



THE WOLF PRINCESS

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Chicken
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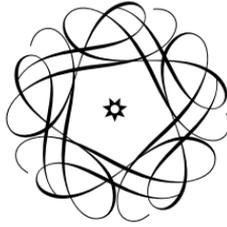
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CHAPTER ONE

The FOREST

‘Hold my hand, Sophie. We have to leave!’

It was her father’s voice. She couldn’t see him, but she knew, somehow, that his hair was dishevelled and that he was wearing his tatty overcoat, the one with the hem that hung down like a ragged wing. He slipped his hand into hers, clasping it tight, and together they ran through the frozen silver forest. She knew where they were going. Always the same place – a place conjured from his stories, dreams and memories. At the edge of the trees, they stopped. Their breath scrolled out before them and the snow fell like a heavy lace curtain. Flakes as large as moths fluttered in front of her eyes.

‘Wait, Sophie,’ he said. ‘She’s coming. Can you see her?’

And his words called up a young woman in a long cloak, her face hidden beneath a hood. Sophie glimpsed a

tendrils of dark-blond hair. It was covered with snowflakes that changed to diamonds as she watched.

'Who is she?'

She couldn't hear her father's answer, but he gripped her hand a little tighter and he sang to her . . . that lovely song whose words she had forgotten. Sophie wanted to ask her father about the woman, but now the song had become a story. He wouldn't stop telling her the story.

It was winter. It was snowing. There was a girl lost in the woods. And – Sophie felt her chest tighten with fear – a wolf . . .

She felt her father's hand slip out of hers.

'Don't leave me!'

But he was no longer there. And the sadness and the fear got mixed up with the snowflakes and covered everything.

'Sophie!'

No! This voice was from another place. She didn't want to answer.

She pressed her face into the pillow, trying to climb back into the forest. To hold herself in the strange dream-time, where she could taste the cold, clear air like a mixture of peppermints and diamonds . . . feel the forest all around her . . . hear the snow creak beneath her feet . . .

'Are you awake?'

Sophie sighed and moved her hand across the bedspread, as if to brush snow from it.

'I am now, Delphine.'

She tried not to sound grumpy. But the day at the New Bloomsbury College for Young Ladies had started and it

would not be stopped. It was too late for dreams.

She turned on to her back and stared at the ceiling. Why did real life have to be so dull? Why did boarding school seem so . . . beige? She looked around at the three narrow wardrobes, three flimsy bedside cabinets and three scratched desks and chairs, and wished for . . . something else. Something beautiful, however small. Enormous branches of cherry blossom in an agate urn . . . panels of lace at the window . . . candlelight . . . In this cramped, mean, London room, there would never be any beauty or excitement. No secret notes or espionage. No adventures.

Just school.

Delphine sat up in bed and stretched. Yellow hair flowed around her face and shoulders. She looked like a Plantagenet princess who had just woken up in a church tomb after a thousand years of restful sleep.

‘What’s the weather doing?’ Weather mattered only to Delphine, of course, so she could decide what to do with her hair. And Sophie’s bed was next to the window. Delphine asked the same question every morning.

Sophie sat up. For a moment she gazed at the photograph of her father on the windowsill. The picture had caught the dreamy, quizzical expression she thought she remembered, as if he had just seen or heard something that interested him. She pulled back the curtain.

The window looked out on to a narrow street of tall houses, and she had to crane her neck to get any view of the sky. Even when it was wild with sunshine, the street was dank and depressing. Today, beads of rain drizzled

down the dirty panes, so there was hardly any need to check the sky, which happened to be the normal London colour – washing-up-water grey.

‘It’s amazing how much water there is in the sky above London,’ Sophie said.

‘It’s been like this for four days,’ Delphine replied. ‘Do you think the rain ever gets bored? Do you think it ever wants to do something else with itself other than fall on drab old London?’

‘It rains in Paris, doesn’t it?’ Sophie said.

‘Of course! But even the rain in Paris is beautiful.’

‘I wish it would snow,’ Sophie whispered. She wondered if the dream of the winter forest would come again. Could she make it come back?

‘Snow? Are you mad?’ Delphine shuddered. ‘It ruins your shoes.’

‘But that wouldn’t matter,’ Sophie said. ‘We would wake up and everything would look so different . . . Maybe it would even be different. Like a fairy tale. Wouldn’t it be amazing if, just for once, it was cold enough for snow?’

‘Such weather is only perfect on the piste,’ Delphine said, firmly. ‘With skis attached to your feet.’ She stretched again and yawned prettily, like a cat. ‘Shall we wake Marianne?’ She swung her long legs over the edge of her bed and wiggled her toes. The nails were painted metallic green. ‘If we don’t, she’ll miss breakfast again.’

‘What is this fascination with breakfast?’ A girl with thin, dark hair emerged from under a brown quilt cover, her face bleary and puffed with sleep.

‘Hey! It speaks!’

The girl blinked like a mole and felt around on her bedside cabinet for a pair of slightly bent wire glasses, then pushed them on to her face. ‘Why are you walking around on tiptoe, Delphine?’ she said.

‘To improve circulation,’ Delphine responded, then stopped and threw her head between her knees to brush her hair. ‘And this is to prevent wrinkles.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ sniffed Marianne. ‘There’s absolutely no scientific evidence for that.’

‘And you haven’t got any wrinkles,’ Sophie pointed out. ‘You’re thirteen.’

‘It is the French way,’ Delphine shrugged, as if that were answer enough. She flicked her head back up, then twisted her hair into a bun on the side of her head and pierced it with a hairpin. Being half French seemed an awful lot of work, Sophie thought. And took an awful lot of time.

‘Oh, but there is something to wake up for today!’ Marianne kicked back her quilt with an unexpected burst of energy. ‘It’s Thursday. We get the results of our geography test!’

Sophie groaned. It was always such an effort not to feel squashed between Marianne’s high academic standards and Delphine’s equally high grooming standards. Mostly Sophie couldn’t be bothered to resist the pressure; she’d got used to the feeling of being squashed by now, anyway.

She checked her watch. ‘We’d better get dressed.’

‘Give me twenty minutes,’ Delphine said, pulling on a pale-pink dressing gown and heading for the bathroom.

‘Twenty minutes?’ Marianne made a face.

‘I couldn’t take that long even if I did everything twice,’ Sophie said.

‘Which is why I look like me . . . and you look like . . .’ But whatever Sophie looked like, Delphine couldn’t find the word for it. She stopped suddenly and stared, as if something had just occurred to her.

‘What?’ Sophie said.

‘You’re actually quite pretty,’ Delphine said. ‘Good eyebrows. Perfect skin. But no one notices because you always forget to brush your hair. And don’t even get me started on that school jumper you wear – it’s full of holes.’

‘Well, it’s the only one I’ve got. And stop staring at me like that!’

Delphine shrugged. ‘You should think about these things.’

‘But why?’ Sophie said. ‘No one ever takes any notice of me.’

‘There’s no point saying anything to her, Delphine,’ Marianne said, putting on her dressing gown. ‘She’s happy the way she is.’

Delphine wagged her finger. ‘Trust me, one day you will want to make a good impression.’

‘Well, I’m never going to meet anyone important,’ Sophie said. ‘So it won’t make any difference if I have holes in my jumper or not.’

‘You wait!’ Delphine said. ‘Someone important could turn up today!’

‘That’s about as likely as snowflakes in summer,’ Sophie laughed.