and gently put his hand on her shoulder. "Actually, you look like you'd be a natural at it to me, Snow."

She turned to look at him and smiled, "I know this will sound strange coming from a girl in her wedding dress, but it occurred to me that we've never even been on a date."

With boldness overcoming butterflies, Mitch stepped right up to Snow, put his hand around her waist and his other hand under her cheek, "Where would you like to go, Princess? The world is yours ... well, at least the village."

Snow put her hand on top of his resting on her cheek, "As long as you're there, that's good enough for me."

Then, he kissed her as he did that night of All Hallows' Eve.

Snow, responding to his kiss, had no convictions now. She was no longer betrothed, nor did she have a decree to concern herself with.

" 'ere ya are, Snow. I've been lookin' for ya."

Once again, their kiss was interrupted by an 'intruder' into the kitchen, but this time it was the cheery tone of Stevie. "They all wanted me to come ask you 'bout breakfast, Mitch. Not sure why they asked me, though. So how 'bout it?"

"Ah, of course, Stevie. I forgot." He turned to Snow, "You see, originally there were sack breakfasts of fruit and muffins made to take on the search for you this morning. Well, I guess now everyone is looking more toward a hot one, looks like. OK Stevie. Tell them I'll get started on something right away."

As Stevie left, Mitch began getting out some eggs and Snow stopped him by touching his arm. "Mitch, you're always such a dear, cooking for everyone. Why don't you get someone else to do it this morning? After all, you made all those sack breakfasts for everyone."

Mitch lowered his eyes to the floor. "No, actually I didn't make the sack breakfasts, Snow. Kristen and Jill made them for me. I was ... I was in the jail."

Snow let go of his arm. "In the jail?"

Embarrassed, Mitch looked back at Snow. "Yes, they had to lock me up because I wanted to search for you last night even though it was dark. I was going to go out alone, if I had to. So they locked me up to keep me from going."

Snow just looked into his eyes, not quite knowing what to say.

"You see, Snow, they brought back your veil covered in blood, and I didn't know what happened to you, Princess. I thought you were ... well, I had to try to find you. I knew you were in danger. I was so angry last night ... at them. They had to lock me up, or I guess they thought they had to. It was the longest night of my life, though ... wondering where you were, if you were hurt, if you were still alive." He stopped, afraid he would choke if he spoke about it anymore.

Snow could read it in his eyes. He was going to risk everything, including his own life, to search for her. She felt her love for him bubble up inside her and virtually explode. She couldn't help herself. Although uncharacteristic for Snow, she wrapped her arms around Mitch's neck and kissed him lovingly. Mitch willingly kissed her back, wrapping his arms around her in return.

Suddenly, there was a knock at the kitchen door. "Mitch? You need any help in there?" It was Yolanda's voice. She knew Mitch and Snow were in the kitchen, so she didn't want to just burst in, but she also wanted to make sure they didn't need any help with the cooking.

Snow giggled. Mitch rolled his eyes. "Sure, Yolanda. That would be great ... but in just a minute." He looked at Snow. "This is getting old, constantly being interrupted every time that" He stopped. "You know what? It's this kitchen. It seems to be the most popular place in Whispering Willows. What about that date? Where do you want to go, just the two of us?"

Snow smiled flirtatiously. "Why don't you surprise me, Mitch. I'm sure I'll be delighted with anything you do." They looked at each other for a moment, "Why don't I help you with the breakfast, Mitch?"

"Oh, Princess, no. You have had way too rough of a night. In fact, you should probably get some rest after breakfast. Just send Yolanda in here and go on in and sit down and rest, OK?"

"Alright, Mitch." Snow sent in Yolanda and went back to sit with the other girls.

"OK, Snow. We now know why you've been so quiet lately, keeping this big secret. So now ya better start talkin'. We wanna hear all about it, girl!" Jill was bold and inquisitive.

Snow told them about everything her father said in the woods and that she wasn't marrying Edward. She told them how it all came about. Snow pondered as she thought back, "It was all very strange at times."

Kristen raised her hands. "Wait a minute! Did you say that Eddy's eyes were green? You must have imagined it, honey."

"That's what I thought, but it happened more than once, and it was very strange ... he wasn't himself, really. And Tweety acted very odd around him during those times as well, come to think of it."

Jill put her hand on Snow's. "Snow, tell me exactly what he said and how he acted when ya saw him with th' green eyes."

"Well, his demeanor was different. He was ... colder. Plus, I suppose he seemed a little rougher than usual. At one point he took my chin in his hand, rather tightly ... not an action typical for Edward since I've been around him."

Jill took Snow's hand with both of hers and leaned in towards her. "Alright, I'm gonna ask ya a few questions that may scare ya ... but just bear with me, K?"

Snow looked at Jill confused, "OK."

"Now remember when ya were cut with that mirror shard? Yolanda said you an' Stevie talked about the possibility of th' attack coming from Margurite."

"Yes, I remember, but the men took that shard away to the woods in a jar after Donnie broke it."

"But before that, the shard was in th' fireplace and caused a smoke cloud that came into your room. When Edward lifted ya outside, th' cloud struck him, then it disappeared."

Snow gulped. Surely, Jill wasn't suggesting ...

"Snow, when was th' first time ya saw Eddy with green eyes?"

Snow put her hand to her mouth, "Right after he woke up."

"An' Snow, what color are your stepmother's eyes?"

Snow began crying, burying her face in her hands. "They're green, oh no! What have I done? And Edward would sometimes call me 'dear'. Margurite called me 'dear'. Jill, I've brought her with me! I've put the village in danger!"

Jill and Kristen stroked Snow's hair while Kate sat wide eyed at the thought.

Kristen leaned in to Jill. "Are you sure about this?"

"Yeah, I've heard legends 'bout people taking th' eye color o' their possessor, but I always thought it was jus' that ... legend. I guess there's some truth to it. But then again, look where we are." Jill turned back to try and calm Snow down. "Shhh, it's OK. We don't want to alarm the others. We don't need them to know jus' yet. We'll figure this out, Snow."

"Too late, there Jill." Donnie had overheard, regardless. "Great, so ya brought yer 'stepwitch' back with ya, did ya?"

Snow looked up at Donnie, horrified.

"Gee, Princess. Thanks so much for the lovely gift!"

"Can it, Donnie!" yelled Kristen forcefully. "She's been through enough without you shooting off your mouth!"

But Donnie continued, "So that makes Eddy 'the queen'! Pretty fittin', when ya think about it."

Kristen wished Duncan were here to shush up Donnie. Where was Duncan? "Wait, didn't Duncan go to Eddy's to check on him? He went to Eddy's alone!"

"That's it, men. Let's go." Donnie was out the door before another word was said.

"Hey, what's going on?" Yolanda rushed out of the kitchen, followed by Mitch when she heard the shouting. She was afraid it was a repeat performance of All Hallow's Eve.

Kate looked at Jill as she got up. We have to tell Yolanda that Duncan is possibly in danger, thought Kate.

"Let me handle this one, girls. Yolanda, can I speak with you for a moment in the kitchen?"

Jill took Yolanda into the kitchen as Mitch came over to see why Snow looked so upset and crouched down to her.

Snow began sobbing again. "Oh Mitch, it's her! And Edward! I've brought her to the village somehow! I've put everyone in danger ... Edward, now Duncan!"

He touched her face, "Snow, what danger?"

"Margurite! She's taken over Edward. Green eyes! She's here!" Snow put her arms around Mitch's neck and buried her face in his chest, sobbing. Mitch, confused, looked at Kate. She nodded.

He pulled Snow off of the chair and down to the floor so he could cradle her. "It's OK, Snow. We won't let anything bad happen."

The worried look on Kate's face concerned Mitch. There really was something very wrong, wasn't there?

"On three! One-two-three!" At Donnie's command, he, Murray, and Ivan broke the door down at Eddy's hut, taking Duncan and Eddy completely by surprise.

Duncan jumped up, "What is going on?!"

Edward was sitting near the fireplace, still not feeling his best. "Good God, man! You could have knocked!"

Donnie ignored their inquiries, "Are you both alright?"

"Yes, what the devil is going on?"

Donnie walked toward Edward. "We need to lock Eddy up. Sorry, man."

"What did I do?"

"Nothing. It isn't you. It's that Margaret woman."

"Margurite," Ivan corrected.

"Whatever. Let's go."

As Donnie pulled Edward up by the arm, Duncan stepped in. "Wait a minute! No one is going anywhere till you tell us what's going on?"

Donnie and Ivan told them about Jill's theory on Snow's stepmother and the surrounding circumstances that Snow observed.

Eddy's jaw dropped. He was speechless and scared. "Maybe that's why I haven't been feeling myself lately. I get blackouts, things I can't remember ... plus the dizzy spells."

"Well, we can't take any chances. We gotta lock you up. I hope you understand."

Edward nodded at Donnie's precaution.

"But he isn't well, Donnie." Duncan continued, "That jail is no place for one who is sick, no matter the reason. He's our brother, man. Surely, there's another way. Why is the jail always your sole conclusion?"

"No, Duncan, it's OK. Donnie's right. I don't want anything else to happen. It's obvious I can't control what happens when I blackout, or whatever. To tell you the truth, the past few days have really been a blur. Except for a few occasions, I don't even remember talking with

Snow about the wedding or making the arrangements. It just ... happened. I guess maybe it was that woman.”

This all really scared Eddy ... to not be in control of his own body. It terrified him. He didn't want anyone to get hurt. “Snow broke our engagement tonight. Under the circumstances, I think it was the best thing.” Edward had mixed feelings on the issue. He still didn't know how he felt about Snow, but he knew that he didn't want anything to happen to her. And until this issue was settled somehow, he was going to keep his distance from her for the most part, just to be safe.

Chapter 12

"The Date"

Pacing outside the barn, Snow knew she was a few minutes early. Dressed in her favorite pink dress and wearing her honeysuckle perfume, she felt her butterfly friends flutter in her stomach. She even asked Stevie to 'bird-sit' Tweety for her, so nothing would disturb their date. Stevie promised Snow that he would not come to the barn for ANY reason. Mitch had told her to meet him in the barn at six o'clock that evening. OK, it's gotta be time now. She felt like she'd waited forever.

She slowly opened the large creaky barn door. "Hello? Mitch?"

"Hello Snow, please come in." Mitch had prepared all day for the date that evening. He was determined that everything would be perfect. He had already warned the men that the barn was 'off-limits' for the night. Kristen graciously offered to take over dinner for the village so he could prepare the barn for his and Snow's date. Mitch had asked Bart to clean the barn especially well that day and promised to return the favor.

"Where are you?"

"I'm up here, sweet Princess."

She climbed the ladder to the hayloft to find there was no visible hay. Instead, on top of the hay, there was a luscious layer of purple crushed velvet material that Mitch asked Jill if he could borrow for the evening. Sprinkled over the velvet were petals of wildflowers, Snow's favorite. Mitch was dressed handsomely in a dark-colored sweater. Snow thought that these sweater garments looked especially nice worn by the men. Besides being warm and soft, they showed the broadness of their shoulders and thickness of their chests.

Laid out in front of Mitch were two covered dinner plates and two empty wine glasses. Next to him was a bottle of wine, a coffee pot, and a basket with some other items. Encircling the entire loft were white candles. And in the air was a most pleasant scent ... it was vanilla. She would have expected the barn to smell like horses, but it didn't. It was overwhelming for Snow ... certainly the most romantic environment she had ever seen.

"Good evening. You look absolutely beautiful, Snow."

"Thank you, Mitch. You look quite handsome yourself." As they gazed into one another's eyes for a moment, she rubbed her hand through the velvet material. "This is so soft. And you added flower petals. You're so thoughtful."

"It's royal purple for royalty ... for you, Princess. And here." In his hand was a wild daisy. He gently placed the stem through her hair under her pink ribbon next to her ear. Snow smiled, biting her lower lip as Mitch uncovered the dinner plates. "And ... we have steamed asparagus, baked eggplant, and fresh grilled trout. Plus, the finest wine in the village," as Mitch pulled out the wine bottle and began to open it. He poured them both a glass, "How about a toast." They both raised their glasses. "To your new life in the Willows ... may all your dreams come true."

Snow masked her surprise, taking a sip of the wine. How did he know about her dreams? Did he hear it from one of the girls, maybe? About the prince in her dreams?

Snow tasted the entrée, "This fish is delicious."

"Yes, Nicholas actually caught this trout since Edward is ... oh, I'm sorry. I didn't want to bring up anything upsetting."

"That's OK. I just hope he can participate in the bonfire tomorrow evening. I would hate for him to have to miss it. I feel so guilty about it all."

"Now stop that. You are not to blame at all. Besides, tonight we are to think of nothing negative, alright?"

"Alright." Snow agreed with a smile. "It sure smells lovely in here ... surprisingly so."

“That’s the vanilla scented candles. They are like regular candles but give off a scent of vanilla. They came in the last mysterious crate we received.”

“It still puzzles me how you receive those mysterious crates, Mitch.”

“Yes, it puzzles me too.”

After feasting on the dinner, Mitch pulled out of the basket a special covered plate. “How about dessert?” He uncovered a luscious-looking cheesecake covered in strawberries.

“Mitch, that looks positively scrumptious!”

After dessert, Mitch put the dishes into the picnic basket. “Now, I have another surprise for you.”

“Another one?”

“Yes. Follow me.” Mitch made his way down the ladder, and Snow followed him. As she was about to reach the bottom, Mitch pulled her from the ladder by her waist, spinning her around and around as she laughed and squealed.

“Sorry, I just had to do that. I had such fun twirling you around the morning you came out of the woods, that I thought it would be twice as much fun under more relaxed circumstances. But, now for the surprise.” Mitch walked over to a familiar black box and fidgeted with some buttons. Suddenly, music began to play from the box.

It was the same contraption that Rein had brought to the barn when she danced with him and he kissed her. She all but shuddered at the coincidence of Mitch doing the very same thing. But Mitch and Rein are nothing alike. Rein is haughty and demanding at times, where Mitch is loving and giving.

Mitch saw the distant look on Snow’s face as she stared at the player, lost in thought. “Snow, are you alright?”

“What? Oh, yes. I’m sorry. I was just remembering, that’s all.”

“Remembering? I know you didn’t have one of these back home.”

“No, I was remembering when Rein brought me here to dance and he had borrowed that same music player. I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to be so distant.”

Mitch wore a somewhat shocked look. He definitely didn’t want any aspect of their date to remind her of Rein, that was for certain. He would rather turn the music off and ‘hum’ if he had to.

“Here, I’ll just get rid of this, then. I don’t want any haunting memories to ...”

Snow went to him and gently put her hand on his arm. “No, that’s alright. Why don’t we make a new memory, Mitch?”

He turned back to look at Snow. Her deep blue eyes, along with her lovely smile, spoke volumes. He couldn’t help but to kiss her. He kept it short and tender, then asked her to dance. The first few songs were cheerful waltzes that Mitch had to show her the steps to a few of them. The songs became much slower, and he dared to pull her closer. Her eyes were at a level just under his chin. He lowered his head to kiss the side of her face, still holding one hand, and with the other on her waist.

Snow wanted to get lost in the music, the moment, but something kept invading her thoughts ... Kate. How did he feel about Kate? She couldn’t shake it from her mind.

Mitch’s thoughts were also racing. He wondered if he should mention it now? Was this a good time? Why not? It was as good a time as any. But he hadn’t even thought about what he would say. Oh well, here goes.

“You know, I must tell you that although you said that you didn’t want me to attend your wedding, I really did want to go. Although, the thing about it is, I wanted to ... be in it, you know? Um, I really don’t know how to say this ...” Mitch swallowed hard.

Snow was still so lost in her own disturbing thoughts, she hadn’t heard a word Mitch had just said, “Mitch, I must ask you something.”

Mitch was somewhat relieved that his next statement had a reprieve. "Of course, Princess."

"I need to know about Kate."

Mitch pulled his head back to look at Snow. "Kate?"

"Yes. I know you have some sort of feelings for her. You had a date with her not too long ago, I know that. And I see you two quite often talking and laughing. I even noticed that it made Donnie uncomfortable ... and so that makes me feel a little strange as well, to see Donnie not his confident self."

She let go of Mitch and turned to walk toward 24-Carrots, "It's just difficult to follow your heart when your heart's desire is possibly following something else, or someone."

Mitch wanted to tell her the truth. He approached her and put his hand on her shoulder, "Snow, I do care for Kate, as a very good friend. And I won't lie to you. Before you came to the Willows, I did have a crush on her, a big one. I tried many times to get her to go on a date with me, mostly to no avail, except one time. I think my favorite excuse of hers was 'I have to wash my hair tonight.'"

Snow giggled. "She actually said that?"

"Yeah. You'd think I'd get the hint, eh? I never asked again once you came. You shouldn't be jealous of Kate, Snow."

"Well, I didn't want to say I was jealous, but ..."

"Well, don't be. You know I get pretty jealous, too sometimes ... of you and Stevie spending as much time as you do together."

Snow laughed out loud. "Me and Stevie? You're jealous of Stevie?"

"Well, yes, because he gets to spend more time with you than I do. You're always up there alone with him in your treehouse. It drives me insane!"

"Stevie always wants to read me a book, and I let him. It helps me sleep, anyway. That's all. There's nothing else."

"Well, then that's how you should look at Kate and I. She's like my Stevie in a way, I suppose."

Snow laughed again, "Kate is Stevie?"

Mitch raised his hands in surrender. "Please don't tell her I said that or she'll probably kill me! You know I just meant it as a comparison."

"Yes, I know," Snow eyed him teasingly.

Mitch took her hand. "Now, since we have that cleared up, shall we dance some more?" The two resumed their position on the 'dance floor' as the song once again possessed a very slow pace.

Mitch remembered the statement he was about to make earlier and pondered whether he should try it again.

Suddenly, Snow's shoulders shook as she giggled, unable to hold it back any longer. "I'm sorry. I just still can't believe you're jealous of Stevie!"

Perhaps he should wait until next time to bring up the subject under the circumstances, Mitch thought.

After several more dances, both of them began to tire out. Mitch went back up to the loft to gather the dishes and blow out the candles. He would gather the velvet material and candles in the morning once they had cooled. He took the basket with one arm and Snow's arm with the other. As they walked back to her treehouse, they talked about the plans for the bonfire the next day. It should feel nice and warm with the chill in the air they felt now.

They reached the tree house and Mitch set down his basket. Snow turned into him, close. He put his arms around her waist and she wrapped hers around his neck. He looked into her eyes for a moment, then kissed her gently. As he kissed her, he pulled her in closer

for perhaps a more passionate kiss. At that moment, a cold breeze blew through the village and Snow shuddered.

Mitch slowly pulled out of the kiss and rubbed his arms up and down her back to warm her. "My, it's getting colder, isn't it? You should be inside where it's warm."

Snow sensed Mitch's disappointment, and in all trusting quietly offered, "Would you like to come up for a while?"

Although possibly the most tempting thought Mitch has had in a long time, he smiled. "No. I know it's late and you need your rest. But I had a lovely evening. I thank you for the wonderful privilege of your company, Princess." He took her hand and kissed it.

"Thank you ever so much, Mitch. I had the most lovely evening ever!"

He made sure she was safely in her house before he left the foot of the tree and made his way home.

"Can I help you there?" came Snow's voice as Ivan was arranging the wood for the bonfire for that night.

"I don't know. Bart just went to take a break. I wouldn't want you to hurt yourself."

"Nah! And these are my work clothes, besides. How about I pass the wood to you from the wheelbarrow?"

In a 'chain' type fashion, Snow passed Ivan log after log as he carefully put them in place for the fire.

"What do you miss most about back home, Ivanhoe?"

He thought for a moment, "Well, besides my family, I suppose I sort of miss walking through the town with all the people selling their wares and such. Sometimes it's rather cheerful to be around a large crowd of people, although I wouldn't want that all the time, mind you. But that was the first thing that came to mind. How about yourself?"

"I miss the castle the most, I think. I loved peering over all the balconies overlooking the countryside. My father has been gone for over a year, so I found much comfort just roaming the large castle corridors and wondering what was around the next corner. When I was a child, I would play that a dragon was around the corner and that a brave prince would be there to slay it and save me. Sounds silly, I know."

"No, it doesn't sound silly at all, Snow. It's actually very charming. And I would think that I would probably miss living in a castle myself. We had a very nice home. It wasn't a castle, but I do miss it sometimes, just the same."

"Did you fight in many battles?"

"Yes, actually. I reported directly to King Richard. We saw many battles, some faired victorious and others not so well."

Ivan shared some of his battles with Snow until Bart returned. In talking, the three soon discovered that they had quite a lot in common to talk about in customs and heritage. Bart mentioned finding the 'new world' with his brother, Christopher Columbus ... a concept almost unthinkable to Snow. She, of course, never imagined that there were any other lands out there so far away from her own ... that is, until she woke up in Whispering Willows.

"You know, I've been thinking."

"Bout what?" Jill replied, as Kate laid back on Jill's floor rug.

"About the woods. Ever since Snow came out of those woods alive after being out there all night. That crest of hers ... she said it protected her. She said it 'glowed'."

Kate sat up and looked at Jill. "I wonder if there would be any way to use it. You know, everyone's curious about that village on the other side of the mountain. I wonder if we could use it somehow. You think we could get out of the woods? Make it out alive at night?"

“That’d be somethin’ you’d have to talk to Snow ‘bout, Kate.” Jill looked at Kate with much curiosity, “Why all the questions centerin’ around leavin’, Kate? You goin’ somewhere?”

Kate laid back down. “No, just curious. That’s all. Hey, has anything strange happened with Eddy lately at all? He’s been in that jail two days, now.”

Jill sighed. “No, nothing has happened. He said he doesn’t even get dizzy spells anymore.”

Kate continued to stare at a spot on Jill’s ceiling. “Maybe they can let him out. It’s cruel to just leave him in there.”

“Well, they’re going to try one last test. They have to leave him alone with Snow.”

Kate sat up again. “Alone with Snow? That’s awfully dangerous. Isn’t it?”

“Yes, but it’s the only way to tell. Margurite always seemed to emerge when they were alone, mostly. Besides, Snow will stay on the other side of the bars and the men will be just outside the jail in case she yells. They’re going to try it this afternoon, so hopefully Eddy will be able to attend the bonfire tonight.”

“Well, I sure want to be there for that, then.”

Jill smiled, “Of course. Everyone does.”

“Anything happen, Snow? Anything at all?” Duncan pressed.

“No. We were a little nervous about it at first ... not knowing if he would fly around the cell or what. But no, nothing. I never even saw him with green eyes, ever.”

Kristen was concerned that Eddy wouldn’t be able to make the bonfire that night. “Well, perhaps we could let him out and just keep a close watch on him, then ... at least for tonight.”

Donnie shook his head, “I don’t know.”

Duncan offered to Donnie, “What if we assigned two men to be with him at all times. “

“Well, I guess that sounds OK. But at the first sign of trouble ... and I mean anything ... we gotta lock ‘im up. Got it?”

The men let Eddy out, and he and Snow smiled at each other. He walked on to his cabin with Thomas and Nicholas, the two men that agreed to stay with him. He wanted to get a good hot bath.

The sky was unusually clear that night. Snow swore she could see every star in the sky. How beautiful the fire looked in front of a black sky of stars. Mitch approached her with a tray of fresh rye bread. How does he do it? He can find time to cook just about anything! She took a piece of bread and held his gaze for a moment, flirtatiously. Maybe the ‘flirting’ tactic of Kate’s is something she should try on Mitch more often. As Snow watched Mitch offering bread to the others, she noticed Jill snuggle up to Roger near the fire. There you go! Why couldn’t that be her and Mitch? He is so giving, but at the same time, he is ‘giving’ to everyone else, leaving Snow sitting there all by herself.

She thought she might just go snatch that tray out of his hands and ... what’s this? She noticed Mitch offering the bread to Kate and her all ‘flirty-like’. There they go again! That ‘flirt’ thing! Golly! That’s what I’m talking about, thought Snow. She glanced over and saw Stevie sitting, reading his book by the fire. OK, then. Fine. Two can play this game!

Snow quietly crept over to Stevie and snatched his book from his hands. “Whatcha readin’, Stevie?” She danced around giggling and waving the book around out of his reach as he tried to get it. Seeing that this was a game, he played along, still trying to get the book back. Finally, as she turned to round the corner of the bonfire, he grabbed her around the waist, lifted her up, and twirled her around. Snow, still clinging to the book, was squealing and laughing.

Mitch caught the game out of the corner of his eye and set down his tray. Of course, it became an all too familiar scene when Stevie picked Snow up and twirled her around, as Mitch so loved to do.

Finally, Snow and Stevie both tumbled to the ground, laughing. "I give! Here's your book, Stevie!" Snow stood up and made her way back to her seat, still laughing and brushing the grass off of her dress.

She looked up to find Mitch eyeing her curiously. "What was that all about?"

Snow thought, hmm, looks like her plan worked like a charm. "Nothing. Just having a little fun with someone not so busy."

"Not so busy', huh?" Just then, Mitch dipped Snow as though he were about to kiss her. Snow, being embarrassed to kiss in public, playfully wriggled to get free. She succeeded, and as she landed a hard 'thud' on the ground, she began to laugh hysterically.

Mitch eyed her with raised eyebrows as he picked up his tray.

"Hey Mitch, you didn't slip her some of that homemade booze of yours, did ya?" laughed Nicholas.

Suddenly, there was a commotion on the other side of the bonfire with Kate and Donnie. Kate was shouting and hitting Donnie. As some of the others made their way over there to see what was up, Snow looked up into the smoke cloud above the bonfire. She screamed "It's her! It's her! She's there!"

Mitch was startled by her scream and dropped his tray of bread. He tried to help her up. She was crying and looked at Mitch. "NO! Green eyes! Green!" she screamed. She shoved him away and fell back to the ground.

Mitch knelt down to try and comfort her. Ivan came over to assist him in helping her up. She was fighting the both of them.

"What is it? Is she OK?"

Snow looked around at the voice. It was Edward. Snow gave a blood-curdling scream and blacked out, falling to the ground.

Edward blinked his brown eyes from the bonfire's smoke. "She OK?"

Later, as Snow awoke and was moved off to the side of the commotion, she saw Kristen and Jill throwing bread into the fire. She saw many of the men fighting and was frightened. Mitch noticed she was awake and went over to meet her.

Some of the villagers had fallen victim to 'ergot poisoning', which is a parasitic fungus that thrives on rye under certain climate conditions. Symptoms can include hallucinations, among other things.

Kristen ran up to Mitch. "Is there any more bread in the kitchen? What about bread dough? We have to get rid of it!"

Snow coughed out, "Bread dough ... who 'kneads' it!" In catching her own pun, Snow laid back onto the grass laughing hysterically, kicking her feet into the air. Mitch peered down at her with a look of surrender.

"Why don't you let me take her home, Mitch?"

Mitch turned around. "Oh, Ivan, that would be so kind. I have so much to take care of to make sure no one else gets a hold of this stuff."

"Sure. No problem. Donnie found Kate unconscious, and so he's taking care of her for now. I'll just make sure Snow gets home safely."

"I can't go up there! She's up there! She'll try to kill me!" Snow trembled as she and Ivan stood at the foot of her tree house.

"Snow, you need to sleep this off. It's having a bad effect on many of us."

"But I can't go up there. I'm scared."

"Snow, there's no one up there."

“Can I stay with you?”

“I don’t think Mitch would like that very much.”

“Oh, Mitch-ShMitch. You can tell me about Robin Hood!”

“Oh, dear. It will take me a bit to explain this one, but ... I suppose.”

As they began to make their way to Ivan’s cabin, the treehouse door slowly opened. Peering down from the darkness were two small, glowing green lights.

Ivan was supporting Snow’s weight on his shoulder with her arm around his neck as they entered his cabin. “I guess it’s the ol’ chair for me tonight, eh.” He chuckled as he gently set her down on the bed.

“Ivan, did you ever fight any dragons back home?” Her words were slurred as she rocked back and forth on the bed.

“Snow, there are no such things as dragons. Where did you hear that?” As he turned from adding wood to his fire, he found Snow slumped sideways on the bed, fast asleep. “There now. You just stay there and sleep this off. I hope there are no aftereffects for you in the morning.”

It was difficult to fall asleep in his rather hard wooden chair, but as he watched the princess slumber, he smiled at her and soon found that slumber himself.

Chapter 13

“Powdered Kiss”

After thanking Ivan for his kindness in letting her stay in his cabin, Snow made her way home back to her treehouse. She didn't remember anything of the night before from the time after she returned Stevie's book to him in teasing him at the bonfire. Ivan had told her of the ergot poisoning in the bread that was served. Mitch must just feel terrible, Snow thought ... making bread that made people sick. She knew it wasn't his fault, but she knew Mitch pretty well nonetheless, and knew he must have felt badly about it. She made her way up the ladder and opened the door. She nearly stumbled over the obstacle in the kitchen area near the door. How sweet, Snow thought! Mitch must have left it for her last night. She would go right away and thank him in person for the lovely basket of fruit in her tree house. She grabbed the large red apple on the very top and headed down the ladder.

“No, sorry Mitch,” Thomas held his head to try and steady the dizziness he was still feeling, not to mention that his nose was still throbbing from the previous evening's fist fight. “With that ridiculous ‘ergot’ junk, I don't remember much about last night ... much less being able to keep an eye on Edward.”

Mitch scowled and turned to Nicholas. “What about you? You two were supposed to keep an eye on Eddy last night. Now he's missing and has been all night, for all we know. Thank God Snow stayed with Ivan last night rather than alone in her tree house.”

“She did?” Thomas said with the sound of a congested nasal passage, “I thought you wouldn't be too happy about something like that.”

“Well, Ivan said Snow had a bad feeling about going home from the beginning. Besides, Ivan is a gentleman. I trust him.”

“What about the river?” Nicholas offered, “Maybe Ed's fishing this morning.”

Mitch nodded, “Perhaps. Can you go and check? I'd like to see how Snow is. It's getting pretty late in the day.”

Nicholas and Thomas both went to look for Eddy.

Mitch was taking off his apron when he heard a noise behind him. He turned to see Snow throwing an apple into the air and catching it.

“Good morning, you thoughtful sweetheart.”

“Good morning, Snow.” She wore a huge smile that Mitch found exhilarating.

“You're such a dear. See, I even brought part of your gift with me.”

“I'm not sure what you're talking about, a ‘gift’, but I'm so glad to see you're looking well.”

“Mitch, you can't fool me. I know you're just being humble. Would you like to share your gift with me?”

Mitch wore a baffled look. “Gift?”

“Now, are you going to just keep denying that you left me that beautiful basket of fruit in my treehouse last night, Mitch?” She started to take a bite out of the apple she had brought with her.

“Fruit? Snow, no!” He grabbed the apple out of her hand and threw it on the ground. Snow stood there, confused.

“I didn't leave you a basket, and Edward is missing ... has been all night. I wouldn't want to take any chances on that fruit, Snow. OK?”

Snow looked down disappointed. “Alright. I understand.”

Mitch realized and reached for her hand, “Snow, I'll give you a hundred baskets of fruit if you want me to, love.”

Snow smiled and looked up. "Can I just have YOU in a basket?"

"You can have me anywhere, Snow."

Suddenly feeling a bit awkward, Snow inquired, "Did you say that Edward was missing?"

"Yes, Nicholas and Thomas went to check on him."

"Ivan said this whole thing was caused by something wrong with the bread?"

Mitch rubbed her arm. "Ergot poisoning. Kristen told us about it."

"Do you know where she is? I'd like to ask her," Snow inquired.

"The girls are helping to tend to Kate. She didn't fair too well last night, either."

Nicholas gave a sigh of relief as he and Thomas came upon Edward at the river. "Here you are! We've been looking for you everywhere, Eddy!"

"Sorry, guys. I've been here."

"How long? We didn't see you all night."

"Don't know. I don't remember much about last night. Thomas, what happened to your face?"

"Long story. What do you mean you don't remember? Did the bread affect you too?"

"Bread?"

"Yeah, the rye bread that Mitch was passing around the bonfire. Kristen said it caused 'ergot poisoning'. They say it can give a person hallucinations and the like. A lot of people were really affected by it."

Edward shook his head. "I didn't eat any of the bread. I don't know what's going on. First thing I knew was that I woke up here. What if it's HER again? I decided to just stay here so I couldn't hurt anyone."

Nicholas and Thomas looked at each other. Nicholas gave Edward a quick stare to be sure his eyes were brown. "Let's go on back, Eddy. We need to tell the others."

"Well, at least let me catch something for dinner first. I can't hurt anyone out here."

"You sure Eddy?"

"Yeah, just give me a little while."

"Alright, we'll come back for you later, then."

Snow returned to her treehouse after getting the rundown on ergot poisoning from Kristen. She sat on her couch pillows and admired the daisy she had put in a vase, the one that Mitch had put in her hair on their date the other night. She noticed one of the petals had fallen from it. She felt all 'grimy' from the bonfire last night, as she hadn't bathed yet. She knew Kate's cabin was out of the question and the others were probably already using their baths for the same purpose. Snow figured the best place to go would be the guest bath in the main hut. She grabbed a change of clothes and headed for the main hut.

When she arrived, it was all but deserted. The only one in the main cabin portion was Bart reading.

"Hello, Bart. Is that one of Stevie's books, there?" said Snow as she entered the hut with her clothes.

"Yes. I really didn't have anything better to do, believe it or not." He saw the clothes in her arms, and he winked at her playfully, "Mitch isn't here at the moment."

"That's alright. I'm just here to take a bath. I imagine all the others are occupied."

"Let me know if you need any help," he teased.

"Don't worry, I'll let you know." She giggled as she closed the door behind her and began to run the water in the tub. Good, it's warm, she thought. As she was about to undress, something caught her eye in the corner of the room. She approached the object on the floor next to the full-sized mirror. She gasped, then calmed herself. 'I'm sure that's just

a similar-looking jar. That can't be the same one. Donnie buried it in the woods.' As she picked up the empty jar, it felt dusty in her hands. She quickly set it down and brushed off her hands. The dust that was on her hands was brown. It was not dust at all, it was dirt. It was as if the jar had been ... dug up?

As she stood up, she was facing the mirror. The reflection she saw took her breath away. She was frozen in terror. She couldn't speak, she couldn't scream. It was her! She was there in the mirror! But it can't be! Maybe it's the ergot. Snow turned around. She gasped. There was Edward standing behind her with those haunting green eyes. She hadn't heard anyone come in. The door was still closed. She shut her eyes and turned back to the mirror. She was still there! Edward's reflection in the mirror was not Edward ... it was the queen, Margurite!

"What do you mean he's gone?" Duncan raised his hands. "Wait, let me get this straight. You found Eddy at the river. He didn't remember anything before waking up in the woods ... anything about last night, and he admitted to not eating any of the bread. And you left him there? Then you came back for him later and he was gone ... IS gone!"

"We looked everywhere," as Thomas sat down on a large chair in the main hut.

Mitch quickly asked, "Where is Snow?"

Bart glanced up from his book, "She just went in to take a bath a minute ago, just before you lads came in."

A terrified scream came from the direction of the guest bath. All the men went running toward it. Mitch threw open the door to see Snow in Edward's grasp. He had her arms in his grip and was pushing her toward the mirror. As he looked in their direction, they saw those dreaded green eyes. Edward went to shove Snow into the mirror. Mitch lunged to try to stop him from crashing her head into the glass. To his surprise and everyone else's, Snow and Mitch went right through the mirror as if it were an open window, disappearing. Edward fell to the ground, coughing. He hadn't gone into the mirror. Duncan ran to the mirror, but saw nothing but his own reflection.

He called out, "Mitch! Snow!" Nothing ... no reply. Duncan and Nicholas picked Eddy up as he held his head, staggering.

He looked at Duncan with his brown eyes, "What happened?"

"The queen! That's what happened. She was here again."

"Wait a minute!" Shouted Nicholas, "What the devil happened to Mitch and Snow? They just disappeared."

"I don't know."

Nicholas went running out of the hut to check the side of the building to see if they had come out the other side. "Are they gone forever?"

Duncan shook his head. "I'm not sure, Thomas. I wish I knew what was going on myself."

"Look at this." Thomas picked up the jar sitting next to the mirror. "Isn't this the same jar that Donnie buried in the woods that had the broken mirror shard in it? It's empty."

Duncan ran his hand over the surface of the mirror for any sign of them. There was nothing. Just a cold piece of glass.

Kristen's, Yolanda's and Jill's jaws dropped as Duncan told them what happened in the guest bath.

"We're getting a team together and are going to begin searching everywhere. I've not told Donnie. I'd rather wait until Kate wakes up, at least. He has a lot to worry about right now. I'd appreciate it if the rest of you would not tell him just yet."

The others nodded. The team was made up of Duncan, Nicholas, Thomas, Bart and Stevie. Mainly because they saw what happened, and Stevie because he may have insight to where Snow could be. Their first stop would be the place in the woods where Stevie found

Snow. There were a lot of mysterious occurrences around that area, such as Snow seeing the strange mist. Besides, since they found the jar in the bath that was supposed to have been buried in that spot in the woods, they figured that it was the best place to start. They had to hurry, as it would get dark fairly soon. They took two horses and the remaining three went on foot.

“ere ... this is it, guys!” Stevie called to the others when he reached the clearing where he had found Snow.

“Mitch! Snow!” The men started calling out as they looked around.

“Over here, guys! We need help! We’re over here!” The men followed the voice in the woods to where Mitch was sitting ... his head bleeding and an unconscious Snow lying in his arms.

“Mitch, thank God!” Duncan kneeled down to him. “What happened, man?”

It was apparent that Mitch had been crying, “I pulled her away, and we landed over there in those leaves.” He pointed to a spot just meters away ... the very spot Stevie found the original mirror shard.

“It was like nothing I’d ever seen. One second, I’d lunged for Snow and Eddy, and the next second we were in this strange room, like a basement. And there were all these bottles on tables with colored liquids and smoke coming out of them. And then I looked and saw that Margurite had Snow clenched in her hands instead of Eddy’s. She had these long, hideous fingernails. She dug them into Snow’s arms, making her cry, begging her to stop.”

Mitch rubbed her arms where there were multiple red cuts on both of them, then he wiped a tear with the back of his hand. “I looked back and saw the place where we had come. It was a mirror. I could see all of you in the guest bath, even Eddy. I could hear you calling me. Next to that mirror was another mirror where I could see the woods. The lunge from the mirror had knocked me off my feet. When I got up, this huge black crow attacked me.” He reached up to his forehead and touched his head where it was bleeding.

“I knocked the crow across one of the tables and got up. When I did, I saw Margurite blowing some sort of powder into Snow’s face. She started coughing and wheezing, and then she fell to the floor, grabbing the queen’s dress for support. The queen shoved her away, laughing. Snow fell towards me. The first thing I could think of was to grab her and jump through that mirror where I could see the woods. That’s what I did.”

Mitch began crying. “But I can’t wake her up. She must have put some kind of spell on her with whatever that powder was. She won’t wake up.” He lifted her head and gently patted her face and hands. “Snow? Princess?” He pulled her into him and gently stroked her hair, “We have to do something, we have to get her to the village and break this spell.”

Duncan turned to Bart, “Untie the horses and bring them over here.” Bart brought the horses. They put Mitch holding Snow on one of them and headed back to the village.

“No, not with the women. I want her with me!” Mitch instructed as they reached the village.

“Look, it’s Mitch! An’ he’s got Snow!” pointed Jill as the men came into view of the Willows.

They helped Mitch get Snow into bed. “I don’t care if I have to sleep in a chair for a week, she’s staying here,” Mitch protested to Kristen and Yolanda’s urgings that she stay with one of them.

“Let’s try some water. Anyone got any smellin’ salts?” inquired Jill as Yolanda went to get some water.

“I think Kate might have some in her cabin.”

“No Mitch. We just went through her cabin, and there was nothing like that in there. What about something from the kitchen? Any ammonia?”

Mitch draped an extra blanket over Snow. "There's some with the cleaning supplies in the storeroom."

Bart came back with the ammonia. They tried it, but to no avail.

Mitch was raving, "That witch! That's it! I'm going back to the main hut. If I can get back through that mirror, I'm gonna kill her!"

Jill gently squeezed his arm, "Mitch, calm down..."

"Wait, where's Eddy? This is his fault anyway! He should be..."

Jill grabbed his arm harder this time. "Mitch! Calm down! This isn't helpin'! Mitch, ya wanna be strong for Snow. She needs ya right now, dear. She might be able ta hear ya, ya know. That kind of stuff happens all th' time. People in comas an' stuff can hear their loved ones talkin' to 'em."

Kristen put her hand on Mitch's shoulder. "Perhaps she just needs to sleep it off. I'm sure in the morning she'll be bright-eyed as usual."

Mitch wanted Kristen's words to be true so badly he could taste it.

That evening, the others left Mitch to care for Snow. Mitch brushed her cheek with his hand. He touched her soft rosy lips. He constantly checked to make sure she was still breathing.

He whispered, "Snow, I can't lose you. Please come back to me." He could feel himself begin to cry, but he didn't want to do that. In the small possibility that she could hear him, he didn't want anything to dash her hopes, "Can you hear me, Princess? I don't know if you can, but there's something I want to tell you. I wanted to tell you the other night on our date, but it just didn't seem to be the right time. We were talking about Kate and Stevie and ... Snow, I wanted to tell you that I love you. Well, not just that, but ... your wedding. What I was trying to say was ... I wanted to be there ... but be in it, be part of it." He paused and took her hand. "I wanted to be the one marrying you, Snow. It should have been me, not Edward. I'm not sure how, but it should have been. I wanted to tell you all of this so badly. I know I should have told you the other night in the barn but ... well, I just should have, that's all there is to it. I wish I would have, Snow. So, you see Princess, you have to wake up so I can tell you in person ... well, when you're awake. Fairy Princess, I AM your prince after all. Well, I really want to be ... not for just a costume, but in real life, Princess." Again, he fought back the urge to cry, "Sweet Princess, come back to me." Sitting next to her, he laid his head next to her hand. And as he breathed her in, he fell asleep.

The next morning, Mitch was awakened by a knock at his door.

Stevie came bounding into Mitch's cabin. "Any news?" He was followed by Jill and Kristen.

"She's still out. She didn't move a muscle all night long. I'm so worried about her." He realized, "You know, in all of this insanity, I totally forgot about supper last night."

"It was taken care of ... don't ya worry. Kristen here just baked some potatoes and served the fixin's 'buffet style'," smiled Jill. "But ya must be starved yourself. Why doncha let us go get ya somethin' ta eat, Mitch?"

"No, but thanks. I can't eat. Not with her like ... this."

"Mitch, ya know, I just remembered something last that I wanted to tell ya," chirped Stevie excitedly. "In the story 'Snow White' when the queen put a spell on her, you know it was the prince who kissed her an' woke her up! Maybe Eddy could ..."

Mitch interrupted, "No way! That's ridiculous! I'm not letting that monster anywhere NEAR Snow!"

"Wait," thought Kristen. "Stevie has a point. Maybe we SHOULD go and get Eddy? It couldn't hurt to try. We'll all be here to make sure nothing bad happens."

“No. Something bad could still happen ... DID happen! You don't know what she's capable of!”

“Wait a minute.” Jill stopped them. “Didn't ya say that ya fought the queen in the mirror? She was with you an' Snow, an' yet ya saw Eddy still back in th' bath with Duncan and th' others, right?”

“Yes.”

“Well, then I think maybe Eddy's not taken over by th' queen no more then.”

“But Jill, I'm not willing to take that chance.”

Kristen folded her arms. “Then perhaps you'd rather take the chance that Snow will sleep forever and ever. Is that what you want?”

Mitch sighed and looked at Snow. “Where is he, anyway?”

“They locked him back up after what happened. He's in the jail.”

Without turning his eyes away from the Princess, “Alright. But I'm not leaving.”

Edward entered the cabin cautiously. He saw Mitch standing by Snow. When Mitch turned and saw Eddy, he had to turn and walk away to try and hide his anger.

“Mitch, I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to hurt anyone. It was *her*. You know I would never do anything to hurt Snow.”

Mitch kept his eyes away. “Yes, Edward, I know. I'm just upset about this whole thing is all. And the idea of you kissing Snow isn't helping matters.”

Eddy looked at Kristen. She nodded. Edward approached Mitch's bed where Snow lay motionless. Mitch couldn't help but to turn and watch over this particular event. Edward leaned down to kiss Snow. He gently kissed her. Nothing happened.

Edward looked at Kristen. She shrugged, “I don't know. Maybe it takes a minute.”

“No, no. I know wha' it is!” Stevie strode over to their side of the room. “In th' story, she was awakened by th' kiss of 'true love'. The prince was her true love in the story, but it doesn't necessarily have to be a 'prince' to wake up our Snow, right? It just needs to be her 'true love'.”

Edward turned and looked at Mitch. “I agree. This is your job, mate!”

Mitch looked around at the others, who were smiling and nodding. He slowly approached where the sleeping princess lay, as Edward crossed back to the door. Mitch swallowed ... not that he had any saliva left at that point. He looked at her face, that angelic face. Her eyes ... he so wanted to see her beautiful blue eyes again. Mitch leaned down to her face, slowly. He hesitated, then gently kissed her.

Chapter 14

"The Portal"

Although it was always a sweet experience to kiss Snow, this particular kiss was not one of the most enjoyable ones. Mitch was too scared ... scared that she wouldn't wake. And then what? What would wake her? He lifted his head from her lips and watched her. Nothing ... no movement.

Mitch touched her cheek, "Snow?"

Kristen touched Mitch's shoulder. "Maybe it takes a minute."

"No," he turned to Kristen, "I knew it was too good to be true. Her life may have been based on a fairy tale, but obviously it's not one anymore. What if I've lost her ... forever?"

"Mitch, nonsense. I'm sure that we can find the answer."

"Where? What else can we possibly do?"

"Well, pancakes sound good. I'm really quite hungry."

Mitch whirled around on one foot at the sound of her voice. At that moment he saw the two most beautiful blue eyes he's ever seen looking back at him ... and that warm, friendly smile of Snow's directed solely at him.

"Snow!" He choked, then dropped onto the bedside and took Snow into his arms and held her tightly. He held her so tightly, Snow had to make an extra effort to breathe. But she would never complain. She simply laughed.

The room cheered.

"OK, let's go get those pancakes for Snow." Kristen announced, as she began shooing everyone out of the cabin to leave Mitch and Snow alone.

"That means you too, Stevie," as he stood smiling at the two ... happy to see that his friend was alright.

As the last guest left the cabin, Mitch took Snow's face in his hands and looked into her eyes. "Snow, I cannot tell you how scared I was. I was afraid you wouldn't wake up. I was afraid I'd lost you forever. I don't know what I'd do, Snow. I don't. What would I do if I couldn't see your smiling beautiful face every day? Hear your singing, look into your eyes, touch your skin?"

He took her hands in his. They both had tears in their eyes. "Snow, do you remember what happened in the guest bath and then in the mirror?"

She nodded. "I was so frightened. Then I dreamed she was coming after me the whole time, that is, except when I heard your voice, Mitch ... only I'm not sure if I wasn't dreaming that too."

"I did talk to you, Snow. I'm sure you weren't dreaming. What did I say in your dream?"

Snow lowered her eyes, "Um, well, lots of things, really."

Mitch raised her head with his hand. "Like?"

She stuttered, "Like ... that you wanted me to come back. And ... you mentioned our date in the barn, I think."

"Is that all?"

"Well ..." Snow felt a shudder of fear in remembering Margurite. She grabbed Mitch and hugged him. "Please hold me for a while, my love. I'm frightened. I can still see her in my head. She'll be back for me, Mitch. I know she will. I can feel it."

"I'm not letting go of you, Snow. And I'm not letting you stay alone. You'll stay here with me until we know she's gone forever. Alright, Snow? I can't stand to see you afraid, my Princess." He held her for a while and rocked her back and forth. He had to find a way to destroy the queen. He and Snow would never have peace, never have happiness until Margurite was gone. He pulled back to look at her. He wanted to comfort her, to make her

feel safe and not frightened. He smiled and rubbed his nose on hers, then rested his cheek against hers.

Snow felt like warm honey was running all through her as she closed her eyes to savor the moment with her 'true love'. But she had to know if her dreams had been true. Had those things she heard really happened, or were they all in her head?

She dared to break the moment to ask, "How did you wake me from Margurite's spell?"

Mitch pulled back and looked at her, "It was Stevie who reminded us that the kiss from Snow White's 'true love' awakened her in the fairy tale ... the tale we are all so fascinated with because it is your life's story," he chuckled.

Then it really happened, Snow thought. She had heard every word in her slumber ... every word as it had been spoken in true life. She heard Stevie, Kristen, Jill ... and Mitch. She had heard all that he said about her, about Edward, about the barn, about the wedding ... their wedding. He wants to marry her! She desperately wanted to tell him. She remembered his regret that he hadn't told her about his feelings in the barn.

She didn't want to regret not telling him as well. "Mitch, I-"

"Here we go! Pancakes per your request!" Stevie cheerfully burst in, holding a tray with two breakfast plates of pancakes and syrup.

"Knock, Stevie. You're supposed to knock! Sorry about that." Kristen said apologetically as she followed him into the cabin.

"Aye, sorry. But I know ya said ya were hungry." He set the tray on the bed.

"Yes, Stevie. Thank you, I am." Snow smiled as she pulled the tray up closer.

"OK, Stevie. Let's go have breakfast ourselves. See you two later."

Mitch added as they were leaving, "Thanks for everything, Kristen."

She smiled as she closed the door behind her. Snow tried her best to eat slowly so as not to look like a pig in front of Mitch. She was just so famished. At one point, Mitch noticed a bit of syrup on her lip. Too enticing to resist her already sweet lips now covered with maple syrup, he boldly reached up, put his hand behind her neck and pulled her in to kiss her. He surrounded her lips with his, gently licking the syrup from them. Taken by surprise, Snow halfway wanted to respond to such a passionate kiss from Mitch, but was too preoccupied with wanting to get rid of her mouthful of pancakes ... not too appealing, she would imagine, for a kiss of passion. She giggled and pulled back, covering her mouth as she chewed and swallowed the pancakes. Gosh, she wished she weren't so darn hungry! Is this what Jill meant by men being in the 'mood' in the mornings?

"Sorry, Princess. You're just too sweet to resist." Mitch let her finish the rest of her breakfast in peace.

Finally, she had gotten her bath, Snow thought as she entered her treehouse after having bathed at Jill's after breakfast. She giggled as she remembered Mitch arguing with Jill about not leaving her side, even for her bath! Gee, I wonder if there was an ulterior motive there, she thought. "Nah!" She said to herself sarcastically. She noticed that the fruit basket had been removed from her house, and in its place was a bag of homemade cookies from 'you know who'.

"Goodness, I guess he's trying to get me fat, replacing fruit with cookies!" she laughed. "Oh, poor daisy." She then sadly noticed the flower Mitch had given to her on their date had lost three more petals. "I wish you could live forever." She dug into the bag of cookies. She simply couldn't resist sweets, especially Mitch's. Along with the cookies, she found a rolled piece of paper. She unrolled the note and something fell to the ground. It was a bracelet. She picked it up. It was handmade of coffee beans ... each one hand painted a different color. It smelled wonderful, like Mitch's coffee. The note read: 'To my true love. You will forever be in my heart. Love, Mitch' She slipped it on immediately and then dashed off to find him in order to thank him 'properly'.

Mitch was just finishing the dishes. It was the least he could do after the ladies made the breakfast for everyone so he could spend that time with Snow. Suddenly, an arm was wrapped around his neck from behind him. The arm wore the bracelet of coffee beans and he rubbed it.

He turned around to face her, and she lifted the bracelet to her lips and kissed it, "Thank you for such a beautiful gift, much better than a basket of fruit."

He, in turn, took her hand and also kissed it.

"Do you know why I shall cherish my new bracelet?"

"Why?" he smiled.

"Because it was handmade by my true love."

She put her arms around his neck and moved in closer to him, her face only centimeters from his. "Do you know what else?"

Mitch shook his head.

"No pancakes this time." She smiled and leaned in to kiss him. With his arms around her waist, he pulled her closer into the kiss.

"Oi, Mitch, I found some more dishes in the cabin. Sorry, I guess I just missed them."

Snow pulled back, giggling. 'Well,' she thought, 'it was bound to happen, always does.'

Mitch didn't look so amused as he took the dishes from Stevie with a muffled 'thanks' through clenched teeth. Stevie bounced back out the door and into the dining hall. OK, so the kitchen was obviously not the place for ... well, anything really, thought Mitch. Perhaps it's time for another date. That evening he had already made plans for the dinner for everyone, but tomorrow night? Yes, perfect. That was the night. He would tell her everything. "Snow, do you have any plans tomorrow night?"

Snow side-glanced at him flirtatiously, "No."

"Well, how about dinner at my cabin, then? There is much we need to talk about."

"There is, huh?" she asked, knowingly.

"Yes, Princess. There is." He took her hand with her bracelet and kissed it.

There was a soft knock at the door. Eddy peeked his head in cautiously. "Hello, just wanted to get a coffee refill."

"It's alright Eddy, you can come on in." Mitch poured him a refill. Edward gave them both a friendly smile and promptly left.

Snow turned back to him, "I'm glad they let him out of the jail."

Mitch sighed, "Yes. It wasn't fair to leave him in there. Besides, I think there is truth to what Jill said. Since we had Margurite with us in the mirror, and Eddy was left behind in the bath, I really do think he is free of her."

"So where do you think she is now?"

"Well, I'm hoping she is still in the portal, because that's how I'm going to get rid of her."

Snow gasped with concerned surprise. "You are? How?"

"Don't worry about it, Princess. I don't want you to be afraid, alright?"

"But I am worried, Mitch. Whatever you're thinking, I'm sure it's dangerous. You have to tell me or I'll just be sick with worry."

He kissed her forehead. "Alright."

Mitch went over and pulled a small canvas bag out of the back of one of the drawers. Out of the bag, he pulled out a bundle wrapped in a large dishrag. He unwrapped the dishrag to display an oblong shaped object. It was an avocado green and was very bumpy. Snow reached out to touch it. It was cold and hard, like metal.

"Careful, this is a dangerous object."

"It looks almost like a vegetable."

"Yes, I know. But believe me, it isn't. It's called a 'grenade'. You mustn't say anything. If Donnie knew I had it, he'd kill me."

“How did you get it?”

“There were a bunch of them in one of the ‘mysterious’ crates. Donnie usually gets them all, but he missed this one. I thought we should have one that wasn’t in his possession, just in case of an emergency. Well, to me this seems like an emergency.”

“How does it work? How can you use it to get rid of Margurite?”

Mitch demonstrated, “You pull this pin out, throw it as far as you can toward your target, then run and duck for cover, because after a few seconds it will explode.”

“Explode?!”

“Yes, therefore, blowing up the portal itself. She can’t come back if her doorway is gone. There has been plenty of rain, so there shouldn’t be any fear of fire.”

Snow stood wide-eyed at the thought of ‘blowing-up’ any part of the woods.

Mitch took her face in his hands. “I know it’s a bit extreme, Snow. But I don’t want this woman coming between us anymore. You mustn’t say anything to anyone. You know this is something they wouldn’t allow.”

“But this could get you into terrible trouble with Donnie and Duncan and everyone.”

“I know. That’s alright. Besides, it’s always better to ask forgiveness than permission, you know.” He laughed.

“When will you go?”

“Tomorrow after breakfast. Then nothing will spoil our date. By then, I’ll have things all settled with Donnie and the others.”

“Optimistic, aren’t you? I’m going with you. Then they can blame us both.”

“No, absolutely not. It’s too dangerous, Snow. You’re not coming with me.”

“But Mitch, it’s dangerous for you too.”

“I know. But you’ve never handled one of these before.”

“Have you?”

“No.”

“Well, then?”

“Snow...”

“How do you know she’s still in the portal?”

“Well, I don’t. I just hope she is. I’m pretty sure that she has to have a medium to travel through, like the mist you saw, or the mirror shard that Stevie found. That’s how she got into the village, and proceeded to take over Eddy. Donnie already shattered and disposed of the large mirror in the guest bath, so I don’t think she’ll be coming back through there. She’s there waiting for us in the portal, waiting for you. That’s why I can’t let you go with me. You’re staying here where it’s safe. I love you. I have to make sure you’re safe.”

He kissed her forehead again and wrapped up the grenade, “Well, I guess I’ll finish up these last-minute dishes that Stevie brought.”

“Snow?” Stevie returned to the kitchen. Speaking of Stevie, Snow thought.

“I’ve got Tweety, ‘ere. I forgot all about ‘im. I was goin’ ta give him to ya earlier. I took really good care of ‘im.”

“Tweety! Thank you Stevie.” She lovingly cradled the bird and kissed its head. “Are you ready to go home, Tweety? Let’s go.” As she carried her pet out of the kitchen, Mitch looked on with just a hint of envy that Tweety was going home with Snow, and he was not.

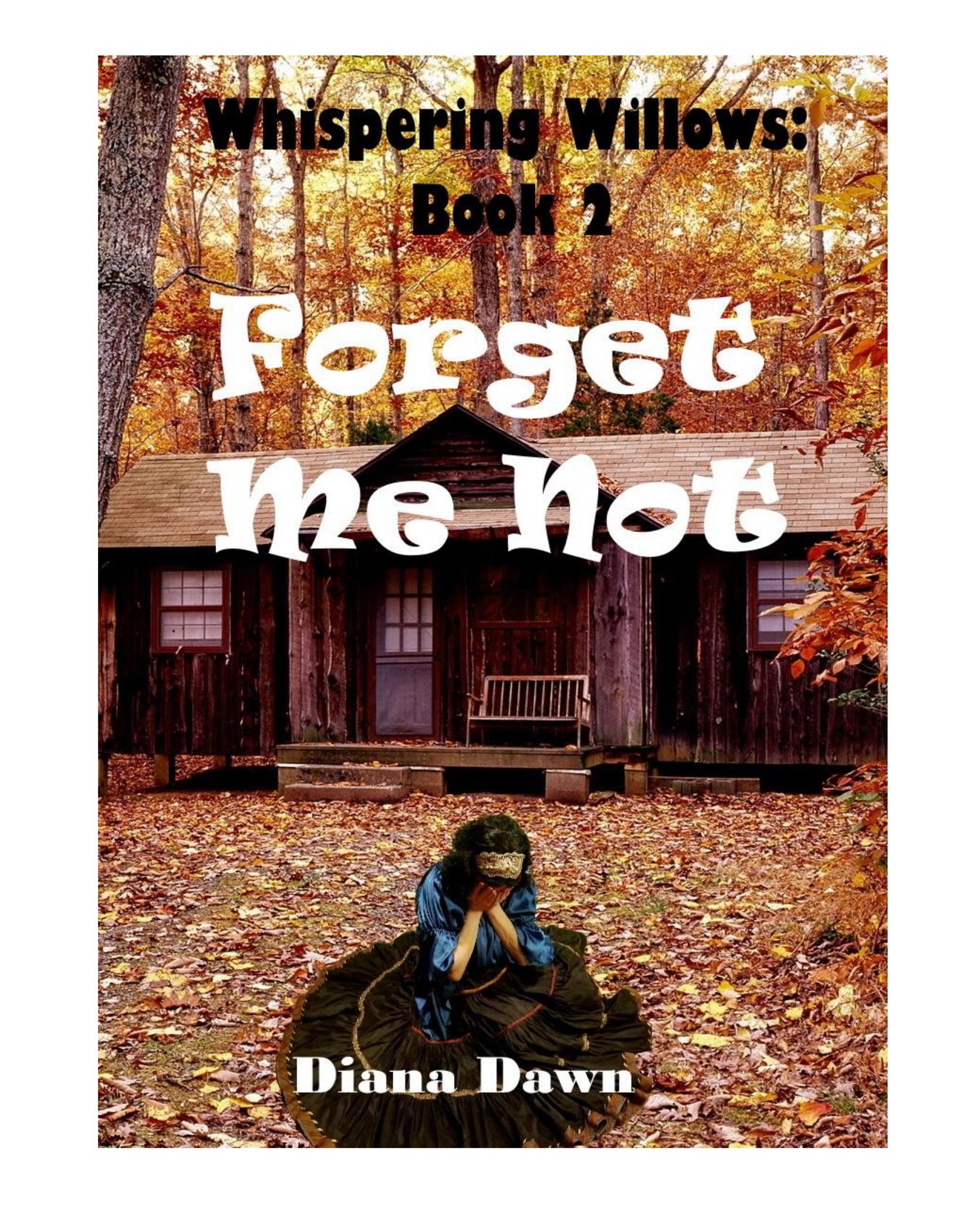
Even though Mitch wanted her to stay with him until the issues with Margurite could be resolved, Snow insisted that she stay in her treehouse. She’d keep the whistle nearby, but she didn’t feel right about staying alone with him. Although she wanted to very much, she was afraid of what the others might think about it. That evening, as she watched her little bird flutter about in her couch pillows, it reminded Snow how the butterflies would flutter in her stomach so very often, especially when she was with Mitch. But they weren’t there now. She was nervous, worried.

“Tweety, I’m so worried about Mitch. I don’t want him going out there in those woods without me ... with HER out there, ready to pounce. I got everyone into this mess in the first place. I need to get them out.” She plopped back onto the pillows. “I’m the one she followed here. I should be the one to get rid of her.” She thought for a moment as she turned her beloved bracelet around and around on her wrist, smelling its rich fragrance. “That’s it then. I shall take care of this myself. I’m not afraid of her, anymore. I’m too angry, now.” She sat up to see her daisy had lost two more petals, and it irritated her all the more. She stomped up to her bed loft and turned in early. She had a big day the next day.

Snow awoke early, before dawn, and got dressed. “You stay here. This is a dangerous mission, Tweety.” She crept down her ladder and made her way to the main hut, careful that no one saw her. Just as she suspected, there was no one there. She quickly went into the kitchen and pulled out the drawer. Good, it was there! She grabbed the bag and carefully put it into her knapsack for her journey.

She took her time slowly as she made her way to the portal in the woods. She wasn’t quite sure if it was due to her uneasiness to return to that spot or because she wanted to scope the woods for the queen’s presence anywhere. There it was ... the clearing! She stopped just short of it when she saw it ... the mist. Margurite was still there. She didn’t dare enter the clearing. She quickly fumbled through her bag for the grenade. She carefully held it in her hand, wondering how large of a ‘blow’ would it cause? How much time would she have to run for cover? It didn’t matter. The portal would be gone ... the queen would be gone. She put her finger through the pin and pulled.

“I knew I should have locked the thing up,” thought Mitch as he ran to the spot in the woods where he knew Snow had gone. When he found the grenade missing that morning, he knew what had happened. It was his own fault. He should never have shown it to her. He should have known she would try to remedy the situation herself. He knew how guilty she felt about bringing Margurite to the Willows. He just hoped he could get to her in time ... get to her before she used it. He hoped he could get to her alive.



**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 into 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 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 awhile 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 déjà vu 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 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 for 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, and 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 at 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 for 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 of her 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 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 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.

“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 on 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 do 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 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 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 at 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’s 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 her 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 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 folktale, 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 month 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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