



# Chivalry IN THE MEADOW



DEBRA PARMLEY

# **Chivalry In The Meadow**

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*For my*

# Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Also by Debra Parmley](#)

# Chapter One

“Are you sure I don’t need to pack any clothes for this camping weekend?” Mia Louise Harkness spoke to her speaker phone, as her best friend Lilly Moreno listened on the other end. “We’re going to be there four days.”

Since it was Memorial Day weekend, she had Monday off.

“Finn says we can borrow any gowns we need from the mistress of the wardrobe,” Lilly answered. “So, I’m only bringing pajamas to sleep in.”

“Is he sure about that?” Mia said. “He just started working there. What if he’s wrong?”

“He’s not wrong,” Lilly said. “We’re allowed to wear their gowns and walk around. They want us to help contribute to the atmosphere.”

“So now we’re working there this weekend?” Mia’s voice rose, and her face started to warm. “I’m off work this entire weekend, to have fun, not take on a new job.”

Suddenly, spending the entire weekend living at the Renaissance Faire in a medieval tent was sounding less fun. Mia still wore the slim navy-blue skirt and white blouse she’d worn to work, and her heavy red hair was still pinned up. She’d hurried home, kicked off her shoes, in her bedroom, and then pulled out a small bag to start packing.

After speaking to customers on the phone all day, the last thing she wanted to do, was to have to speak to the public all weekend about the Renaissance Faire. The first she’d ever been to. Though she worked as a telephone customer service rep at a bank, which gave her banker’s hours, it also meant Saturdays. She’d worked every Saturday for the past month to finally have this one off and she intended to enjoy every minute of this three-day weekend.

She also didn’t have to face customers in person at work, and never had to worry about her face turning red to match her long, wavy, red hair, or worry about becoming tongue tied. Her cheeks felt flushed as she’d worked herself up, ready to argue this issue with Lilly.

“No, Mia we’re not working, and they’re not paying us,” Lilly spoke in the voice she always used when trying to calm her best friend down.

It was as if she knew Mia was upset. And likely she did. They’d been best friends in high school and remained close. Now both were in their late twenties, pushing thirty and their friendship had stood the test of time.

Mia, like many redheads, could get heated up quick, depending on how she was feeling in the moment.

“They’re just helping us out, by loaning us the dresses, and we’re helping them out, by wearing them,” Lilly said. “That’s all.”

“Right,” Mia said, not entirely convinced this wouldn’t turn into a form of work, even if they weren’t getting paid. Perhaps the company considered their free admission as payment for working. Companies weren’t usually in the habit of giving things away without expecting some kind of return. Return on investment it was called. One of those terms financial services people used. Her head was full of them, having spent several years after college in the banking industry.

She was ready to find some other kind of job. Though there was something to be said for the stability of her job, and the full-time benefits. Not the dress code, though.

Mia peeled out of her skirt and started unbuttoning her blouse, trying to decide what to wear to the event. Something casual and comfy, no heels. She took off the glasses that she wore at work and laid them on the bed stand.

*Maybe I won’t take those, she thought. They look too modern. My eyesight isn’t that bad.*

“Mia,,” Lilly said. “We’re going to have so much fun wearing their fancy gowns. You’ll feel like you’ve stepped into one of those romance novels you love to read!”

Mia, a voracious reader, usually read three or more books a week, and one of those was always a historical romance. Lilly was more of a mystery and suspense reader, though occasionally, she’d read a romance if Mia said it was particularly good. But Mia was romantic, down to her bones.

Unfortunately, none of Mia’s ex boyfriends had carried a shred of romance in them. Even after she shared how important it was to her, they had not stepped up to at least try.

The last one, Jerry, had finally brought her flowers, but only after he'd royally screwed up. Three months of dating him, without even a hint of romance, then suddenly flowers, in his attempt to keep her from splitting up with him. When she'd told him it was still over, even after the flowers, he'd knocked those flowers onto the floor and crushed one of the roses beneath his boot before storming out the door.

Those kinds of flowers weren't romantic, they were manipulative. And she knew better than to fall for that.

She'd been so mad, she'd gathered all those flowers, and thrown them in the trash, not wanting to even look at them. The next day, feeling much cooler, she wished she'd gathered them up and taken them to the elderly widow woman who lived next door, who didn't have a son or a boyfriend to send her flowers. But the trash collectors had come and gone by then and so had the flowers. They had been lovely. Normally she loved flowers.

Mia had started buying herself flowers, at the grocery store, feeling that if no one was ever going to surprise her with flowers, she'd just have to buy them for herself. That didn't mean she didn't still dream of having a man in her life who would bring her flowers.

*Sometimes a woman must buy her own flowers.* This was one of her new mantras.

Since Jerry, Mia had been on a long stretch of no boyfriend and none in sight. She yearned for adventure, and a long Renaissance Faire weekend sounded like a safe kind of fun.

"So...", Lilly spoke and paused, waiting for Mia to say something.

"Okay." Mia looked down into her empty bag, which appeared strange to her, considering they'd be at the Renaissance Faire from Friday night to Sunday evening. "Something to sleep in. That's all. Got it." She added thin cotton pajamas since they'd be in sleeping bags and she couldn't sleep if she got too warm. Three pair of panties, three pair of socks, and a clean shirt to wear home. "Guess I'm packed then. I just need a shower."

"Great! I'll be there in thirty minutes," Lilly said.

"Just enough time. I'll be ready," Mia said.

After they hung up, she packed a few more things into her bag, like her book light to read at night, and the bar of chocolate she'd picked up on her lunch break. She almost added the paperback she'd been reading, but then decided she'd read while she waited for Lilly.

Time would fly if she was reading. It always did.

In the shower, as she washed her hair, her thoughts turned to their weekend plans.

*Lilly swears this is the most fun I'll ever have in my life. But she tends to exaggerate.* Apparently, there would be jousting between six knights on horseback.

*The people working the Ren Faire will all be in costume and we're going to wear them so we can blend in. Hopefully, it will be like Lilly said, we'll just walk around and enjoy ourselves. If I don't have to do any forsooth type of speaking, or answer questions, it should be fine.*

After she showered, she dressed in her softest jeans with a yellow T-shirt which said, 'book dragon' and had a picture of a little green dragon wearing glasses while reading a book.

Mia got a glass of ice water from her kitchen, and then, taking the glass, and her book, she settled into a chair by the front window, where she could see out. The book, set in medieval England, was about a heroine who'd run away from her upcoming arranged marriage with an old man she wasn't attracted to. Instead, she would find her true love and marry him for a happy ever after, Mia's favorite kind of story.

Real life often did not hand her a happy ending, so she insisted there be one in all the fiction that she read. For Mia, it was romance or nothing. Kind of how she felt about her real life. If she couldn't have romance with a man, she would rather be alone.

She was done with settling.

The hero in the book would've made Mia swoon, if she'd met him in real life. She was quickly caught up in his world, while waiting for her best friend to arrive. She loved to escape into a book and this long weekend she would escape into the Renaissance Faire.

Friday had always been Mia's favorite day of the week, for two reasons. First, if she had Saturday off, it meant she had two whole days before she had to go back to work. She was happy to work inside the telephone company, answering calls. Well, not exactly happy. Telephone customer service could be stressful. One call after another coming to her ears via the headsets, wasn't easy. Headaches were common, and she averaged three or four a week. But she tried not to think about the stressful parts of the job. It paid the bills and most of the time she didn't mind talking to people and helping them. It's just that she did that hour after hour until clocking out.

Escaping into a book allowed her mind, ears, and mouth to rest after a full day of work.

The second reason was because a weekend might bring some exciting adventure.

Though usually, she ended up at home, doing laundry, fussing around, and wishing that something, anything out of the ordinary, would happen. Maybe someday it would.

Something exciting could happen this three-day weekend. She felt it deep in her bones.



It was what her grandmother called ‘a knowing.’ Such things couldn’t be explained. You just knew, and then, when you were right, it helped you trust a ‘knowing’ the next time one happened. This time, the feeling she had was strong. So, she was part nervous and part excited.

She glanced at the carved wooden owl on her fireplace mantle which had also sat on her grandmother’s fireplace mantle. Worn smooth from years of being touched, she sometimes took it down just to hold it, as she’d done as a young child. Though now she did it when she was remembering her grandmother. A tactile way of remembering.

Last night she’d had that dream about an owl. She wondered what her grandmother would have said about it. Her grandmother had died right before Mia went to high school, so Lilly had never met her. Now that her parents had passed, there were few people still living who remembered her grandmother and she missed having that connection with someone who did. There were days when she missed her grandmother very much, as her grandmother had raised her while her father worked. Today was one of them.

Instead of taking the owl down and holding it, Mia turned her attention to her book and began to read, forgetting everything but the story of the medieval world she was immersing herself in.

Soon she would be in a real-life medieval world, or as close as you could get to it in a modern age. And she couldn’t wait.

\* \* \*

A sound outside drew her attention away from the novel. *Lilly.*

Mia peered out the window as Lilly’s car pulled into her driveway. *Good. She’s here.*

She dropped the paperback into her handbag and was out the door with it and her overnight bag before Lilly could make it out of the car and up the walk to ring the bell.

Lilly rolled down the passenger side window and grinned. “Excited?” Lilly asked through the window, laughing, because she already knew the answer.

“Yes!” Mia opened the car door, got in, and swung the door closed. She turned to face Lilly. “Tell me more about the Ren Faire, and about your cousin. I know people usually pay to attend the Faire for the day and evening, and then go home when the Faire closes. But I don’t know much about the people who work those events. And I met Finn for all of two minutes at your grandfather’s funeral a few years ago. I don’t remember much about him.”

“We were just kids, so no one would expect you to,” Lilly said. “Finn was always the one in the family who would joke around, make people laugh, play pranks, and get into trouble. But he was quiet and well behaved at grandpa’s funeral, so you didn’t see that side of him.”

“What does he do now?” Mia asked. “Other than this summer job, what else does he do?”

“For the past two years, he worked for the circus, as a fire breather and flame swallower. Circus people go to Florida in the winter and practice down there, before touring starts up again. But he wanted to try something different this summer, so he accepted the Ren Faire job.”

They had an hour and thirty-minute drive to get to the Ren Faire, so they went to a fast-food drive through and got two hamburgers and two chocolate shakes. They ate on the way, instead of stopping, as both were anxious to get there before dark. If the Ren Faire food turned out to be expensive, at least tonight’s supper wouldn’t be. They’d drop their stuff in Finn’s tent, and find the costume lady to pick out dresses, without having to worry about supper as well.

“I had an unusual dream last night,” Mia said. “I dreamed an owl came through my bedroom window and perched on my dresser, looking at me. But when I woke, it flew away. I think that must have been part of the dream, because when I woke and got up, I check the window. It was closed and there was no owl to be seen.”

“Weird,” Lilly said. “Have you been reading about owls, or seen one on TV?”

“No.”

“You and your birds,” Lilly said.

Mia was always noticing birds, often when no one else did.

*Now I suppose they’ve followed me into my dreams,* she thought. *At least it was a kindly owl.* She didn’t know how she knew that it was, but she did.

“Are you missing your grandmother?” Lilly asked. Being her best friend since high school, she was very astute sometimes.

“Yes, how did you guess?”

“Every time you talk about owls, you tend to bring her up,” Lilly smiled. “This time you didn’t.”

“I suppose it’s because my mind has been so much on the Renaissance Faire,” Mia said.

“Mine too,” Lilly said. “I’m excited! What are you most looking forward to this weekend?”

“So many things, I don’t know where to start,” Mia said. “I love the idea of stepping back in time, wearing pretty, renaissance gowns and meeting handsome knights. The music, maybe dancing, and the jousting.” She laughed. “I’m looking forward to all of it!”

Lilly laughed with her. “You’re such a romantic. I’m hoping the knights are handsome and manly, not girly.”



“Girly?” Mia laughed.

“You know, the kind who fusses overly much with their appearance. Vain and preening. I cannot be attracted to a girly type of man.”

“Oh yes, I do know.” Mia nodded. “And a girly type of man is not likely to be attracted to you.” she laughed. “They lean the other way. Are you thinking of men in tights? I’d love to see them wearing armor. That would be manly.”

“Men in tights could be sexy, if they were manly men, and had strong thighs.” Lilly said. “I agree about the armor. Maybe some will be single.”

“I have terrible luck with boyfriends,” Mia said. “You know I do. There must be something wrong with me.”

“Jerry was a jerk, but that had nothing to do with you,” Lilly said.

*Yes, Mia silently agreed. Jerry was a jerk.*

“There’s nothing wrong with you,” Lilly said. “You have gorgeous red hair, and an adorable scattering of freckles across your nose when you’re not hiding them with makeup. You have curves and men always like that. But best of all, you’re kind and considerate. A good man will see that and see you. Really see you.”

“Where are all the good men?” Mia asked. “Whatever happened to the heroes of old, men not afraid to stare death in the face, and even laugh bravely at it? To protect and defend their women. Who have a sense of adventure. Where are the men who’d risk anything for the woman they love?”

“We call them alpha males,” Lilly said. “And your romances are full of them. Which you know as you read too many of them.”

“No such thing,” Mia retorted. “And you read just as many murder mysteries.”

“What can I say,” Lilly shrugged. “I like to see villains get their comeuppance, and murders to be solved.”

“I want romance, Lilly,” Mia said. “And I want someone to love.”

“The kind of men in your romance novels likely don’t exist,” Lilly said. “And if they do, they’re few and far in between. The thing is, we ask where are the good men all day long, but that does nothing to help us find one. Better to go out there and try. This could be an opportunity for us both to meet a wonderful guy. Maybe you’ll get lucky and find one this weekend.”

“I hope so. That would be simply amazing,” Mia said and with a dreamy smile looked out the window to daydream.

Lilly glanced at her and then left her to her thoughts.

Finally, they reached a gravel drive leading to the parking lot of the Ren Faire and saw a huge sign welcoming fairgoers.

Lilly found where the workers parked when she saw Finn’s truck and parked in near it.

“Do you need to call Finn, and let him know we’re here?” Mia asked.

“No. He left our tickets at the gate,” Lilly said. “He gets comp tickets, so he’s getting us in this way. We can act like guests, even if we’re in gowns. We’ll fit right in, once we change.”

“I’m in no hurry,” Mia said. She watched people in regular clothes heading toward the entrance. They also wore jeans, so she’d blend in wearing hers. She wasn’t ready to answer questions, as she knew nothing about the layout, not even where the restrooms were. “Are we going to have to change our clothes right away?”

“No,” Lilly said. “Since I can tell you’re not ready for that, let’s go in the front gate, use our tickets to get in, find a map, and do a general walk around. We can find out if there’s an employee gate for when we come back out to my car.”

“Sounds good to me,” Mia said. Lilly knew her so well.

They got out, grabbed their bags and started walking toward the entrance.

Mia paused at the edge of the fairground path, near the entrance, her breath catching at the sight before her.

Colorful banners snapped in the breeze overhead, each bearing a different heraldic crest of stags, lions, ravens, serpents, and bears. The sights and sounds of the banners were already awakening her imagination to step back into medieval times. Her nervousness started to give way to her growing excitement.

They stepped up to the ticket taker’s booth, gave their names, and waited, while a thin man in a brown and green costume wearing brown boots, looked in a metal box for their tickets.

Once he found the tickets and handed them over, along with a map, they headed in.

Though they had the map, they started moving down the path before them, instead of stopping to look at it, which would hold up the people behind them.

With each step, they moved deeper and deeper into a medieval looking world, leaving the modern mundane world behind.

Laughter echoed from vendor stalls lining the dirt path, mingling with the scent of roasted meats, and the sharp sweetness of mead, drifting in the air.

“I’m not hungry, but things smell good,” Mia said.

“Yes, they do,” Lilly agreed. “I’m glad we already ate though and aren’t starving for something right now. This event is bigger than I thought it would be. Looks like we’ll be doing a lot of walking this weekend.”

“Just think,” Mia said. “Back then, everyone walked everywhere, unless they had a horse, or someone to give them a ride.”

A lute trilled somewhere off to the left. Children darted past in tunics and crowns made of flowers and twisted vines.

“This is so exciting!” Mia said, her spirits lifted and a childlike wonder filling her. “Three full days of this!”

“It’s like walking into one of your romance novels,” Lilly said, nudging Mia’s shoulder.

Mia smiled. “I know.” A breeze blew Mia’s hair, and she pushed it off her face. “I keep waiting for the pages to turn.”

“In this breeze, they just might,” Lilly said.

A brown-haired man in front of them, wearing a bi-color tunic, with red on one side and green on the other, turned around and grinned, smoke still curling from the corner of his mouth, a pipe in his left hand. “Come on then, dreamers,” he said with a laugh. “You’ll want a good view of the parade.”

“Finn!” Lilly exclaimed. “I didn’t recognize you!”

“The back of me head, you mean?” he broke into a Cockney accent and gave her a bow.

Then the cousins hugged, as he kept the pipe in his hand away from her.

“Do you remember Mia?” she said.

“Of course,” he grinned. “Who could forget the girl with the beautiful green eyes and hair of fire,” he said. He gave her a bow. “Milady.”

Mia felt the blush rising in her cheeks. While not attracted to Finn in a romantic way, his cheerful, charming attention had just made her feel beautiful, embarrassed, and happy all at once.

“It’s good to see you again, Finn,” she said, “All grown up and in a happier place.” She curtsied after she spoke, as if just remembering to return his bow. “Milord.”

“Tis just Finn, my wee girl,” he said, tucking her arm into his right arm. “Allow me now, to show you to the mistress of the costumes. You’ll want to be ready soon. The knights ride in at sunset and it will be quite the spectacle.”

The merry trio enjoyed the walk to the other end of the Faire, away from the public areas.

“So, Finn,” Lilly said. “Where are all the good-looking men in form-fitting tights? I still haven’t seen even one man in tights, and we’ve walked all this way from the entrance. You promised me lots of manly handsome guys, dashing guys in extremely cool knight get-up, and swashbuckling pirates. You’ve dragged us all the way out here to the middle of nowhere for this, and I’m waiting on you to deliver.”

Finn laughed. “They’re here, and some may be in tights. I promise, there are eligible single men here, six are knights, and the ladies all find them attractive. Since we started training last week, and I met all the staff, I’ve now met six couples who met because of the Faire in previous years, and they’re all still happily married. So, there’s your real life happy ever after. Don’t worry, there are plenty of manly knights here, all dashing, daring, and romantic. For now, though, we need to get you two into costumes.”

They stopped at a small building, and he knocked on the door. Then, opening it a crack, he stuck his head in and called, “Tis Finn, missus McCullers. I’ve brought ye the two lasses.”

“Lands sakes, my boy, bring them in!” she called. “We’ve no royals about this day, that we need stand on ceremony. Come! Bring them in!”

He held the door, as Lilly and then Mia stepped inside.

The room filled with racks and racks of costumes, was a riot of color and clutter, with hats holding plumes, and crowns, and capes, mixed in among the dresses, jesters garb with bells on, and even a suit of armor near the door.

Finn raised his eyebrow at it and said, “Ye’ve begun dressing the knights now?”

“Nae,” she said with a shake of her head. “Tis here, to be picked up by the armorer. If ye look at the back plate, ye’ll see the gash in it.”

Mia’s eyes widened. “They hit each other that hard? I hope no one was hurt!”

“Luck would have it, this were practice, so none were hurt this time,” Missus McCullers said. “Though the position of the hit makes one wonder, it being on his back and all.” She shook her head. “So, I read me cards, and my card reading for this weekend is a warning for all to keep their wits about them.” She gave a sharp nod.

Mia noticed her speech was sometimes more Ren Faire, and sometimes more American.

*It must be hard to keep up that forsooth speech. Glad I don’t have to.*

Mia pulled out a blue gown and smiled at it. “I love this color,” she said.

The seamstress eyed her up and down. “I have another blue one in the back you’ll like better,” she said, then she eyed Lilly’s darker hair and skin. “And the golden gown for the lady. Wait here.” Then off she went to get them.

They waited, but also pulled a few more gowns out to look at them.

Mia was amazed by the many colors and the details. Jewels, gems stones, and embroidery made the gowns even more stunning. Only a few costumes near the door were plain serving girl costumes, in simple cotton.

“These colors are all so beautiful,” Mia said when Missus McCullers returned.

“In the medieval and renaissance periods,” Missus McCullers said, “They loved colorful fabrics and jewels, and were more apt to mix colors than we do today. Rich fabrics were also a form of wealth and status.”

“I love what you’ve done with these,” Lilly said.

Mrs. McCullers handed Mia the blue gown. “Thank you, my dear,” she said to Lilly.

Mia touched the blue lace across the top. “This makes it even more stunning.”

“Try it on,” Missus McCullers said, “so I’ll know if I need to adjust. Finn, outside now.”

“I’ll just go fer a pint, mum,” he said, before stepping outside, “I’ll be back, to escort you two over to the parade spot.”

“Out with ye then!” Missus McCullers said in a commanding voice.

And quick, he was out the door, closing it fast behind him.

“Off fer a pint, he says,” Missus McCullers shook her head. “Tis good he’s not driving ye this evening. Tis already his third pint today, before noon. I saw him in the pub at breakfast.”

“Perhaps he’s pacing himself,” Lilly said.

“Ha!” That made Missus McCullers throw her head back and laugh. “So, it’s that way, is it?”

“Well, his father’s side *is* Irish,” Lilly said. “His mother’s is the Spanish side, as is mine, and we tend to drink wine young, with our dinners, so I suppose he comes by it naturally.”

Missus McCullers continued to chuckle, and Mia giggled.

Missus McCullers waved at them. “Come, girls, on with your dresses now. We must move along, if he’s to be your escort.”

Mia’s dress with green lace across the bodice was subtly beautiful and at the same time, striking. Against her glorious mane of long, wavy, red hair, the dress brought out her green eyes and natural beauty.

Standing in front of the single mirror, Mia was speechless.

“Well, my girl? What say you?” Missus McCullers said.

Mia breathed out a breath. “You’ve made me look… beautiful.” She whispered the last word.

“Nae, twas not I, my dear,” Missus McCullers spoke kindly, placing her hands on Mia’s shoulders. “Tis your inner beauty coming out. Look there. Into the mirror, and into your own eyes. Can ye see it?”

“Yes,” Mia whispered.

“That, my dear, is your soul, inside your eyes, looking out, looking back at you. Sending you the love you have inside.”

Mia felt such a movement within, that her eyes filled with tears.

*I see you*, she thought. *I see you*.

“Now you see her,” the older woman smiled. “You can always find her there, if you’ll but look into a mirror. Remember to be as kind to yourself, as she would be to others. That love inside is for you as well.”

Mia could only nod and smile. Her emotions were too much for words right now.

The older woman smiled and squeezed her hand once, before letting go to turn to Lilly, who stood watching with wide eyes.

“My turn?” she asked quietly.

“Yes, of course, my dear,” missus McCullers said. “The gold is perfect for you.” She moved her finger in a circling motion. “Turn and let me help you with your lacings.”

Lilly turned and missus McCullers began to lace her dress up.

“Now, the two of you must help each other in and out of your dresses,” she said. “Ladies would’ve had a lady’s maid to help them, if they were of high enough rank, and if of lower rank, sisters would help sisters. You two are like sisters, yes?”

“Yes,” they both answered as if in chorus.

“We’re as close as,” Lilly said.

“And you look out for each other,” Missus McCullers said.

“We do,” Lilly nodded.

“Then you must double up on that, this weekend,” Missus McCullers said. “To stay out of danger, and to help each other make wise decisions. Tis in the cards.”

“Are you the tarot reader Finn said would be reading our cards?” Lilly asked.

“Oh no,” Missus McCullers shook her head. “You passed her tent, on the way in. I only read according to the timing of the moon’s phases. I shan’t be doing a reading this night.” She gave a small shudder, and then smiled, as if to shine away whatever thought had disturbed her. “I am but the dressmaker, and the mistress of the costumes,” she said. “And now, I see two beautiful young ladies before me.” She clasped her hands together as her eyes shone. “Simply beautiful. Love is in the air this weekend as well. Perhaps for one of you.”

Mia and Lilly smiled at each other.

“Love would be good,” Mia said, ever hopeful.

“True love is always good,” Missus McCullers said. “Now, off with you, before that rascal Finn is no longer fit to escort ye.”

“Thank you,” Mia said, still emotional from her mirror gazing experience.

“Yes, thank you!” Lilly shook missus McCullers hand, making her laugh.

Mia gathered up their modern clothes to take with them, and then they headed out the door for the pub, to find Finn.

When they reached the pub, he’d been watching for them. “There now!” he shouted. “There are me beautiful lasses!”

All heads in the pub turned toward them, and Mia felt a warm blush spread across her cheeks, sure it would soon match her hair.

He came over to them, and said, “Tis like you’ve been to see your fairy godmother, and now you’re both off to the ball. There is magic afoot this eve! And now, we too must be afoot, my stunning beauties, off to my tent, where you can drop those modern things, and if we hurry, make it back just in time for the parade. Come along now.”

They followed him deeper into the encampment where the Ren Faire workers lived. Tents stretched in two orderly rows. Some striped in crimson and gold, others black as pitch, some off white with no decoration at all. Flags fluttered above the tents. Bells jingled on dancers' ankles as they hurried from their tents, back to where the people were.

The air shimmered faintly with something Mia couldn’t name.

*Magic? Sunlight?*

The setting sun lowered rays for the coming in between time. The moon was faint, but already up in the sky. It too shimmered faintly.

She squinted trying to bring it into clearer focus. *Maybe I should’ve brought my glasses.*

*There’s that shimmer again. What is it?*

*Magic? Or just my own wishful thinking. I hope it’s magic, the good, romantic kind.*

Something inside of her longed for a bit of magic. Just a wee bit. Hopefully to bring her true love, like it did for the heroines in her books.

## Chapter Two

“What did they do, give you the last one?” Lilly asked Finn, breaking Mia out of her thoughts of magic, as she saw that his tent was at the very end of the row, near one of the trees that framed this side of the meadow.

“Haha,” he laughed. “No, silly Lilly,” he laughed again as he used his childhood nickname for her.

Lilly frowned at him.

“I picked the one on the end because there’s more privacy. Single man, remember?”

“Oh, I don’t want those images in my mind, Lothario, and don’t call me that,” she retorted with her hands on her hips.

“But Lilly is your name,” he said. “Unless you’re changing it for the weekend.”

“We can do that?” Mia asked with surprise, interrupting them.

“Of course!” he said. “Many of us perform under different names. Who would you like to be? Pick it now, before I introduce you to people.”

“I’m happy just being myself,” Lilly said. “Just plain Lilly.”

“There’s no ‘just’ or ‘plain’ about you, cousin,” he said. “Your name suits you.”

“I’m okay with my name as it is,” Mia said. “My grandmother named me, and I’m not here to be acting like someone I’m not.”

“Good enough,” he said. “Lady Mia and Lady Lilly, it is.”

Opening the flap to his tent, he showed them the set up. Three cots with three sleeping bags on top, two lawn chairs, a cooler, and a couple of plastic tubbys. “It’s not much, but it’s home for the next three months,” he said.

“I think it’s very nice,” Mia said. “The tent is so old timeish.”

“These tents are period reproductions,” he said. “The canvas is heavier than modern tents, so it will get hot in here during the day. But we always have water in our coolers, and we can open the flaps when we’re inside. Go ahead and help yourself to water now, before we go, if you’re thirsty. I don’t have free refreshments anywhere else.”

They each took a chilled water bottle, dropped their bags on their cots, and then headed back out with him.

As soon as they neared the main medieval road, which was covered with straw, they saw where a crowd was gathering to watch the parade.

“Just in time,” Finn said. “Look!” he pointed. “The herald is about to begin.”

The crowd surged forward.

Trumpets blared.

“Milords and Milady’s! Hear ye, hear ye!” the herald announced.

All heads turned toward him.

“All may attend! Six of our most valiant knights, who compete in the joust tomorrow are gathered here tonight, for the Parade of Champions!”

Excited energy spread through the crowd.

A line of six knights appeared at the far end of the camp, riding to the edge slowly, on large powerful steeds. Knights ready to ride.

Mia’s breath caught again. This time for an entirely different reason.

The sight of the six manly knights in armor, upon their strong steeds, stirred her blood.

Then the air shimmered again.

The herald, wearing brightly colored red and purple garb, announced the first knight riding forth, “Sir Cedric of Goldmane!”

Every bit the white knight, Sir Cedric rode in first, upon a powerful white horse, as the setting sun’s rays shone upon him, gilding his long blonde hair like a halo. Wearing white and gold, and polished silver steel armor which gleamed and was etched with golden filigree and a gold cross on the front of his chest plate. A white and gold pennant trailed from his lance as he rode and as he raised a gauntleted hand to the crowd, his rakish smile widened, showing a dimple in his chiseled chin.

Mia was very much aware of how atop his stallion; he was controlling the animal with powerful hands and thighs.

*How strong he must be.*

She sighed at the sight of how handsome he was, like a character stepped out of one of her romance novels.

“Mia!” Lilly whispered. “There’s a cover model for one of your -romance novels if I’ve ever seen one.”

“Yes,” Mia whispered back, unable to look away from the handsome knight. It was as if he’d stepped out of her dreams.

“Sir Cedric,” she spoke his name low.

Suddenly his blue eyes, bright, amused, knowing, met hers for a heartbeat too long, as if he’d sensed her saying his name, before he rode past her. In that moment, a thrill went through her, and she shivered with excitement at the connection.

“Sir Alaric of Ravenwood,” the Herald announced the second knight, who rode behind Sir Cedric.

*Of course he would be the black knight, Mia thought. And he really fits the part.*

A dark figure, upon a black horse, he was in complete contrast to Sir Cedric. Wearing black, his armor storm-gray steel with gold filigree, his pennant black and gold. With short dark hair, and a dark trimmed beard and mustache, his mouth maintained a hard line where no smile escaped to grace his handsome face.

He and his horse moved in sync, as if in a perfected dance. A powerful one.

Mia tried not to look at Sir Alaric’s thighs, which were as powerful as Sir Cedric’s.

He guided his steed in an easy way, different than Sir Cedric had. The smooth way that Sir Alaric used his strong legs to guide his horse, made her hyper aware of his masculinity.

*Try not to look there,* she told herself as she forced her gaze up and away from his legs.

Stern and strong, his intense dark brown eyes landed on Mia.

She gasped and suppressed a shiver as their eyes met.

His massive horse, coal-dark, with braids in its mane, showed muscular strength, every bit a stallion, giving a loud snort as he neared. She’d never seen such a large horse or such an intimidating man.

Mia willed her heartbeat to slow down, to not be so affected by the dark knight.

Sir Alaric’s eyes, dark brown, and unreadable, swept across the crowd once more, and then returning, fixing briefly on Mia again. Unlike Sir Cedric’s gaze, his felt like a challenge.

A warning. A weight.

Mia’s heart began to beat faster, and she caught her breath.

*Sir Alaric,* she thought, not daring to whisper his name, in case she conjured his attention.

Lilly leaned closer and spoke in a low voice. “Ooh, he’s a handsome brooding man.”

“Yes,” Mia agreed.

The Herald was already announcing the third knight. “Sir Gareth of Silverer!”

They turned their attention to the next knight, and Mia took a deep breath and released it. *Who would have thought the sight of knights on horseback would affect me so?*

Sir Gareth rode tall in his saddle, upon a gray horse. He rode straight-backed, his pennant green and silver. His armor was polished as if it were a mirror, and as he moved, he made sure it caught the sunlight. His brown hair was short like Sir Alaric’s and his brown eyes were shining.

A cluster of swooning girls squealed, as he gave them a practiced smile, his teeth almost unnaturally white, as he smiled and winked at them.

His eyes then lingered long on Sir Cedric’s back as he gripped his reins tighter.

Mia could both see and feel the tension in the movement. She sensed something sharper behind his charm, and that it was directed at Sir Cedric.

*He doesn’t like Sir Cedric.*

It was a knowing. Mia’s excitement dimmed for a moment. She didn’t want to know. Instead, she turned her attention to the fourth knight in the line-up, a shadow in steel blue.

“Sir Rowan of Duskvale,” the herald announced.

Sir Rowan’s face was nearly hidden beneath his helm. Only his sharp gray eyes visible, and his long black hair tied back.

“It’s like he doesn’t want to show his face,” Mia whispered.

Sir Rowan didn’t wave. Didn’t smile. His horse moved with eerie grace, as if trained for stealth rather than pageantry. And he scanned the crowd like a hunter, his helmeted head turning.

“He gives me the creeps,” Lilly muttered.

“I can understand why,” Mia whispered back.

“I’ll bet he sleeps with a dagger under his pillow,” Lilly said. “Like a spy.”

Mia was contemplating that thought, when the herald announced the fifth knight.

“Sir Elias of Sundholm!”

“Oh,” breathed Lilly.

Mia turned her attention to the man who’d captured her best friend’s attention.

Sir Elias wore less flashy armor than the previous knights. A simple, weathered bronze, with a sunburst emblem, as warm as his genuine smile, was a welcome change from the first four knights. His dark hair was short and like Sir Alaric he kept his beard and mustache trimmed. The warmth of his personality shone through stronger than the setting sun.

A child dropped her crown of daisies off her head, and he paused, alit from his horse, picked it up and, offering her his hand, placed the daisies gently back on her head.

Mia saw how Lilly watched him, with a light in her eyes, as if his warmth had spread to her, bringing forth an inner glow.

Lilly looked away quickly, but not before Mia caught the tiny smile playing at her lips. Before she could say something to Mia, the herald interrupted her thoughts.

“Sir Thorne of Black Hollow!” the herald loudly announced, startling both women. Sir Elias had quickly returned to his saddle and ridden on.

The first five knights rode on, as the sixth and last knight brought up the end, making no sound, giving no greetings, not even a smile to acknowledge the watchers in the crowd. His coal black horse moved like smoke, as his pennant, black with a deep red thorn, flapped in the wind. His armor was jagged, almost thorn-like, and his helm had a slotted visor which completely obscured his face. His long dark hair could be seen beneath his helm.

If the others shone like stars, Sir Thorne cast a dark shadow behind them.

The crowd’s excited cheers quieted as he passed.

Then he turned his head, slow and deliberate, and Mia felt the hair on her arms rise, knowing his gaze would land on her.

And as it did, his dark gaze chilled her to the bone.

Mia froze, even her breath caught for a moment, before she took in a shallow whisp of air, needing it in her lungs. She wrapped her arms around herself, feeling the sun had given way, the warm rays gone, the air cooler now, and the moon already up in the sky. Goosebumps raised on her arms, and she rubbed them, trying to warm herself from the sudden chill.

An inner dislike for Sir Thorne rose within her, which she couldn’t have explained beyond saying it was just a feeling she had. A knowing.

Mia had never had one knowing after another before. More than one now had her on edge, feeling nervous.

*This man was dangerous.*

Mia felt it in her bones.

She wouldn’t be cheering for the sixth knight, for she disliked him on sight. But she said nothing to Lilly about the feeling.

Mia kept these knowings to herself, when they came upon her, for she had no logical explanation for them. She’d stopped telling people about them when she was young. People didn’t understand the inexplicable.

“They are all big and strong,” Mia said. “Almost larger than life>”

“Yes, but if you could take one home, for a new happy ever after for you, which one would you choose?” Mia asked.

“I want a modern-day personification of knightliness,” Mia said. “A man who’s not afraid to laugh triumphantly in the face of death, who lives for adventure and excitement. Not a guy who scares the crap out of anyone who gets a good close look at him. Sexy as these guys are, some of them are quite intimidating. I’m not quite ready to take one of them home.”

As the final hoofbeats faded, and the knights dismounted, applause thundered from the crowd. But Mia barely heard it, and her arms stayed wrapped around herself, failing to clap.

Another feeling, that of being watched from behind, made her turn her head.

She saw no one at first, but then she saw two golden eyes fixed directly on her.

A great horned owl sat motionless on top of a large tent pole, the intense yellow eyes watching her made her more aware of the goosebumps on her arms.

The air had cooled. It was still more spring like in the evenings once the sun began to fade, and a slight breeze blew through the meadow, making her shiver.

Beneath the owl’s gaze, her skin warmed and her goosebumps faded.

It blinked once, and then continued looking at her.

The owl’s eyes felt more like the eyes of the neighbor’s sheepdog where she’d grown up. The dog was always present, watching out for the neighborhood children who gathered to play ball in the neighbors back yard. Like he guarded them. This felt like that kind of watching.

The owl steadily gazed at her and then blinked once more. He looked very much like the owl from her dream.

*Coincidence?*

Comforting, that’s what this owl was. She let that comfort soak into her. That warmth.

“What are you looking at?” Lilly asked. “You’re missing the handsome knights.”

Mia turned back to face Lilly. “I saw an owl. A great horned owl.”

“You and your birds.” Lilly shook her head. “Look, I know how you love animals, especially owls, but you’re going to miss the knights. You can see owls anywhere, any time. Handsome knights are hard to come by. And we have all six of them here right now.”

Finn stepped up next to them, grinning. “I knew you ladies would enjoy the parade,” he said. “Wait till the jousting



tomorrow. That will be even more exciting. This is just the opening night pageantry.”

“Oh, they aren’t jousting tonight?” Lilly asked.

“Not in the dark, sill…” Finn caught himself before he called her silly again. “Cousin,” he said with a smile. “Evening entertainments are my area,” he winked. “Fire is much more dramatic at night. I’ve got to do a few things, but if you go between those two vendor tents,” he pointed. “You’ll be on the row where my stage is. And you have the map to find it.”

“Yes,” Lilly nodded. Ever the practical one, she would keep them on schedule, and make sure they didn’t get lost, or miss something they wanted to see.

“Good. See you in a bit,” he said. “The fortune teller I told you about is behind you on your right. You’ve got time to see her if you go now.”

They both turned and saw the sign which said, ‘Madame Merlina, Fortune Teller.’

Mia giggled. “Think that’s her real name?”

Finn had already walked away, so he couldn’t answer.

“I doubt it,” Lilly said. “The name is too close to Merlin, and I’ve never heard it before. I bet she made it up.”

“It’s kind of fun, though,” Mia said.

Lilly just shrugged. “Finn insisted we should have our fortunes told by her,” she said. “I don’t know why. It’s not real. They just make stuff up.”

Mia really didn’t want to get into a discussion about it.

Lilly preferred facts and figures, science and data, rather than anything magical.

But Mia, who loved romance, adventure, and magic, was intrigued, so she said, “Let’s try it! It will be fun.”

“Sure,” Lilly shrugged again.

They headed for the fortune teller’s tent, which was dark blue with silver stars on it.

As they stepped inside, a brown skinned woman, with a multicolored skirt, a purple and red full blouse, wearing a red turban, and large silver hoop earrings, said, “Come in, come in.” She gave them a smile. “Fortune is smiling on you. Have a seat.” She gestured to the two chairs on their side of a round table.

As they sat, she watched them, and then she said, “No private readings for you, as you both share everything with each other.”

Surprise showed on Lilly’s face, for this was true.

Mia knew Lilly would be thinking, how did she know that? She must have made a guess.

But Mia believed in the woman’s abilities. So, she smiled at her.

“Madame Merlina,” she said. “We would like readings to learn our futures, with love and marriage, children, that kind of thing. My name is Mia, and this is my best friend, Lilly.”

“Of course,” Madame Merlina said. “A pleasure.” She smiled at them both, and then unwrapped a purple silk cloth from around a deck of Tarot cards. “This deck for you.”

The deck she laid on the table was older, much used, with faded corners on the cards.

Mia wondered if it had been Madame Merlina’s first deck. The other deck on the table was newer, more dramatic looking. Compared to that one, the older deck didn’t look like much.

“Why that deck?” Lilly asked looking back and forth between the two decks.

Mia knew the answer before the fortune teller spoke.

The older deck was stronger, gave deeper messages, life changing ones. Goosebumps spread down her arms at that knowing.

Madame Merlina tapped the deck with her index finger, and looked at Mia as if she knew what Mia was feeling. “This deck,” she said. “Speaks to me. Always answers. Always true.”

“Now,” she turned to face Lilly. “You shuffle first.” She handed her the deck. “Three times shuffle, and while shuffling, think of questions you want answers to. Nothing else.” She pushed the deck in front of Lilly, and then sat back, her hands in her lap, waiting.

Lilly picked up the cards and began shuffling. Once. Her brow furrowed as she thought. Then twice. And a third time. She sat the deck down in between them.

Madame Merlina nodded. “Well done. You have all the questions, yes?”

“Yes,” Lilly said.

Madame tapped the top of the deck once. “These will read this night’s truth. Your future may be changed, if you wish it. Futures are not set in stone. Prepare to listen, as the cards speak.”

Cutting the deck in half, she placed two sets on the table, and then pulled cards from the top of the bottom half, to lay out a pattern.

“Past,” she said, laying cards down. “Present,” she laid more cards down. “Future,” she laid the last cards down. Then she looked at Lilly. “First we learn from the past.”

Lilly nodded.

She turned the first cards over. Looking at them, she nodded. “Your mother sailed here on a boat, with you in her belly,” she said. “You grew up in a new land. A happy child. Then lost your mother to a sickness.”

Lilly’s jaw dropped.

Even Mia sat stunned. *How could Madame Merlina know those details?*

Lilly’s mother had come to the United States from Panama, after marrying an American man, and Lilly had been born nine months later. It was a love match. Her mother died from cancer the year Lilly and Mia graduated high school, and Lilly matured fast that year, becoming more serious.

*This isn’t like any card reading I’ve ever heard about. Madame Merlina is more than a card reader. Anyone can learn to read cards.*

Mia had dabbled in reading cards.

*She must also be psychic.*

Mia sat up and paid more attention now.

“We do the present next,” Madame Merlina said.

Lilly nodded, still soaking in what the first cards had shown.

“Now, tonight,” Madame Merlina turned the cards over. “You have your eyes on a man.”

Lilly smiled.

*I’ll bet Lilly is thinking about the fifth knight, Sir Elias of Sundholm.*

“He is steady,” Madame Merlina went on. “Strong. Dependable. But is not easy for him to... open. You want assurances from a man. You must learn patience.” She tapped a card, and then said. “Enough. Now the future. Why you are here.”

Lilly took a deep breath, riveting her eyes on the next cards being turned over.

Mia could tell that Lilly had started to believe.

The cards were telling truths, as Madame Merlina had said.

Madame sat quiet, looking at the cards. “You must be brave,” she finally spoke. “And you will be, when it’s time. You hide disappointment in yourself. You are too hard on yourself. When you find your agency and your dreams again, and believe in yourself, then you will succeed. We are stronger when we don’t go it alone, when we go with true companions. This weekend will have turning points. There is a good future when you choose well.”

Lilly appeared stunned.

Madame Merlina started collecting the cards, without asking if Lilly had questions.

Lilly finally spoke. “I thought a reading would be, you’ll marry, have three kids, and live in a small house.”

“You thought the Tarot card reading would be like playing that children’s game you call ‘Life.’ This one has two kids, that one three. Here is the car, here is the house. That game is only accumulating things and people, it is not real life. Real life is living, vital, vibrant, like you. You have a vibration.” She nodded. “Everything has a vibration.”

She watched Lilly for a moment before she spoke again.

“Now you have a lot to take in, and as you’ll be changing, so will your fortune. Try to remember to laugh and relax. Everything does not always have to be so serious.” Madame Merlina winked at her.

Next, she took the full card deck and tapped it three times on the table. She struck a match and lit a bundle of white sage. Passing the smoke all around the deck of cards, she said. “To cleanse them. “Now,” she placed the cards before Mia, “They are cleansed for you to shuffle. As before, three times, and think of your questions.”

Mia had a sudden urge to learn more about her own abilities. About the knowing, which had passed down to her from her grandmother, and anything else she might have inherited. So, instead of a question, she thought, *teach me the hidden and unhidden abilities I don’t yet understand, and bring me helpers. Oh, and a handsome hero for me, one who is true and good to me. Help me to find my true love.*

Finished with the three shuffles she placed the cards on the table in front of Madame Merlina and then folded her hands in her lap.

Madame Merlina, who’d been watching her, smiled.

Lilly’s eyes lit, excited to hear her best friend’s fortune.

Madame Merlina picked up the deck, cut it in half, and as before, drew from the bottom cards. Placing them down, past, present and future, she then began to turn them over.

“You’ve lived in an imaginary world in your early life,” she said. “It was a hiding place for you, when you were teased because of your red hair. Bullies knew they could get a rise out of you. Yet you stayed a lively, happy, positive child.” She nodded. “You learned from stories about others, and you have a childlike curiosity about the world, which you will never lose.”

Mia and Lilly both smiled, at that. No one could have described Mia better.

“Now the present,” Madame Merlina turned over the next cards, looked at them, and took a deep breath. “You are drawn in more than one direction, and your heart is longing for true love. But you are afraid, because in your past, your kindness was abused.”

She closed her eyes, and then her expression grew sad, as if what she was seeing affected her. "You were taken advantage of, for your kindness and empathy." She opened her eyes again and looked directly at Mia.

"You haven't had a good man in your life since your father died. This longing you have, this lack, is pushing the good energy aside which would bring you, your true love. You want the real, but you also want the magical." She smiled. "This isn't asking too much. There is no such thing as asking for too much. You didn't come down here to earth, to live a small life, hiding away in a book. You are here to live vibrantly." She nodded. "And that is what you must do."

She gathered the second set of cards. "Which brings us to the future." She set the cards aside and laid out the next cards.

Mia was learning much about how to read cards from watching her. Except for psychic visions, or any knowing's the fortune teller must've had, Mia could've done exactly as she had.

Perhaps she could become a card reader.

A thirst to learn more about such all things filled her, as if her curiosity was blooming inside this small tent.

Madame Merlina tilted her head, looking at the cards, thinking. She laid her hands on the table and closed her eyes. Her voice, when she finally spoke sounded different, like an older, wiser woman, lower pitched and strong.

"You must learn to trust your intuition, always, above all else."

Mia's hands clenched and chills ran up her spine as the knowing filled her thoughts.

Her third knowing tonight.

*Madame Merlina is channeling. She isn't present in there. Who is speaking to me now?*

"When you know something deep inside, that is your soul, speaking to you," Madame Merlina said. "Sometimes your guardian angel will speak, or your spirit guide. You must learn to listen, for they may speak in whispers. Do you believe this?" Madame Merlina asked without opening her eyes.

"Yes," Mia said.

Madame Merlina continued in that other voice. "Too much noise around you can drown it out. Too much busy mind can do the same. Once you learn how to listen, through all things, this ability will never leave you. Do you understand?"

"Yes," Mia said.

"Your strength is your empathy, which comes from your heart. This is why others try to use it, to take it from you. They lack this energy and resent you. It is your strength, but you must control where it goes and not let others drain you. Will you work on this?"

"Yes," Mia said.

"Fire comes naturally to you, and that inner fire brings strength, with the temper you've been taught is bad. Inner fire is not bad, it is what we do with our energies that can be bad or good. This fire has always been with you, yes?"

"Yes," Mia said.

"It will always be with you. Now you must let your pure heart guide you. Learn to see beyond appearances. Many are not who they seem. When someone is for you, your heart will know. You must be receptive to true love, not seeking and chasing it. Helpers will come to you. Listen for them."

Madame Merlina gave one nod, and then slumped, her eyes still closed.

She remained silent, unmoving.

Mia and Lilly looked at each other, both afraid to speak.

"Now what?" Lilly mouthed.

Mia shrugged, having no idea whether they should get up and leave, or wait till the woman woke up, if she was asleep.

*Was she asleep?*

With a jerk, Madame Melina sat up straight and opened her eyes, startling them.

She looked around the tent, before her gaze landed on Mia. "You sent a strong request," she said. "I trust you received answers. I never remember what is said when channeling."

"Yes," Mia spoke quietly. "Thank you. It was much more than I expected."

Madame Merlina nodded. "Now if you will hang out my closed sign." She pointed to it.

"You're closing early?" Lilly said.

"No more tonight," she said. "I must rest." She stood, holding onto the table but was clearly exhausted.

"We need to pay you," Lilly said.

She shook her head. "No."

"Oh, but we really should," Lilly started digging in her purse.

"Tomorrow," she said, and then stepped behind a red curtain in the back of the tent.

"Let's go," Mia said. "Can't you see how exhausted she is? That took a lot out of her."

"Well, yes, but I don't feel right not paying her for our readings," Lilly said.

"We can come back tomorrow, like she wants," Mia said. "I don't know what time it is, but we don't want to miss your cousins show."

"Right," Lilly put her money away, and then went to hold the tent flap up for them to slip outside. "My mind is full of the

things she told me. Wow, she knew all about my family.”

“She’s the real deal,” Mia said. “No wonder your cousin insisted we get readings.”

“I just wanted to know about a boyfriend,” Lilly laughed. “Those readings got deep.”

“Yeah, a lot to think about,” Mia said. “I’m ready for Finn’s fire breathing, but let’s freshen up first and get some water. I’m parched.”

“Sounds good.”

They started walking back to Finn’s tent.

The moon now up, and the sun long gone to bed, Mia and Lilly left the public area to explore the knight’s encampment on the way back.

“Do you think we’ll run into any of the knights?” Mia asked.

“I hope so,” Mia said.

Up ahead the encampment seemed to shimmer.

“It feels like there’s magic in the air tonight,” Mia said. “Do you see anything shimmering over there?”

“No,” Lilly said.

“By that first tent right now,” Mia said.

“Nope.” Lilly looked at Mia. “Didn’t you bring your glasses?”

Mia shook her head. “No. I left them at home on my bedside table. I don’t need them to read and since I wasn’t driving thought I could do without them.”

She could have sworn the air was shimmering with some kind of magic.

## Chapter Three

Full of tents, weapon racks and banners, there was no mistaking who was staying in each of these knight's tents.

"The horses must be somewhere else," Mia said. "I don't see them here."

"Finn said there was a barn for them, somewhere," Lilly said.

"It might be fun to visit them tomorrow," Mia said.

"Yes, I think so too," Lilly said.

As they passed a tent decorated with the colors Sir Elias had on his pennant, Lilly nudged Mia. "I'm calling dibs on Sir Elias. Did you see how he helped that little girl? And how her sweet face lit up?"

"Kind of like yours did, when you saw him," Mia smiled. "You go for the kind ones, and the ones who are good with children. I'm surprised you aren't married already."

"The last two turned out to be not so kind," Lilly said. "It was all for show. One didn't even like children."

"True," Mia said. "I remember that. Those two were so charming at first, then it was like both changed a few months in."

"Next time, I'm paying attention to how he treats others from the beginning, not just to how he treats me."

"Very sensible," Mia said. "As for me, I still want the fairy tale, the white knight, one who won't let me down."

They wandered past the next tent, a black and silver one with a pennant bearing the crescent moon.

"That must be Sir Alaric's tent," Mia said.

"You're right," Lilly said. "He's quite handsome, in a dark, mysterious way."

"Yes, he is," Mia said. "I'm looking forward to watching them joust tomorrow."

As they passed, Mia could've sworn she felt someone watching, but when she glanced back over her shoulder, the tent flap was still, and she saw no eyes watching.

Still, she'd felt it, and her feelings were not usually wrong. So far today she'd already had three of her knowing's.

Plus, Madame Merlina had told her to listen to her feelings and for any messages.

These knights had her feelings all stirred up, which so easily lead into imaginings and dreams. Likely her dreams tonight, after she went to sleep, would be vivid.

"I wonder if I'll dream about a handsome knight tonight?" Mia said.

"Knowing you, the answer is yes," Lilly said. "The question is, which one?"

*That was a good question indeed.*

Mia slowed her steps. "Maybe we should stop for a while and call it a night, before I start imagining I'm living in a fairy tale and get carried away."

Lilly laughed. "You say that like it's a bad thing." She grinned. "I thought you wanted romance and adventure this weekend."

"Well, yes, but I'm not feeling ready for an adventure just yet," Mia said. "I've taken in a lot, and I haven't had any rest since I got off work."

"We've only got an hour before Finn's fire show," Lilly said. "He's expecting us to be there. We can always call it a night afterward, if you still want to."

"Oh, yes, of course," Mia nodded. As their host, they should go to all his fire shows each night to show their support. "I'm looking forward to his show. I've never seen fire breathing. I'll be ready after a short rest. Just need to gather myself together."

When they reached Finn's tent, he was just leaving to go prepare for his fire show.

"Looking for me?" he asked.

"Mia wants to freshen up before we head back out," Lilly said.

"Oh, right. Porta potties are over there," he pointed. "And I've got a water tub and soap in the tent, and cold-water bottles in the cooler. It's okay to bring a water bottle to the show. They're selling food and drink nearby as well, if you want that."

"Thanks," Lilly said.

"Here," he grabbed a map out of his pants pocket and handed it to her.

"I already have a map," she said. "They gave it to me when we came in."

"I circled my stage on this one, so you can find it," he said.

"Perfect," Lilly said as she looked at the place he'd circled.

"I've got to go now," he said. "See you at the show."

"See you there!" Lilly said.

They went into his tent and sat down, after Lilly fished two water bottles out of the cooler. "Finn is the best," she said. "I was getting thirsty." She handed a water bottle to Mia.

"Me too," Mia said. "You're lucky to have such a nice cousin." She took the bottle and drank down half her water with a thirst she hadn't realized was so strong.

"Yes, I am," Lilly said.

Mia put the lid back on her water bottle and laid it down on her cot carefully. She looked up at the tent ceiling, as Missus McCullers's reading ran through her mind along with images of the handsome knights on their steeds. Remembering how their gazes felt upon her.

"You're quiet," Lilly said. "Feeling all right?"

"Feeling all sorts of things," Mia said. "Too many to sort out right now."

"Hmm," Lilly sat on her cot and pulled out her phone. "Twenty minutes for us to nap. You've been on the go since you got home from work. I think we need to pace ourselves. It's only the first night and we have two more nights to go."

"You're right," Mia said. "I was up early. A nap sounds good."

"Setting the timer now," Lilly said. "No more talking."

Lilly closed her eyes, and taking long slow breaths, hoped to get a nap in. If her mind would slow down enough.

Sounds from the Ren Faire in the distance caught her ears attention, and she listened.

It was quieter here, with Finn's tent being on the end of the row, the quietest spot.

She must have dozed, for soon, Lilly was shaking her shoulder gently, saying, "Wake up Sleeping Beauty, your handsome knight awaits."

At that, Mia opened her eyes. "Which one?" she asked.

"Which knight?" Lilly smiled. "Which one do you want? Did you dream of one?"

"Sir Cedric, I think," Mia said. "Though I didn't dream of him, or any of the others. I was zonked. Really needed that twenty-minute nap."

In her mind's eye, Sir Cedric seemed the white knight in shining armor on a white horse. The one she was most likely to dream about. Though one could never tell with dreams.

"He *is* handsome," Lilly nodded. "And you *did* catch his attention."

"Yes," Mia said. "Their horses are all huge, and the knights seem large and intimidating while riding them. I wonder if they'll seem different when down on the ground on our level."

"They're all quite tall," Lilly said. "None appear short. And all are fit."

"Yes," Mia nodded. "They are."

"Let's watch my cousin's performance, and then see if any of the knights are about, now that we know their horses will be in the barn for the evening. We could ask them about seeing the horses tomorrow. That would be a good conversation starter."

"Do you suppose they take care of their own horses?" Mia cocked her head to the side. "Or are the horses borrowed, like we've borrowed these dresses?"

"That would be a good question to ask," Lilly said. "I'll ask about where the horses and about seeing them, and you ask who takes care of them."

Mia nodded.

"Feeling more rested?" Lilly asked. "Got your second wind?"

"Yes," Mia said.

"Let's get going," Lilly said. "it's a bit of a walk, and we want to be sure of getting seats."

Mia drank down the rest of her water bottle and then said, "I'm ready."

They left the tent and found it much darker outside.

The moon had slipped behind a cloud. Tiki torches lit the merchant areas for the public, but back here, where the entertainers lived, it remained dark, and the tents seemed to be empty.

"It's too early for people to be going back to their tents," Lilly said. "They'll all still be working, or maybe having a pint in the pub. I think I'll find us a flashlight after the show."

"That's a good idea," Mia said. "Maybe we can ask Finn where we can get one."

"I'll ask him," Lilly said. "He might even have one in his tent. I just didn't see one."

When they neared the first Tiki torch at the edge of the public area, Lilly stopped to look at the map again and get her bearings. "This way," she said, and Mia followed her directions.

The air buzzed with the scent of roasting meat, and the faint tang of woodsmoke as Mia and Lilly wound their way through

the crowded fairgrounds.

Music drifted from the nearby minstrel's stage, but the deeper hum of voices drew them toward a roped-off circle, where a small crowd was gathering.

Dressed in leather breeches, and a loose white shirt rolled at the sleeves, he moved with the sure confidence of someone who owned the space. At his feet lay an assortment of strange tools; long steel rods, capped torches, and a battered brass jug that sloshed when he shifted it.

They sat on a wooden bench nearby.

Finn's stage was lit by two tall torches on each side, and it appeared he was nearly ready.

"Do you ever wonder if we just... missed the part where our real life started?" Mia asked.

Lilly threw her a sideways glance. "What do you mean?"

"I spend my spare time at home reading about romance, true love, and magic," Mia said.

"Yes, but what's wrong with that?" Lilly smiled. "That's so you."

"The rest of my time is spent looking at people's checking accounts, and bill payments."

"And that part is the real life that isn't so you," Lilly said.

Mia nodded. "I'm not sure how I ended up with this kind of life. It just happened."

"And now you want the magic." Lilly smiled.

"Yes, I think I do."

"And I went from wanting to explore the world, to working a front desk for that dude."

"What's he been up to lately?" Mia asked.

She prepared to hear another tale of "You won't believe what that dude did today."

"Same old stuff," Lilly shrugged, surprising her. "Hitting on any female that moves."

"You need this escape weekend too," Mia said. "Thank God for three-day weekends off."

"Yes." Lilly sighed. "I'm glad Finn invited us here, for a fun weekend."

"Me too. I needed this," Mia admitted. "I haven't... felt anything real in a long time."

Lilly nodded. "So maybe we flirt, maybe we dance, maybe we even kiss a knight."

"And what if it's more than that?" Mia asked softly.

Lilly's eyes sparkled. "Then we hope he's got a horse, a house, and a pension plan."

The same herald who'd announced the knights during the parade, stepped into the circle.

"Milords and milady's," he said. "Behold Flamethrower Flinn, the man who tames fire." Then he stepped back out of the circle and disappeared into the crowd as Finn moved forward.

Mia felt her stomach flutter as anticipation rippled through the crowd. She'd read about fire breathers in books, but seeing one in person breathing fire was another thing entirely and knowing him personally took it to a whole other level.

Finn raised his hands, and the chatter fell quiet. He grinned; a rogue's smile that made him look far older than his twenty-nine years. "Ladies, lords, and little ones," he announced, "Behold the oldest of magics. Fire, itself, bent to my will."

A torch flared to life in his hand, and gasps rose around the circle.

He dipped a rod into the brass jug, then lifted it to his lips. The moment he blew, a plume of fire burst from his mouth. The flames curled into the twilight sky like a dragon's breath.

Mia clutched Lilly's arm. "Oh my gosh!" she whispered, half horrified, half enthralled.

The crowd cheered as Finn repeated the feat, spinning in a circle so that the flames seemed to lick outward in all directions. He danced with the fire, twirling torches that left streaks of gold in the air, before finally tipping his head back, and letting a rod slide slowly into his mouth.

Mia winced; certain he would burn himself, but when he drew the rod back out, the flame was extinguished, and his smile remained unscathed.

He winked at them.

"Is he insane?" Mia whispered to Lilly as the crowd cheered, "Huzzah!" and clapped.

Lilly only laughed, clapping loudly, as Finn took his bow.

But Mia wasn't the only one watching. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Sir Cedric lingering, just beyond the rope, the torchlight glinting off his long blonde hair.

*He was certainly a fine man to look at.*

And she enjoyed looking at him.

Tonight, his arms were crossed, his expression amused, as though Finn's performance was little more than a clever parlor trick. Yet when his gaze slid to hers, it lingered, warm and knowing, as if he'd caught her delight and meant to capture it for himself.

Her cheeks warmed instantly.

Then she noticed another figure in the shadows, just beyond the torchlight's glow.

*Sir Alaric.*



Where Sir Cedric was golden and easy with his smile, Sir Alaric's dark eyes fixed on the fire with a calculating intensity. The flames reflected in his irises, giving him the look of a man who had stared into danger far deeper than Finn's act. He said nothing, but Mia could feel his attention heavy on her, a silent pull that made her pulse quicken.

After the crowd began to scatter, moving toward their next entertainment, and he'd finished answering questions and listening to comments, Finn motioned the women over.

"Well?" he said. "Did I impress you?"

"Impress? You nearly gave me a heart attack," Mia said, but she couldn't hide her smile.

"That's the point." He winked. "Come on, I'll show you how it works."

Behind the rope, he knelt by his equipment. "First rule. Never, ever try this, unless you've been trained. Second rule." He held up the brass jug. "This isn't oil from the kitchen, it's a special fuel that burns cleaner and slower. Still dangerous, but safer than you'd think."

"I will not be trying this," Mia said with a shiver.

"Maybe I would and maybe I wouldn't," Lilly said. "But if I did, I'd never be doing this in public. The last thing a lady needs is for men to see her swallowing things in public."

Finn laughed hard. "Indeed," he said. "I'd be fighting the men off of you, if you did."

Mia had turned pink at the turn the conversation and taken and was relieved when he prepared to demonstrate for them.

Finn demonstrated how he dipped the rods, how he kept the flame a certain distance from his lips, and even how he held his breath and angled the torch when swallowing the rod. "It's all sleight of hand and timing," he explained. "Make the crowd believe you're in more danger than you are. That's the trick."

A smooth voice cut in. "Or you could simply fight with steel in your hand, and danger at your throat. Far less smoke and mirrors."

Mia turned.

Sir Cedric had stepped closer, his tone teasing, his smile sharp enough to be a challenge.

Finn snorted. "As if what you do in the lists isn't scripted. However, I'll leave the swordplay to you, knight. Because fire," he smiled. "Fire listens to me."

A low voice joined them, edged with quiet warning. "Fire does not listen," Sir Alaric said, stepping forward at last. "It devours. You're a fool if you think otherwise." His eyes flicked to Mia, and for a heartbeat, it felt as though his words were meant for her, as much as for Finn.

Sir Cedric's grin widened. "Ever the poet, Sir Alaric. Do you brood over every flame, or only when a lady is watching?"

Sir Alaric's dark gaze shifted to him, and the tension in the air thickened. "Some of us don't need theatrics to impress," he said quietly, the weight of his tone like steel drawn in the dark.

Sir Cedric's smile sharpened. "And some of us know when a lady enjoys being dazzled." He offered Mia a playful bow, his blue eyes never leaving hers.

Mia's breath caught, torn between the warmth in Sir Cedric's gaze, and the intense gravity in Sir Alaric's.

The air between the three men crackled with a tension as potent as Finn's torch. Mia stood caught between them. One knight's golden charm, the other's shadowed intensity. And Finn's defiant pride. It left her feeling as if the sparks hadn't quite faded with the show and at any moment might start a dangerous fire.

Finn, sensing the current between the two knights, gave a laugh. "Careful, gentlemen. You're both standing too close to my torches. You might get burned."

But it wasn't the torches Mia feared. It was the heat gathering between the three men, as if a fight were brewing, and the way it seemed, somehow, to center on her.

Lilly said, "That was a great show, Finn. The crowd loved it."

With her words, the building tension in the air eased, a little.

"Thanks, cousin," he said.

"Come on, Mia, there's a vendor booth I want to show you," Lilly said.

"All right," Mia said. "Finn, I enjoyed the show. Thanks for inviting us to the Faire."

"You're quite welcome, milady," Finn said, and then bowed to her.

Lilly threaded her arm through Mia's and nodded to the two knights. "Gentlemen."

"Ladies," the men spoke in unison, and each bowed.

Lanterns flickered along the paths between tents as the women walked away.

From their silence, the men were likely watching them go.

Mia and Lilly didn't look back to see what they were doing.

"I'm hungry," Lilly said. "Are you?"

"Not really," Mia said. Her appetite had fled with the feeling of a gathering fight.

Lilly glanced over her shoulder, then said, "It was getting tense back there."

"Yes," Mia agreed and took a breath, to exhale tension and to relax again.

“Perhaps it’s how good the food smells, making me hungry,” Lilly said.

“Perhaps.” Mia smelled the food too, but it wasn’t having the same effect upon her.

She tried to put the knights out of her mind to focus on enjoying the faire sights.

As they walked, they came upon a shallow fountain made of stone and trickling water.

“Look, that’s where those women dressed as fairies acted out stories earlier,” Mia said.

They’d passed them earlier in the day but had no time to stay and watch.

Many activities went on at the same time during the faire. Something for everyone.

“This is a lovely spot,” Mia said. “I think I’ll just wait by this fountain for you.”

“Okay. It is a good spot.” Lilly said. “Enjoy.” She headed off to find food.

Mia walked closer to the fountain.

The sound comforted her, and she daydreamed.

A voice like honey spoke behind her. “Ah, the faire lady of flame by the magic fountain.”

Mia turned to look.

Sir Cedric leaned against a tree, arms crossed, looking far too at ease in full armor.

*Had he followed us?*

“Lady of flame?” she asked, one brow arching.

He stood to his full height and stepped closer.

*Oh my. He seems even taller now.*

“Your hair,” he said. “Like coals just before they spark. Or a sunset that refuses to end.”

She laughed. “That’s a bit much, isn’t it?”

He tilted his head, amused. “Perhaps. But isn’t this the place for too much?”

“You don’t talk like a man from this century,” she said.

“I’m not sure I belong to any century.” He shrugged and gave her a dimpled smile.

Mia studied him.

He was all charm and poise, but something flickered behind those blue eyes.

*Hunger? Tiredness?*

He stepped closer. Not too close. Just enough to make her heartbeat pick up.

“You felt it too, didn’t you? When our eyes met during the parade?” His eyes sparkled.

And yet Mia hesitated because she was unsure of her feelings. “I’m not sure what I felt.”

He smiled softly. “Good. The best things begin in mystery.”

And just like that, he walked away, leaving her staring after him.

*I feel like I’ve just met Prince Charming. Sir Cedric is everything I’ve dreamed of.*

He hadn’t asked her name, but he had flirted with her.

Though she knew his name, she knew nothing else about him. But she wanted to.

She stared at the fountain and waited for Lilly to return from the food venders.

Soon Lilly came walking down the path, carrying a paper bowl with food in it.

“What did you end up getting?” Mia asked.

“Fish and chips,” Lilly said. “The vender is getting rid of his fish tonight.”

“Why?” Mia asked.

“He cooked too much, and it won’t keep for tomorrow, so he sold it half price.”

“Oh good,” Mia said. “Is the food expensive?”

“Some seems so,” Lilly said. “But a giant turkey leg, who sells those? Can’t price that.”

“True,” Mia said. “I’ve never seen them anywhere else to compare.”

“The meat pies looked good, and I almost got one, but then I heard the fish sale.”

“Is the fish any good?” Mia asked.

“It is,” Lilly held her bowl out. “Want some?”

“I’ll try a bit of each.” Mia pulled off a piece of fish and popped it in her mouth.

Lilly munched on a fried wedge of potato, after dipping it in ketchup.

“The fish is good,” Mia said.

Lilly held out her bowl to offer more, and Mia tried a potato wedge without ketchup next.

“Did you discover anything while I was gone?” Lilly asked. “Sorry I took so long.”

“I was enjoying the fountain when Sir Cedric surprised me,” Mia said, blushing.

Lilly’s jaw dropped. “Really? The minute I step away.”

“Really.” Mia said, smiling.

“Well, what did he say?” Lilly’s eyes lit with excitement. “And how did he surprise you?”

“He came up behind me. Maybe he followed us,” Mia said.

“And what did he say?” Lilly asked again.

“He called me fair Lady of Flame.”

“I leave you for five seconds.” Lilly shook her head. “And a handsome knight finds you.”

Mia smiled. “It seems so.”

“Five seconds.” Lilly threw her hands up. “And he’s already nicknamed you”

Mia giggled.

“He said my hair was like coals before they spark, or a sunset that refuses to end.”

Lilly lifted the ends of Mia’s hair. “You do have glorious hair. He’s not wrong.”

Mia tipped her head, looking down at the wavy red tresses.

“I keep telling you that,” Lilly said. “Now maybe you’ll believe me.”

“He said something about our eyes meeting, and that the best things begin in mystery.”

“Your eyes did meet,” Lilly said with a nod. “I saw it.”

Mia smiled and ate another chip.

They began walking away from the public areas, strolling slow as they nibbled.

“Did you see any knights?” Mia asked.

“No,” Lilly said. “But I was told there’s a knight’s circle, where they hang out at night.”

“Where?” Mia asked.

“I don’t know,” Lilly said. “Did you see any other knights?”

“No,” Mia said. “But I think they’re all tall. Sir Cedric must be over six foot.”

“More?” Lilly asked, holding the paper bowl of food out.

“No thanks.” Mia shook her head. “I’m full.”

Lilly finished her food as they walked around seeing how evening at a Ren Faire looked.

They bought cups of hot apple cider before looking for the knight’s circle.

Night fell soft over the encampment, the air warm for spring and edged with the cool scent of cut grass and woodsmoke.

Torches lined the paths between the tents, their flames wavering in the light breeze.

Then they saw it. The knight’s circle.

A great fire crackled in the center, sparks spiraling into the dark. Four of the knights were gathered around it. No armor now, only tunics with hose or pants, and the easy or wary postures of men stripped of the tournament’s ceremonial parade garb.

Mia and Lilly approached with their apple cider, the firelight painting everything near it with golden light, which lit upon their faces as they neared.

Sir Cedric spotted them first. “Ah, the fairest ladies of the lists,” he said, rising with a theatrical bow. His white and gold doublet glowed in the fire’s warmth as he gestured toward a pair of empty seats beside him. “You honor us with your presence.”

Before Mia could answer, Sir Alaric’s voice came from the shadows beyond the firelight. “Careful, Sir Cedric. A lady’s honor isn’t yours to bestow.” He stepped into the glow, away from the darkness he had blended in with.

His voice reached Mia before she saw him.

Something about his voice reached something inside of her on a very deep level.

She hadn’t heard him speak before now and was surprised at how hearing his voice affected her.

His eyes found Mia’s, holding her gaze until her pulse skipped.

He took a seat opposite them, thus making it five knights around the fire. Sir Thorne was the only one missing.

Lilly settled beside Sir Elias, who offered her a quiet smile, nothing like Sir Cedric’s showmanship. “Welcome, milady,” he said.

Sir Cedric made a big show of holding the chair for Mia as she sat.

*What a handsome gentleman*, she thought, as she looked up at him. “Thank you,” she said with a smile.

“You’re most welcome.” He smiled back at her, which made him even more handsome.

*I doubt he could take a bad picture*, Mia thought. *He really could be on a book cover.*

Lilly had turned to Sir Elias and was smiling at him. “We were just wondering where you keep your handsome horses?” she asked.

“There’s a barn,” he said. “You’d see it in the daylight. But not in the dark.”

Mia had been listening. Then she turned to Sir Cedric and asked, “Do you take care of your horses, or does someone else take care of them?”

“I have a squire for such things,” he said. “I give Aethon a good workout when we practice and then hand him off to my squire.”

“Some of us care for our own horses,” Sir Elias said to Lilly. “Even if we have a squire.”

“Aethon is your horse’s name?” Mia asked Sir Cedric.

“Yes,” He nodded. “My stallion is named after one of the four horses which the Greek God Apollo used to pull the sun

across the sky. A strong and powerful steed.”

“He is well named,” Mia said before taking another sip of cider.

“Of course,” Sir Cedric said, clearly proud.

Mia could see why, as all the horses were amazing.

“I’ve never seen such big horses,” she said. “Aethon is white, is he hard to keep clean?”

Sir Cedric shrugged. “My squire handles that.” He took a drink from his large mug, which was also white. It seemed everything he had was white. Like an angel.

“Will I see your squire at the tournament tomorrow?” Mia asked, trying to think of something to say.

“Yes, of course,” he said. “He must hand me my lance, and anything else I need.”

“I didn’t see any squires in the parade,” Mia said.

“Squires do not ride publicly,” he said, his tone now arrogant. “Only knights ride in the parade,”

“Mia,” Lilly stood. “It’s time we turned in. Are you ready to go?”

“Yes.” Mia drank the last of her cider and stood.

Sir Cedric stood as well, and Mia realized all the knights had stood. These gentlemanly ways were something she wasn’t used to.

“Will you be attending the joust tomorrow?” Sir Cedric asked.

“Yes,” they both answered.

“Excellent,” he said. “I expect to be victorious again. No man can best me.” He leaned toward Mia. “Especially when I have such a lovely lady cheering me on.”

Mia blushed.

He reached for her hand, and taking it, bent to kiss the back.

She caught her breath.

His lips were warm upon her hand, and she suddenly felt warm all over.

As he raised again to stand, he whipped out a red rose from behind his back and presented it to her. “A beautiful rose for a beautiful lady.”

“Oh!” she let out her breath in a rush, “Thank you!”

“Quite welcome. Until tomorrow, my sweet,” he said and then sent her a dazzling smile.

*My sweet, he called me his sweet. Oh, how romantic.*

“Ladies, remember to bring your favors to the tourney,” Sir Elias said.

“Favors?” Mia asked, still dazzled by the romantic overture by Sir Cedric.

“I’ll explain it to you later,” Lilly said. She addressed the group. “Good night, all.”

Five of the knights bowed.

“Fare thee well, ladies,” Sir Elias said.

Lilly’s face lit and she waved. As they turned to walk back to Finn’s tent, she said, “I wonder where Sir Throne was? All the knights except him were there.”

“I haven’t seen him since the parade,” Mia said. In truth, she didn’t want to. Something about him scared her. She looked down at the red rose she was carrying.

“That was so romantic,” Lilly said. “Him giving you a rose.”

“It was,” Mia agreed. She was floating on such a high from the romantic gesture that she barely felt her feet touch the ground. They were at the tent before she knew it.

A lantern inside flickered.

Mia pushed up the flap of the tent for them to go in and stopped short.

They both froze.

*What in the world?* Mia’s eyes widened in shock at the sight.

## Chapter Four

Inside the tent, their bags had clearly been shifted.

“My hoodie,” Lilly rushed over to where it lay on the ground, halfway across the tent.

Mia gasped. Her copy of *His Lady’s Heart* lay open, face-down, on the ground.

Lilly picked up her hoodie, and Mia’s bookmark which had fallen out of her book.

“Who could have done this?” Mia asked. “Finn?”

Lilly frowned. “No. He would never go through our things.”

“Why would anyone do this?” Mia said.

“Looking for money, jewelry, or other valuables,” Lilly said. “Did you leave any cash?”

“No, I didn’t leave cash, or anything of monetary value.” Mia placed the rose on her cot and then picked up her book.

She dusted it off and looked inside at the pages which had been on the ground.

One of the pages had been bent.

“I’ll tell Finn what happened and see what he says,” Lilly said.

She handed Mia the bookmark.

Wind rustled outside. A low, skittering sound moved behind the tent.

Both women stilled.

“Raccoon?” Lilly whispered.

“Too fast,” Mia replied. She crept to the entrance and peeked out.

*Nothing.*

But up in the tree, half-hidden in shadow, sat the owl, huge and still.

“Was that you in my dream?” she asked softly, low enough that Lilly wouldn’t hear.

It’s eyes, golden and slightly glowing didn’t blink as it watched her. It didn’t move just watched her.

“Whoever was in this tent, you saw them,” she said softly, speaking the knowing.

*Was that my fifth knowing today?* She’d stopped counting them.

The owl blinked once.

“I wish you could tell me who did this,” she said.

Then the owl let out a low, guttural hoot that sounded almost like a warning.

It felt like one, to her.

“Who are you talking to?” Lilly had come up beside her and was looking out.

“Just that owl,” Mia pointed. “He spoke, but I can’t understand what he said.”

Lilly turned to look at Mia, quizzically, but didn’t say anything.

*I forgot not to let her know about my woo-woo feelings and thoughts. I need to be quiet.*

*Especially about thinking this owl is trying to talk to me.*

So, she said nothing, let the tent flap close, and went to put her belongings back.

“We can figure it out in the morning,” Lilly said. “I’m tired and going to bed.”

“Me too,” Mia said. “Whoever it was, didn’t find anything, and they are long gone.”

They both changed into pajamas and then got into their sleeping bags.

Lilly left the lantern light low, so Finn could see when he got in later tonight.

Likely he was at the pub enjoying a beer after his show. They were not going to wait up.

Mia set the rose on the side of her cot, near her pillow, where she could see it and enjoy its scent and then settled in to read, with her book light and her paperback.

She was looking for her last page, where she’d left off.

That had been lost when the bookmark fell out.

Then she realized that a page had been torn from her book.

*What? Why would anyone do that?*

It horrified her that someone would tear pages out of books.

And it made no logical sense to do that.

*What would anyone do with the missing page?*

Luckily it was a page she'd already read. But it ruined the book for anyone else.

She'd planned to ask Lilly if she wanted to read it after she finished reading it.

Now that wouldn't happen.

After about twenty minutes of reading, Mia placed the rose on the ground where she wouldn't roll onto it in her sleep and turned off her book light. She couldn't stay up all night and needed to rest.

Long after the torches outside had burned low, she lay awake in the tent, listening to the distant murmur of laughter and music drifting from the campfires.

She couldn't shake the image of the two knights watching her, during Finn's show. The golden amusement in Sir Cedric's eyes, the shadowed weight in Sir Alaric's. Both had unsettled her, though in different ways.

Sir Cedric's charm was easy, bright as the flame itself, and he had presented her with the red rose. She replayed that moment many times, enjoying the memory and the way his kiss felt on the back of her hand.

She wondered what his lips would feel like upon her lips and imagined kissing him.

Sir Alaric's attention was heavier, dangerous, as though he saw something in her she didn't yet understand. He frightened her a little, but at the same time, she was drawn to him.

The memory of their words tangled in her head: Sir Cedric mocking, Sir Alaric warning. Two men, both strong in their own way, both impossibly interested in her.

She'd dreamed of meeting one handsome knight who might be interested in her, and now, it seemed she had two.

Sleep came slowly. And with it, restless dreams.

\* \* \*

The first dream was both familiar and unfamiliar.

She was back in her grandmother's house, sitting by the fireplace.

Light through the window and the lace curtains caught dust motes as they floated down. A fire crackled low in the hearth. On the mantel sat a carved wooden owl, worn smooth from years of being touched.

Her grandmother sat by the fire, combing Mia's long red hair with slow, gentle fingers.

"You have the gift, little one," she whispered. "Dreams will chase you. But you must learn to chase them back."

Mia blinked. Her younger self spoke with a child's clarity. "You talk to birds, Nana."

"Only the wise ones," her grandmother replied.

The fire suddenly flared blue. From the corner of the room, with a low screech, the owl statue turned its head. It blinked, suddenly alive with brown and white feathers, and intense golden eyes which looked at her steadily.

It flew up and landed before Mia, then pressed a single feather into her palm.

"You will know him by the blade he does not show," the owl says.

"And the one you *must* not trust will offer roses without roots."

Mia woke gasping. When she looked down, a brown and white striped feather lay on her pillow. She reached out to touch it with her finger.

It was warm. As if the owl had just left it. Real.

Not her imagination, not just a dream. Real.

And beside it on her cot lay the red rose. No longer on the ground.

\* \* \*

Saturday morning, Finn stepped inside the tent, carrying a trash bag.

Mia sat up on her cot and yawned.

Lilly was already awake, playing on her phone.

"Careful not to wear the battery down," Finn warned.

"Is there nowhere to charge it?" Lilly asked.

"There's a charging station, but you have to leave your phone there, and wait your turn," he said.

"Oh," Lilly said, turning her phone off. "I was just waiting for Mia to wake up."

"Sorry," Mia said. "Why didn't you wake me?"

"Because I heard you tossing and turning last night," Lilly said. "But I was about to. Mia," Lilly paused, looking down at

something. "When you were reading last night, did you tear a page out of your book?"

"No, I would never do that," Mia said. "Why?"

Lilly held up a page which hung down in strips. "Because this was next to my cot when I woke up."

Mia frowned and held out her hand. "Let me see it."

Lilly handed it to her.

"That's the missing page," Mia said. "But why is it shredded?"

"I don't know," Lilly said.

"Let me see," Finn came over to look at the page and Mia held it out. He let it fall on his hand and looked closely at it.

"Looks like mice got hold of it. Probably wanted the paper, to pad their nests."

"Eww," Mia said, wanting to pull her hand away.

"I can take that for you," he said.

She nodded and let him take it.

He wadded it up in his hand. "If you ladies are going to breakfast, they're only serving for another hour," he said.

"Yes, we are," Lilly said. "Come on Mia, get dressed."

"Missus McCullers sent you some cooler dresses to wear today," Finn held up the bag.

"Oh good," Mia said.

"It's supposed to be a scorcher," Finn sat the bag on his cot.

"Great," Lilly said. "Thank her for us."

"I will." He checked the water bottles in the cooler. "Be sure to hydrate."

"Thanks Finn," Mia said. "We will."

"I'll see you later. Ladies," he gave a bow and headed back outside.

Lilly lifted the dresses out of the bag. "It's easy to tell whose is whose."

"How can you tell?" Mia stood, ready to get dressed.

"We have different size corsets, or bodices, those lace up things," Lilly said.

"I've always wondered what it would feel like to wear one," Mia said.

Lilly had already pulled on a long white chemise and then a green skirt over it.

"You're fast," Mia said.

"I'm hungry," Lilly said. "I hope there's enough breakfast left for us this late."

Mia slipped into the thin ankle-length white cotton chemise, noting how soft it was, before adding the black bodice with gold embroidery. She began to lace it. "How tight is this bodice supposed to be? My boobs are flowing over the top!"

Lilly gave her the once over. "Can you still breathe?"

Mia straightened up and tried to take a breath. Her lungs didn't expand any noticeable amount, but she was still standing. "Yes."

"Then it's not tight enough," Lilly said, and she came over to tighten them for her. When she was done, she stepped back and nodded.

"Lilly, I can't go out like this. Look at my boobs!" Mia frowned as her hands fluttered around her chest.

"What's wrong with them?"

Mia thinned her lips. "Well for one, I no longer have individual breasts, instead I have a bosom shelf. This bodice is too small. My boobs are practically touching my chin."

"Don't be silly, all boobs look like that in a properly fitted bodice," Lilly said. "Guys love it. Finn told me they'll offer to drop grapes down into your cleavage, and then do a grape dive."

"Eww." Mia glanced down, eying her breasts that rose like overflowing bread dough in a too-small pan. "And anyway, I don't think a grape would fit in there."

"Fine, you stay and fuss with your costume," Lilly said. "I'm going to go eat before those big strong knights eat it all."

Lilly pulled the tent flap back. "Remember, Finn said we can eat with the actors, in their cafeteria so that's where I'm headed."

"Right," Mia said. "See you there."

"I just hope there's some bacon left," Lilly muttered as she left.

Mia continued fussing with her costume as she finished dressing.

"God almighty, how am I supposed to bend in this bodice?" Mia complained as she picked up the black and gold cotton ankle-length skirt, to shake the wrinkles out of it.

She slipped it over her head, then tried twirling around ineffectually to see how it looked. But without a mirror, she couldn't tell.

"Well, it will have to do." Mia sighed. "All I wanted was a chance to get away for a bit, a chance to find a good man, and where do I end up? Cinched into a bodice. Now I'd better hurry if I'm going to eat breakfast."

She heard a thundering noise in the distance, and wondered what that was, as it didn't sound like the kind of thunder that



came with rain.

Skirt finally in place, she stepped out of the tent, and hearing that thundering noise closer, turned her head to look toward the sound, stepping straight into the path of a galloping steed heading right for her.

The white shape loomed up from the left side of her vision and as she turned to face what it was, she saw the large white horse with a man on its back.

She spun to her left toward the tent to escape being run down.

Suddenly a strong muscular arm reached around her waist, from her right side, scooping her up.

She screamed.

Mia was plopped onto her rear, on top of a muscular thigh, as she continued to scream. The horse reared up, making her scream even more, as the man holding her pulled hard on the reins to stop.

The horse's hooves landed hard as he stopped. With that, Mia stopped screaming and tried to catch her breath.

The man, she realized now that they were so close, was Sir Cedric.

Close as they were, he was even more handsome. And she was sitting on his muscular thigh which she'd so admired yesterday.

"You bloody idiotic fool!" Sir Alaric, the handsome, dark-haired knight, came running as he yelled and then swore at Sir Cedric, a word Mia wouldn't have repeated.

As they stopped, he stalked closer, his eyes narrowed in anger.

Mia tried to get her breathing and heartbeat under control.

"Stupid! What the hell did you think you were doing?" Sir Alaric scowled at Sir Cedric. You know not to ride through here like that! You could have killed someone! Are you completely daft, or do you just look it?"

Mia stared at Sir Alaric as Sir Cedric held onto her tightly. She sensed that Sir Alaric was angry because she could've been harmed.

*How mortifying. My first morning at the Faire, and already I'm being almost run over by a big, handsome knight on his steed.*

The other knights had now gathered around them as they'd come from the knight's tented area at the other end of the row.

She felt she'd made a spectacle of herself in front of them all. Her cheeks heated.

"Having a bit of trouble with your wench?" Sir Thorne asked, his voice dry and sarcastic. He held back further than the other knights, as if he wasn't a part of their group.

"Let go of her, you damned fool," Sir Elias said as he approached.

"Clearly the lady wants away from you," Sir Gareth said. "A fact that illustrates her obvious good taste and intelligence." He directed his attention to Mia. "My lady" he bowed. "I am your humble servant. If you'll allow me to remove you from the knave Sir Cedric's slug of a horse, I shall assist."

Sir Alaric said nothing but reached for Mia to help her down.

Mia felt his warm hands upon her as he pulled her toward him, but she didn't move far.

She was still held tight by Sir Cedric, as he tugged back. "If it is not obvious to you, I saved her," he said. "And clearly, she shoved her breasts at me. Which she certainly wouldn't have done if she didn't want to be near me."

Mia gasped. "I did no such thing!"

"Let go of her before you hurt her," Sir Alaric said, his voice low with a warning of what he would do should Sir Cedric hurt her.

*Oh, no! They're fighting over me. Tugging at me as if I were some toy to be won.*

"I had her first," Sir Cedric said, tightening his hold on her.

"You didn't want her," Sir Thorne said. "You wanted that blonde from last night. This red-haired beauty fell into your lap from your dumb luck."

"Whether or not I want her, isn't the issue," Sir Cedric said. "I had her first, so she's mine to put down."

He glared at Sir Alaric. "I realize you don't have a shred of chivalry in your soul, but if you did, you'd know finders' keepers' rules apply to her."

Mia gasped again.

Sir Cedric's gaze dropped for a moment, to her bosom, which was heaving, in proper wench fashion, and added in a much softer voice, "Not that I don't appreciate the wubby, but I'd prefer one that wasn't conducted on horseback."

Her cheeks flamed with heat then, her embarrassment total.

This wasn't the moment to argue with him, or to investigate the man who held her too close, this was the moment to request he put her down, slowly and carefully as they sat atop his tall horse.

"Please put me down," she said. "Gently."

Keeping one hand upon her, Sir Cedric unhinged his metal helmet and took it off, pulling off a soft white cap before shaking out a glorious mane of shoulder-length golden hair. Even red-faced, from riding under the hot morning sun, he was handsome. Tanned face, sun-streaked hair, vivid blue eyes, and a chiseled chin with a dimple in the middle.

"I'm the damsel in distress," Mia said. "You dashed up, and rescued me from your horse, in the very best brave knight manner, so thank you. Now *please* put me down gently."

"You nearly ran her over," Sir Alaric said. "She's uncomfortable. It's ridiculous for you to keep her, when she wants away from you. Release her," he ordered.

"She's safer with me, than with your ill-mannered black stallion," Sir Cedric growled back. "Here, you, wench whatever your name is, let me have your arm."

"Address her as a lady," Sir Alaric growled back, in warning.

"When she's not dressed as one?" Sir Cedric raised a brow. "Dressed as a common serving wench, one of the lower classes, it's clear that's how she wishes to be treated here."

"Wait. What?" Mia shook her head. "No."

"Put her down. Now," Sir Alaric said, his deeper tone implying an or else.

"Remember what happened the last time you two went off script," Sir Throne said with a sly grin.

"For the last time," Sir Alaric said, his tone hard as iron, "Put. Her. Down."

"Really, Sir Cedric," Sir Elias spoke, trying to ease the tension between the two men. "There are gentler ways of holding a woman on your lap, and the lady has asked you to put her down. Gently."

"Please, my dear, ignore these men. I will help you," Sir Cedric said as he moved his hands across her body.

"No! You've done enough," Mia said, as she tried to push his hands away. "Remove your hands from me, sir!"

With that, Sir Cedric raised his hands in the air, completely away from her. "You had but to ask," he said.

Quickly Sir Alaric's strong hands moved upon her waist and lifted her down.

"Are you alright?" his quiet voice spoke near her ear once she was on the ground.

"Yes," she nodded, still feeling the heat in her face as the knights all watched.

As Sir Cedric sat atop his horse, now she could see he wore a gorgeous white tunic embroidered with golden dragons, white tights, and knee-high; white leather boots tied on with leather garters. He and his horse wore white with gold threads everywhere.

The program listed him as the white knight, and he more than fit the part.

"That big horse came out of nowhere," she said, looking at how big and tall the white horse was. "Frighteningly fast."

"Yes," Sir Alaric said. "Quite dangerous. I'm glad you weren't injured or worse."

"Why was it so close to my tent?" She frowned, worrying that it might happen again.

"It shouldn't have been," Sir Alaric said, sending a glare to Air Sir Cedric.

"Yes, Sir Cedric." Sir Elias crossed his arms and gave him a stern look. "You know it's against the rules to ride our horses through here. So why were you breaking that rule?"

"I was on the practice field and realized I'd forgotten my sword," Sir Cedric said. "It's in my tent. Everyone is usually gone to breakfast by now. So, no one should still be in their tents."

"You're damn lucky you didn't hurt her," Sir Elias said.

"Milady, where were you headed, when this oaf nearly ran you down?" Sir Alaric asked.

"To the village to have a late breakfast with my friend Lilly," she said. "If any is left and they haven't already stopped serving."

"Ah," Sir Cedric interrupted. "Breaking thy fast. May I accompany you?"

"No," she said, shaking her head at him. "I wish to dine alone, if not with my friend."

"If you should so, please," Sir Alaric said. "It would be my pleasure to escort you safely there." He bowed to her and then held out his arm.

Despite how dark and dangerous he'd appeared to her during the parade of champions, this felt right, so she took his arm.

"Thank you, good Sir," she said.

"Tis my pleasure, milady," Sir Alaric said. "They will still be serving breakfast, and if they're already closing the grill, I'll speak to the cook. You need not fear going hungry."

She placed one hand on her belly. "If I can eat," she said. "I'm feeling a bit, unsettled."

"You had quite a scare." He patted her hand which was holding his arm. "Once you're seated and still for a bit, it should ease."

The other knights dispersed, except for Sir Cedric, who still sat on his horse, watching her walk away, the sun lighting his hair and his costume.

She turned her attention away from him to focus on Sir Alaric, her escort.

"Well, man, are you going to get your sword or not?" Sir Elias challenged Sir Cedric.

"Yes, of course," Sir Cedric slowly rode his horse over to his tent.

Mia did not turn back to see what he did afterward.

"We haven't been properly introduced," Sir Alaric said. "I am Sir Alaric of Ravenwood. And may I have the pleasure of your name, milady?"

“I’m Mia Louise Harkness,” Mia said.

It occurred to her that in all the conversation last night with Sir Cedric, he hadn’t once asked her anything about herself, not even her name.

As Sir Alaric walked beside her with her arm in his, her frightened nerves slowly began to calm down.

In his presence she felt safe, and just a bit lighter.

It was a beautiful morning, and she looked about and enjoyed it. She noticed the colorful striped tents of all colors, some with pennons and flags bearing coats of arms, waving lazily above in the early morning breeze. Where before she’d been more focused on herself and the scare she’d just had.

“Every merchant has some kind of flag,” she said.

“Yes, it helps the fairgoers to find them,” he said.

Then they were to the cafeteria, which wasn’t far, as it was on the edge of the public area and close enough for the workers.

“Mia!” Lilly rose upon seeing Mia enter the cafeteria on Sir Alaric’s arm. “What’s wrong?”

“How do you know anything is wrong?” Mia asked.

“You look pale,” Lilly said.

“She needs to eat,” Sir Cedric said. He pulled out a chair for Mia.

She sat. “Thank you.”

“Sit still and relax,” he said. “I’ll fix you a plate.”

“The eggs have gone cold,” Lilly said. “But the bacon and sausage links in the warmer are still good.”

“Not to worry,” Sir Alaric said. “If you want eggs, I’ll tell the cook. She’ll fix you some.”

“Her favorite breakfast is pancakes,” Lilly said. “But those got eaten up.”

“Are there any breakfast foods you don’t like?” he asked Mia.

“No,” she shook her head. “I can eat whatever is easiest.”

“Hmm,” he said, gave a nod, and left to talk to the cook.

“So, tell me, what happened?” Lilly asked. “And how did you end up being escorted here by a handsome knight?”

Mia took a deep breath and began. “Sir Cedric almost ran me over with his horse.”

“No!” Lilly exclaimed. “How did that happen?”

“I stepped out of our tent and his horse was galloping toward me. But he snatched me up just in time, so I didn’t get run over.”

“Oh my!” Lilly placed her hand over Mia’s. “I’m glad you’re all right!”

“Me too,” Mia said.

“You were rescued from certain death and dismemberment, by a brave, dashing knight!” Lilly said. “Now that is like something out of one of your romance novels. Why aren’t you with him now?”

“It wasn’t nearly as exciting and swoon worthy as it is in romance novels,” Mia said. “For one, it was terrifying. For another,” she put her hand over the bodice. “My ribs are sore from wearing this thing. These aren’t meant to bend, or to be a thing for a man to grab hold of to pull you onto his horse.”

“Oh, no,” Lilly said. “Are you bruised?”

“I’ve no idea,” Mia said. “But I *am* sore.”

“Maybe we can find you a different dress which would feel better,” Lilly said.

“No, I don’t want to be a bother,” Mia said. “I’ll be okay.”

“So,” Lilly grinned. “You were on his horse with him. What did it feel like to sit way up there, next to him?” Lilly asked.

“He sat me on his thigh,” Mia said in a quiet voice.

“His thigh?” Lilly squeaked, her eyes lighting up. “That big muscular thigh?”

“Yes.” Mia’s face heated.

“Now we’re getting to the juicy parts,” Lilly said. “Was it romantic? And kind of sexy?”

“Not exactly,” Mia said with a wince, as she realized she couldn’t slump down wearing the thing but had to sit up straight. “Sir Cedric wouldn’t let go of me, or put me down, and he and Sir Alaric started fighting over me.”

“Ooh!” Lilly clapped her hands together. “Two knights vying for your hand, now that’s exciting! Tell me more!”

Mia sighed. “Sir Cedric finally put me down, and I was able to walk here with Sir Alaric. He’s quite chivalrous. More than Sir Cedric. And guess what?”

“What?” Lilly eyes brightened, like they did whenever Mia told her a secret.

“The fighting the knights do in the tournament is scripted,” Mia said.

“I guessed that” Lilly said. “White knight must always win kind of thing.”

“In public, it is,” Mia said. “But they sometimes fight in real life, and that isn’t scripted.”

“Really?” Lilly said, her eyes widening.

“Yes, and Sir Cedric and Sir Alaric don’t like each other,” Mia said. “At all.”

Lilly nodded. “I can see that.”

“And Sir Elias?”

“Yes!” Lilly leaned forward in excitement. “Tell me about him.”

“He was chivalrous,” Mia said. “Your favorite is a good choice.”

Lilly leaned back in her chair with a big smile. “I wish I could’ve seen him. Hey, why do you keep meeting knights when I’m not around? Maybe I need to stick closer to you.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Sir Alaric said, as he carried a plate with bacon, link sausage, scrambled eggs, and pancakes to place in front of Mia. “Milady is served,” he said as he set the plate down.

“Oh, that all looks delicious!” Mia said. “Especially the pancakes.”

He grabbed a bottle of syrup from the next table and placed in front of her.

He looked at Lilly. “It wouldn’t be a bad idea for the two of you to stick together,” he said. “It’s safer that way.”

“Is it dangerous here?” Lilly asked. “Finn didn’t warn us about anything.”

Sir Alaric paused.

Mia got the feeling that there was something dangerous here, and he didn’t want to tell them.

*But what could it be? This was just a Ren Faire.*

## Chapter Five

After a pause, Sir Alaric answered her. “Finn isn’t a woman alone in a tent. And these events are open to the public. Anyone can pay to get in. It only takes one person with ill intent, and they’ll look for the vulnerable. What we call a soft target.”

“Soft target,” Mia said. “You sound like a police officer or a military man.”

“I’m a warrior at heart,” he said and gave her a bow. “If you need me, call out. Now I must prepare for the upcoming joust, and I hope you’ll enjoy every bite of your breakfast.”

“Thank you, Sir Alaric,” she said. “I will.”

They watched him leave as Mia nibbled on her bacon.

“That man looks just as good going as he does coming,” Lilly said. “He has, as my neighbor says, ‘a fine behind.’”

“Lilly! Shh, he might hear you!” Mia said.

“He’s long gone,” Lilly said. “And you have to admit he has a fine behind.”

“Yes, I agree,” Mia enjoyed every bite of her breakfast, thinking of him while listening to Lilly talk about the schedule for the day.

Just the time she’d spent with him and he with her, made her feel happy.

After she finished eating, they walked, about taking in areas of the Ren Faire where they hadn’t been before.

In the children’s area, there were games, pony rides, face painting, apple bobbing, a pie eating contest with whipped cream on the pies, archery with rubber tips for kids, and a place where they could play with wooden swords.

For teens and adults there was axe throwing, a kiss the wench booth, and a dunking booth, where a man sat saying insults and daring men to dunk him.

In another area, there was henna painting for ladies, and the Tarot card reader.

“We could have them paint some henna on us,” Lilly said.

“But we’re wearing long sleeves,” Mia said. “Where would they put it?”

“Our shoulders or our hands,” Lilly suggested.

“No, I’d rather save my money for something else that will last,” Mia said.

“Okay,” Lilly shrugged. “It was just a suggestion. We should do anything we’ve always wanted to do or try.”

“I wouldn’t mind trying archery,” Mia said. “Shooting a wooden arrow would be cool.”

“It would,” Lilly agreed. “Okay that is on your yes list. What is on yours.”

Lilly smiled and almost didn’t tell her, but then she let it burst out quietly. “Kissing a handsome knight.”

Lilly laughed. “That’s it girlfriend! Now you’re talking. Me too. Let’s make that happen.”

“I will try,” Mia giggled, feeling like a teen again. Being around Lilly often did that. Her enthusiasm and encouragement just the way it had been in high school. Sometimes it seemed strange that Lilly was often so practical. But then they were both grown women now and had both learned to be. It was Lilly who clung to her teenage dreams.

There were so many sights to see and so many types of character at the faire. Jugglers walked about, and stilt walkers took long strides through the faire, while women dressed as fairies flittered about entertaining children.

Off to the back of the faire, and up closer to the entrance were rows of porta potties with signs that said ‘privies.’. Mia was glad the workers had their own, back closer to their tents, especially at night, or in the morning when you really needed one. They didn’t have to wait in line with the paying Faire visitors.

Throughout the faire, there were singers, drummers and guitar players, playing in staged areas. Many vendors selling merchandise or food. There were even stocks in the middle of the faire, though no one was currently in them.

The faire was so much larger than Mia had imagined it would be. She was glad they had all weekend to look around. There was no way to see it all in one day.

Lilly led her to a tent where ribbons and trinkets were sold. “This is where we’ll buy favors,” she said.

“Oh yes, I meant to ask you about favors last night, and then forgot,” Mia said. “Did Finn explain what favors are?”

“Yes, he did,” Lilly said. “I think the cheapest would be to buy a simple ribbon in whichever color represents each of us and then to tie them in our hair.”

“Oh, that would be pretty,” Mia said. “I didn’t know we needed to choose a color.”

“Yes, like the knights have colors, so can we,” Lilly said. “Okay, so we bestow our favors upon the knight we favor in the lists. He will tie it about himself somewhere and then wear it into battle, wearing our colors just as he wears his.”

Mia lit with happiness. “Oh, that is *so* romantic! Yes! I want to do this!”

They spent time picking out ribbons. Lilly held back deciding until Mia chose hers.

“I thought you would choose a green one,” Lilly said. “You wear green so often.”

“Green is a good color for me. Because of my hair,” Mia said. “But I’m feeling pulled toward this pretty sky blue one because my fancy dress is blue.”

“It will look good in your hair,” Lilly said.

They purchased the ribbons, and then headed for the jousting field.

At the far end of the fair, was a large area roped off where the Jousting would be held, in front of a viewing stand for the royalty to sit and watch.

“Hurry, the joust tournament is about to begin,” Lilly said. “We took too long picking out ribbons, and we need to get good spots where we can see. I think near the viewing stand, as they will stop in front of it, before they joust, and then after. We’ll see them closer that way.”

“Okay,” Mia said, picking up the pace, as she saw people starting to gather around the ropes, and more fairgoers like the two of them, heading toward the jousting field.

The summer sun now turned the lists to gold, casting long shadows over the tournament field. Pennants snapped in the breeze, each bearing a knight’s colors, bright against the blue sky.

The crowd’s chatter swelled with anticipation, their eager faces watching.

Mia and Lilly moved through the crowd, as the populace pressed close to the ropes.

The horns blew, and the herald wearing bright red and purple, stood on the viewing stand.

“He’s very colorful,” Lilly said.

“Yes, he is,” Mia said.

“Hear ye, hear ye!” he said. “Welcome, my lords, my ladies, and gentles.”

The crowd quieted to listen.

Cheeks flushed with excitement, Mia and Lilly found a spot near the front, next to the viewing stand, close enough to smell the leather and horse sweat.

“This first joust of the day brings together six of the bravest and strongest knights from the surrounding kingdoms. Let the tournament begin!”

The ground vibrated beneath their feet as the first two destriers pawed the turf before the list. They wore draped cloths in colors to match their knight’s tunic and pennant.

Sir Cedric entered first, his golden hair glinting beneath the open-faced helm, that golden hair catching the light like a storybook hero’s. His white and gold surcoat streamed behind him, and he raised his lance in salute, directly toward Mia, his blue eyes intent upon her.

Her breath caught.

His roguish grin, directed at her, flashed just before the visor on his helm dropped.

He still had the ability to dazzle her with his appearance and performance, even though he’d lowered the esteem she’d felt for him with his behavior this morning.

From the opposite gate came Sir Rowan, Sir Cedric’s long-standing rival, riding in clad in red and black. His visor was already down, his shoulders taut with readiness. Where Sir Cedric moved with theatrical grace, Sir Rowan was all precision and cold efficiency.

The tension between the two was tangible, like a drawn bowstring.

The marshal dropped the flag. The two chargers surged forward, hooves pounding, lances lowering in perfect synchronization.

The impact cracked like thunder, making Mia jump as Sir Rowan’s lance splintered, shattered across Sir Cedric’s shield, but Sir Cedric stayed firm in the saddle, his own strike glancing off Sir Rowan’s pauldron.

The crowd roared, but Mia barely heard as her heart hammered.

*This didn’t seem like acting. Not when real pieces of wood hit hard like that and broke. Were they following a script? They must be. Otherwise, they could seriously hurt each other.*

Soon Sir Cedric was declared the winner according to his points.

The next tilt brought Sir Alaric forward.

Her eyes and her heart lit at the sight of him.

The dark, brooding knight whose silver-gray metal armor gleamed like wet steel, rode astride his destrier, a massive black

warhorse that moved with predatory power, carrying the colors of black and gold.

His black horse was much more intimidating than Sir Cedric's white horse. She couldn't help but think of his stallion as a warhorse, even though it was all make-believe at the ren faire.

*Or was it?*

Across from him waited Sir Alaric, dressed in black and gold, his easy smile hidden behind the visor. He too was handsome, but not as handsome as Sir Cedric. He seemed so calm sitting there on his horse.

Both were quiet, being still.

In that quiet moment of waiting, Mia watched them and held her breath.

The charge which followed was like watching a storm break.

Sir Rowan's lance struck first, but Sir Alaric twisted with inhuman grace, at the last moment, his counterblow catching Sir Rowan's shield with such force that it sent him reeling in the saddle.

Gasps rose as Sir Rowan barely righted himself, before reaching the end of the tilt.

Mia caught a flicker of movement behind an oak near the lists. Something low and quick, darting between the roots.

*What was that? Some kind of animal?*

She heard Sir Alaric announced as the winner of this bout.

By the time the final pairing rode in, Sir Gareth in deep green, and Sir Elias, Sir Alaric's ally, clad in bronze with a sunburst, Mia's attention was split.

Lilly's gaze sharpened at Sir Elias's appearance.

There was something in the way he carried himself, as if the pomp of the tournament was a mask for something quieter.

Their pass was fierce, and the crowd gasped, as both lances splintered in perfect unison. Yet Mia couldn't shake the image of shadows sliding, just beyond her sight.

There was some kind of animal out there, she could feel it.

She squinted to try to see better. She could almost see it.

If she looked long enough, maybe she would learn what it was. This felt important. And it was distracting her from the jousting. She was torn between the two.

The knights wheeled their mounts around, saluted one another, and then prepared for another round as fresh lances were handed up to the knights.

Between bouts, the knights rotated opponents, lances replaced with fresh ash poles as they prepared to battle again. Rivalries flared.

By the final rounds, the air was electric.

Shards of broken lances littered the lists. The men were clearly not going easy on each other, which built the excitement, and made the event seem even more real.

Sunlight flashed on steel, and the cries of the crowd rose to fever pitch as they cheered their favorites on.

Mia's gaze, as she watched the knights, darted between Sir Cedric's showman's flair and Sir Alaric's unshakable focus. At times, Mia could feel both their eyes on her, though neither looked directly her way, still she sensed their attention and awareness of her.

"Are you ladies enjoying yourselves," Finn asked. He'd slipped next to his cousin and was holding a mug of what was likely beer.

"Yes!" Mia said. "It's so exciting!"

"I've chosen a favorite," Lilly said. "When do we bestow our favors?"

"Any time you choose," Finn said. "I thought you might've done so, before the jousts."

"We were running late," Lilly said. "Mia had some excitement, but I'll explain later."

"Okay," he said.

"I wonder when they'll ask us for our favors," Mia said.

Finn shook his head. "Knights do *not* ask ladies for their favors. That wouldn't be chivalrous. It's for the lady to bestow, as she chooses. This is a matter of honor."

Mia was surprised at how serious Finn was, as he explained this to them. Usually he would joke or tease, not be so serious.

*It must be something not to be taken lightly,* she thought.

"Has anyone explained to you how the point system works?" Finn asked.

"No," Lilly said.

Mia shook her head. "No."

"All right. A touch of the lance," Finn tapped Mia's arm with his index finger. "Is one point. A broken or shattered lance is five points. They aim at those shields for that. Unhorsing is ten points, but he's got to be unsaddled. They get five passes and the one with the best total score is the winner. The knight with the highest score advances to fight again. If they go tip to tip that pass gets a rerun. So, each knight's goal is to stay penalty free and hit on target while having the highest score."

“No wonder this sport looks so dangerous,” Mia said.

“Because it is,” he said. “If it goes wrong. These men have been practicing their skills for a long time.”

The trio continued to watch the jousting.

Sir Cedric and Sir Alaric met again, each determined to unseat the other. For there could only be one winner.

With each strike harder than the last, their rivalry escalated to a dangerous edge.

It felt deadly to Mia, and less like an entertainment.

Her pulse raced and she held her breath each time their lances hit true.

When the last lance broke, and the herald declared the victor was Sir Cedric, all cheered.

“Of course, the white knight always wins,” Finn said.

“So, it’s scripted?” Mia said.

“Of course,” Finn said. “This is a Ren Faire. The white knight must always win.”

“It sure looked real to me,” Mia said.

“Which means they did a good job.” Finn winked at her.

The six knights now saluted the crowd in a unified arc of lances. As if now, they were all together, part of a team who had put on a great show.

The roar was deafening.

Mia took a deep breath and let it out.

*The danger is over now.*

It was a huge relief, as it had felt so real. And the feeling that it was real was strong.

*But had it been real? Or just part of the show?*

Confused by how she felt drawn to Sir Cedric and Sir Alaric, her emotions had risen.

The knights saluted together one more time. The crowd cheered even louder.

“That was so exciting!” Lilly said, clapping for the knights.

*A little too exciting,* Mia thought as she clapped with Lilly and the rest of the crowd.

“They all fought bravely,” she said. “This was way more exciting than I’d imagined.”

“I know, right?!” Lilly said.

Mia turned to look at the place she had seen the owl, as she had a sudden feeling of being watched. Now that the herald was done, he’d hurried off the field and was now walking past her.

*What a bright and gaudy costume,* she thought. *Glad we aren’t having to wear something like that.*

“A good beginning to a weekend of tournaments,” Lilly said. “Can you believe they do these jousts three times a day, all summer long, except on Sundays?” She turned to look at Mia when she didn’t answer. “Did you hear what I said? You aren’t even watching.”

“They’re done jousting,” Mia said. “I’m looking for that owl.”

“You’re into owls?” Finn asked.

“She’s into bird’s period,” Lilly said with a roll of her eyes. “You’d think she’d be more interested in the handsome knights.”

“I am,” Mia laughed. “I just wanted to see if that owl was sitting where I’d seen him before. Now that the knights are done.”

“Owls,” Finn nodded. “I’ll have to remember that. There is an owl that likes to sit and watch. I’ll let you know if I see him,” he said. “Glad you both enjoyed the show. I’ve got to run now, but I’ll check on you later.”

“Thank you,” Mia said.

“Bye Finn,” Lilly said.

He slipped away through the crowd.

“We need to get to know the knights,” Lilly said. “Let’s go over there now.”

Mia eyed the crowd of women surrounding the knights and said, “I think I’ll wait.”

Sir Cedric’s gaze landed on her then and held.

“Mia, do you see that?” Lilly said. “He’s watching you.” She elbowed Mia.

“But look at all those women falling all over him,” Mia said.

“So?” Lilly shrugged.

“I’d be just another woman in that crowd if we go over there,” Mia said. “I won’t do it.”

“You’re right,” Lilly said. “You want to stand out and hold his attention not fight for it.”

“Let’s go back to that tent we passed and look at the candles,” Mia said.

“Sounds good,” Lilly said. “And there’s a crystal shop too.”

“Then we can decide what we want for lunch,” Mia said.

“I’m going to try one of those meat pies I told you about,” Lilly said.

“Oh, yes,” Mia said. “I want to try one too.”



“Perfect. Candles, then lunch.” Lilly nodded.

They turned to walk away from the lists.

The knights remained, now signing autographs,

Lilly said, “There’s a second knight watching you.”

Mia, without turning her head, to let on that she was looking, paused and glanced down.

“Do you want to know who?” Lilly asked.

“Yes.” Mia pretended to brush something from her gown.

“Both Sir Cedric and Sir Alaric have looked your way,” Lilly said. “More than once.”

As Mia glanced up and over at them, she saw both looking at her, in between signing.

Mia pun back around, her cheeks heating as she flushed. “Yes, I see, let’s go.”

But then, just for a heartbeat, Mia caught a shadowed figure beyond the lists.

Felt it watching from under the trees. A flicker of movement.

A hint of something small and quick darting between the tree trunks. Her pulse stuttered.

*What was that?*

Despite the sun shining down on them, it felt as if something dark watched them.

Goosebumps spread along her body along with the knowing that it was true.

Since her reading from Madame Merlina, she was paying attention, not ignoring it.

She shivered.

“Are you cold?” Lilly asked. “It’s warm out, not cold. I hope you aren’t getting sick.”

“No,” Mia said. “I just don’t like the feeling of being watched.”

“When it’s a handsome man, you should enjoy it,” Lilly said. “Could be your true love.”

A sudden gust whipped across the field, rattling pennants, lifting fine dust into the air.

The scent of it, musty, earthy, made Mia’s stomach tighten.

Lilly wrinkled her nose. “What’s that smell?” Lilly murmured.

Mia’s gaze flickered toward the tree line.

A sudden shiver traced Mia’s spine, as though a cold breath had brushed her ear.

Beyond the list, a great horned owl perched in the oak’s shade, its gaze locked on her. She’d thought that she felt eyes watching her earlier.

The final tilt had ended in a deafening cheer right about that time, so she hadn’t turned to see who it might be.

Mia looked back at the tourney field. The six knights sat on their horses still signing autographs. There was a time when she would have wanted one. But not today.

Mia’s gaze returned to the tree, where the owl had been just a moment ago.

The branch now hung empty.

## Chapter Six

“I don’t see the owl now,” Mia said.

“It’s long gone,” Lilly said. “Let’s go shopping.”

“Okay,” Mia said, and they headed for the candle shop.

On the way there, they passed the crystal shop, an herbalist’s tent, and shop that sold toys like the wooden swords so many of the children were running about with.

Lilly had to look at and sniff nearly every candle in the place, for she loved candles. She was still shopping when Mia stepped outside.

She could only sniff a few candles before she would feel a headache coming on, even if the candles were made with essential oils. The scents crossed the brain barrier so fast, that even if they were considered good for you, she had to be careful. So, she purchased one lavender candle and one vanilla before stepping outside with her bag.

A strolling juggler passed her by as she stood watching all the people, and not long after that, a man on tall stilts came walking down the path.

Lilly stepped outside wither purchases to join her.

“I wonder how tall he is before he’s up on those things,” Mia said. “It must be terribly hard to walk in them.”

“He’s pretty amazing,” Lilly said. “Crystals next?”

“Sure,” Mia said. “You know I’m always up for looking at and holding crystals.”

“Yes, I know,” Lilly said.

Mia had a whole self of them in her living room. Mostly small ones, though she had one amethyst geode about the size of on the left side and one crystal quartz geode on the right side. Whether or not she bought a crystal had to do with whether any of the stones called to her when she shopped for them. Occasionally, a larger one did that.

Today, none of them were. She wandered and picked some up but then put them back down. “Not a crystal kind of day,” she finally said to Lilly. “None of them are calling to me, saying take me home.”

“You’re probably hungry,” Lilly said. “Lunch is probably what’s calling to you.” She laughed. “Those meat pies smell good.”

“Yes, I’m ready for lunch,” Mia said. “We may be back tomorrow,” she told the shopkeeper.

“I will be here,” the shopkeeper responded with a smile. “Enjoy your lunch.”

“Thank you, we will.”

Mia and Lilly both stepped outside and headed for one of the food vendors selling meat pies which had a long line.

“I guess everyone likes these,” Mia said.

“It might have been better if we’d headed here first,” Lilly said. “because of the line now. But I wanted to shop before the populace crowded the little shops.”

“It was a good idea,” Mia said.

They placed their order, got two meat pies and two fresh lemonades, then found seats at the end of one picnic table. The other end was occupied by a couple who sat holding hands and gazing into each other’s eyes.

Mia and Lilly started to eat, quietly. Both were so hungry they didn’t speak at first.

When the couple got up to leave, Lilly whispered, “Love is in the air. Maybe we’ll get lucky this weekend, too with two handsome knights. Are you still leaning toward Sir Cedric?”

“Yes,” Mia said. “Sir Alaric has that bad boy pull, though he’s all man, not so much, boy. Sir Cedric is a handsome knight, like the ones in my books.”

“They’re very different,” Lilly said. “And equally handsome. It would be hard to decide.”

“You decided right away,” Mia said.

“Sir Elias is beyond compare,” Lilly said. “I hope to get to know him.”

They finished their lunches and then headed back to the Jousting field for the second round of jousting. On the way they saw

some ladies walking around with white lace parasols, and Lilly stopped one.

“Excuse me,” she said. “Did you buy your parasols here?”

“Yes,” one of the women said. “In the second clothing store on your right.”

“Thank you,” Lilly said.

Once the ladies went on, she turned to Mia. “It’s hot for a day in May and these dresses are warm. Let’s get parasols and try to stay out of the hot sun.”

“That’s a great idea,” Mia said. “And they’re pretty too. Do you suppose they had those during the Renaissance?”

“I don’t know,” Lilly said. “And honestly as warm as it is, I really don’t care. I’m buying one anyway.”

Mia laughed. “Right there with you.”

They found the shop, purchased two parasols, and then headed for the jousting field beneath the shade of white lace.

The fairgrounds mid-day were alive with music, the clang of steel, and the eager chatter of festival goers crowding around to watch the jousting. Pennants streamed overhead, snapping in the breeze, and the air smelled of trampled grass and horse sweat.

Mia and Lilly found a place at the ropes, the best view they could manage among the jostling crowd.

Mia’s pulse thrummed as the herald announced the names of the jousting knights again. The first round of jousts had been so exciting this morning, she was sure this second round would be as well.

Sir Cedric rode in first, his armor polished so brightly it caught the sun in dazzling bursts. His long blond hair, bound in a loose tail beneath his helm, gleamed as he saluted the stands with his lance.

Women all along the railing sighed and clapped, but his grin sought Mia, with a cocky tilt of his head as if to say, *Watch me.*

Watch him, she certainly would.

Then came Sir Alaric. His darker armor, appearing worn in places, bore the marks of real battles. He made no show of it. He rode forward steady and grim, a knight with nothing to prove. And yet when his gaze slid briefly toward Mia... her breath caught.

There was no charm in it, no smile. Only intensity.

He could command her attention without the showy display Sir Cedrick put on.

Finn stepped up beside them again as the other knights were riding in. “I just had lunch with Sir Elias,” he said. “Word is, most Ren Fairs the jousters use fiberglass lances and hold them under the elbow. Those don’t break and are just for show.”

“But that’s not what happened earlier,” Lilly said. “These are splintering, and they don’t hold them like that.”

“Exactly,” he said. “I wanted to know more about it. I haven’t learned the why yet. But I did learn a lot. Ladies, what you’re seeing is solid lance jousting. Do you know what that this?”

They both shook their heads no.

“All these lances they’ve been breaking?” he continued. “The first four runs, the lance is made from one and a half inch thick Douglas Fir, and those lances are from eleven to twelve feet long. See how they hold them under their arms? Those suckers weigh ten pounds.”

“Wow,” Lilly said.

Mia stayed quiet, taking his words in and watching the knights prepare.

“I don’t know why they’re not just putting on a show, but ladies what you are seeing here is real jousting the way real knights did it,” Finn gestured to the knights. “You might as well have stepped back into the real renaissance.

Mia’s heart thudded. This *was* more than sport. Any of them could be seriously injured. The fire-show last night had lit a fuse, and now the joust would strike the spark. What she’d sensed was serious, real rivalries among the knights.

Finn said in a low voice, “This should be good. Sir Cedric has been boasting and riling up the others.”

The trumpet sounded. Sir Cedric and Sir Alaric lowered their lances.

The horses charged, hooves thundering, dust rising in clouds. Sir Cedric leaned forward, a golden blur, his lance angled perfectly. Sir Alaric thundered straight down the line, unshaken, dark as a storm bearing down.

The crash of impact echoed across the lists. Splinters flew, shields shuddered, and the crowd erupted.

When the dust settled, both knights remained in their saddles—neither yielding an inch.

Mia let out a breath she hadn’t realized she’d been holding. The air rang with the clatter of armor and the excited cries of the crowd. Bright pennants snapped overhead, horses pawed the ground, and the lists gleamed with banners of red, gold, and black.

Mia and Lilly stood watching, excitement buzzing in their veins. It had just become more real, less like watching a movie.

The fair felt alive, brighter even than the fire from the night before.

The herald raised his staff. The crowd fell silent.

“The first pass,” the herald announced. He lowered his staff down sharp, the signal to ride, as the trumpet blared.

Both knights lowered their long lances and spurred their horses forward, hooves pounding in thunderous rhythm.

Sir Cedric leaned forward with perfect poise; his form as elegant as it was strong.

Sir Alaric thundered down the list like a storm front, unyielding.

Their lances crashed with a splintering crack, Sir Cedric's striking Sir Alaric's shield, Sir Alaric's lance driving hard against Sir Cedric's breastplate.

Both men rocked in their saddles, but neither fell.

The crowd erupted into cheers.

Mia let out her breath she'd been holding again.

Lilly clutched her arm. "Oh heavens, they're evenly matched!"

Sir Cedric wheeled his horse about with a flourish, raising his splintered lance for the crowd before tossing it aside with a rakish grin.

The crowd cheered and it was clear he thrived on that attention.

The two knights rode back to their starting points and to make ready again.

At his end of Sir Cedric's side of the list, his squire rushed to hand him another lance.

Sir Alaric didn't bother with theatrics; he simply took his fresh lance from his squire, nodded once, and lined up at the tilt.

"Second pass!" the herald announced, dropping his staff.

Again, the trumpet sounded. The knights thundered forward.

This time Sir Cedric angled low, his strike grazing Sir Alaric's side just enough to make sparks flash from his armor.

The crowd roared approval.

Sir Alaric's lance, however, struck Sir Cedric squarely on the shield with brutal force, nearly unhorsing him.

Sir Cedric wobbled but clung to the saddle, laughing as though the danger were part of the show.

"Show-off," Finn muttered beside Mia, arms folded.

Mia's stomach twisted. Sir Cedric's laughter set her heart racing, but Sir Alaric's steady, punishing strike left her unsettled in another way entirely.

The two knights readied to go at it again.

"He's an odd one," Finn said, watching the herald.

"He's very colorful in his red and purple," Lilly said with a laugh. "It's not hard to pick him out in a crowd."

"That's the thing, Lil," Finn said. "He only wears that when he's announcing. The rest of the time he wears black and skulks around the encampment. I caught him picking up some of my equipment to look at it and then he put it down quick, made a lame excuse of being curious, and walked away."

"Maybe he was just curious," Mia said. "I'll bet a lot of people are. I know I was before you explained how it works."

"Possibly, but I doubt that's the reason," Finn said. "They say he's been at the Ren Faire since it began, and I know they've hired a fire breather every year. So, it won't be a new thing to him. Like I said, he's dodgy. I've started locking my equipment in its travel trunk in between performances. Fire isn't something to mess around with and I don't want anyone messing with my equipment."

"Oh, I don't blame you," Lilly said. "Yes, keep your equipment locked up. I expect you would need to do that anyway."

Mia now watching the herald, noted his gaze landed on her briefly, before looking away. His gaze made her uneasy in a queasy sort of way.

"Prepare for the third pass!" the herald announced.

The field grew hushed. Even the banners seemed to still in the wind.

Mia caught her breath. There was something here that she ought to know.

But she was too wound tight. A knowing would only come when she relaxed enough.

The rivalry between Sir Cedric and Sir Alaric was no longer subtle.

Everyone in the crowd could feel it, and the tension built like a bowstring drawn taut.

The trumpet called.

The knights charged. This time there was no flourish, no play for the crowd.

Sir Cedric drove with fierce determination, his lance aimed to unseat his rival.

Sir Alaric lowered his weapon with deadly precision, every line of his body bent toward impact.

The collision rang like a clap of thunder. Splinters flew in a golden spray.

Sir Cedric's lance shattered against Sir Alaric's breastplate.

Sir Alaric's lance struck Sir Cedric's shield and broke through, driving him sideways in the saddle.

For a breathless instant, it seemed Sir Cedric would fall.

Gasps rippled through the stands. The white knight could not fail. The populace was rooting for him.

Then with a desperate surge, he righted himself, still astride, though barely.

The herald rushed forward, raising his arms. "A draw!" he cried.

The crowd roared approval, though disappointment echoed too. Many had hoped to see a clear victor.

Sir Cedric swept off his helm, tossing his blond hair back with a grin, as if he'd planned it all along. He flashed Mia a wink that sent a ripple of cheers through the stands. It was as if he had singled her out as his lady.

Sir Alaric removed his helm as well, his dark gaze finding hers. There was no grin, no triumph in his expression. Only the

steady, unflinching weight of a man who would never play for the crowd, but for the truth.

Mia's heart thudded painfully in her chest.

Between the knight of gold and the knight of shadow, she couldn't say which one unsettled her more. And now that she'd been singled out, the strange herald and the crowd were watching her too.

His face heated, uncomfortable with all the attention.

Sir Cedric however was eating it up.

The knights would tilt again and the third Jousting session in early evening. Now they would dismount, remove their armor and care for their horses.

"Ready to go meet them?" Finn asked. "I can see that you both need a nudge in that direction. You're still wearing your hair ribbons!"

"Why, yes, I am," Lilly said. "Were you planning to go over there with us?"

"I certainly can," he said. "I've nothing further until it gets dark again. Let us walk." He gave them both an arm to hold so he could escort them. "Ladies, are you ready?"

"As ready as I can be," Mia said. Her face was still warm from all that attention.

Finn walked them across, to a mostly empty field, as the crowd had been moved along with no autographing session this time. That wouldn't happen again until after the third jousting session this evening.

They reached Sir Elias first, as he was standing near his horse, removing armor.

"Sir Elias," Finn said, "May I introduce my cousin, Lady Lilly."

Sir Elias reached for her hand with a smile and as she reached out for him, took her hand in his. "Tis a pleasure, milady." He bowed.

Lilly, beaming from ear to ear, curtsied. "Milord."

"Will you be attending the masquerade bonfire ball tonight?" he asked.

"Yes," she smiled deeper, "I will be."

"Then I hope you will save me a dance," he said.

"I will," she said. "But behind a mask, how will I know which one is you?"

"Never fear," he said. "*I will find you.*"

Finn had walked Mia closer to Sir Cedric and Sir Alaric, but Sir Cedric stepped toward first. "And this lady is?" He smiled his most charming smile at Mia.

She blushed again, suddenly tongue tied.

"May I introduce Lady Mia," Finn said.

Sir Cedric took her hand, bent to kiss the back of it, and standing again said, "Enchanted."

Mia giggled.

"I trust you ladies are now in good hands, so I will retire to the pub for a cool pint," Finn said with a wave of his hat.

"Thank you, Finn," Lilly called.

He waved his hat over his head in response as he walked away.

Mia barely took that in as Sir Cedric had captured her full attention, and she felt like a blushing schoolgirl. His horse snorted and she jumped, then looked up wide eyed at the large white stallion.

"He is bigger up close," she said, looking up at the horse.

"Indeed, he is," Sir Cedric said, his smile telling her he wasn't only referring to his horse. "I believe you've met him already this morning and can attest to that."

She blushed remembering how she'd been seated upon Sir Cedric's muscular leg and sat atop his horse. "Yes, I can," she said. "It was startling at first."

Sir Cedric beamed his smile at her. He led her to the side, more out of the way of his big horse. "Await here, milady" he said. "I shan't be long."

She nodded. "Okay."

He glanced at his squire who was removing the armor from his horse. He turned to face him. "Come here, squire," he commanded. "Leave the horse and help me with my armor."

Mia wrinkled her brow at the way he spoke to his squire. She didn't care for the abrupt way he spoke to the boy or the tone he used.

*Perhaps he's sore from jousting and needs his squire to remove the heavy armor.*

She let out a breath, let the frown ease, relaxing and giving him the benefit of the doubt.

Sir Alaric, who'd been watching them both, while helping his squire care for his horse, came over to her now, still wearing most of his armor. He stopped in front of her and said, "Lady Mia, it is good to see you again. I trust you are enjoying the faire?"

Sir Cedric turned his head and sent him a scowl, his lips forming a thin line.

*Was he jealous?*

"I am, Sir Alaric," she said with a smile.

She glanced over at the horses at the edge of the tiltyard. Most had their armor removed except for Sir Cedric's horse.

Squires were hurrying to gather all the horse's armor, placing it in two large wagons which stood nearby.

"Your horses are magnificent up close," she said, eyeing the broad-chested destriers with their glossy coats, and their nostrils still flaring from the strain of the joust. "I've never seen horses so big."

"They are, milady," Sir Alaric said. "These breeds are made to be the best warhorses."

"Of course," Sir Cedric butted in sounding as if everyone should know this. "A knight must always have the best horse. Mine has impeccable bloodlines."

She saw two of the squires already leading horses away and as she watched them go, she wondered where they were taking them.

Sir Alaric had turned back to help his squire finish removing the armor from his horse. The squire was now carrying it toward the wagon.

She hesitated, then took a step toward Sir Alaric.

Sir Cedric, off to the side had begun to berate his squire for something, but she ignored that, her focus on Sir Alaric now.

He held his gauntlets, and his helm tucked beneath one arm. His dark eyes flicked toward her, unreadable as ever, as he and his squire kept removing armor.

"Sir Alaric?" Her voice caught faintly in her throat. "Forgive me for interrupting, but where do they take the horses after the joust? To the stables, I mean?"

"Not an interruption, at all milady," he said. "Tis my pleasure." For a moment only, he studied her. Then he inclined his head toward the far side of the field. "Past the tiltyard, beyond the armorer's tent. You'll find the stables against the tree line." His voice was low, quiet, but there was something in it that made the simple directions sound weighty, as though he were telling her more than she asked.

"And...who cares for them?" she asked, emboldened by the way his gaze stayed steady on hers.

"The squires," he answered, slipping his gauntlets onto his belt. "And the grooms. They see to the feeding, the cleaning, the care. A knight cannot fight without his horse, nor live without those who tend it." His tone softened, almost reverent at those last words.

He ran a hand along his stallion's neck before passing the reins to the waiting squire with respect and not a hint of superiority.

*How different he was from Sir Cedric.*

Mia nodded, tucking the directions away in her mind. She wanted to see the stables for herself, to understand what happened behind the pageantry. But more than that, she felt the pull of his words, the respect beneath the hardness, a glimpse of the man behind the steel.

There was kindness beneath that, beneath his brooding nature.

Before she could reply, Sir Cedric's laughter rang out. He strolled toward them, blond hair gleaming in the sun, flashing Mia a smile that all but demanded she look away from his rival to focus only on him.

"Ah, fair lady," Sir Cedric said, "you mustn't let Sir Alaric bore you with details of hay and mucking stalls. If you'd like to see the stables, I'll be delighted to escort you there myself. And I promise, my stories are livelier."

Mia found herself caught between them again, the golden knight offering charm and attention, and the dark knight who had already given her the answer she sought.

And for the first time, she realized the stables might hold more than horses. They might hold answers about the men themselves.

"Thank you, milords," Mia curtsied to them both. "You've been kind to answer my questions when I know you're both very busy. I will now resume my shopping."

"Never too busy, milady," Sir Alaric said with a bow.

"Allow me to accompany you," Sir Cedric said, having removed all his armor. His squire was now loading it into the wagon, while his horse stood waiting. "What are we shopping for?"

*So, would he now leave his horse for his squire to do all the work of removing the armor and tending to the horse?*

She suspected he would.

"I wish to browse through the crystals," she said. "So, I'm headed to the crystal shop."

He took a step back as if he'd been struck.

"You collect stones?" he said, shock in his voice.

Then he gave her a dazzling smile as if to make up for his initial reaction. "Or jewelry perhaps. Many ladies buy what they see as pretty rocks set in necklaces and earrings." He shook his head. "But this is not quality jewelry. I will take you to a store which has much higher quality jewelry. Real gemstones, such as emeralds, not cheap rocks such as the crystal sellers have."

*Does he not realize that the prize and value of a rock of any kind comes from the price and value that men have placed on it?*

Even some crystals were prized and prices higher than others. Mia prized her crystals for how they made her feel. But she wasn't about to explain any of that to him. Clearly, he saw no value in crystals.

"I do collect stones," she said. "At home I have a whole shelf of them."

*What would he make of that?*

"Really?" his eyes widened. "I would not have guessed. Do you wear them on your person?" His eyes looked her over as if searching for some and gleaned with intensity. "Perhaps in a pocket?"

"I have not worn them, but that is a lovely idea," she said. "I believe I should. Stones make me happy."

"Really?" His tone indicated he found that strange.

She found his intensity and reactions to crystals strange.

"No need to escort me," she said. "I expect I'll be browsing through the crystals for quite some time." She gave him a smile, wanting nothing more than to be away from this awkward conversation.

*Clearly, we are not compatible when it comes to crystals. He would discourage me from collecting them, like Jerry did.*

Likely he thought them woo-woo as well. Jerry's favorite description of the things she was drawn to. It had been a constant criticism from her former boyfriend, who'd wanted her to 'stop wasting money on that stuff.'

Funny how some men viewed buying crystals as a waste but spending hundreds if not thousands of dollars on fine jewelry gemstones was considered an investment.

*Was Sir Cedric like Jerry? I hope this is the only way there alike.*

She felt a headache coming on.

Right now, she really felt the need to be in a quiet and calming environment.

Being near the knights had her in a fuzzle, as if she'd drunk too much and couldn't get her head on straight, and her feels were all over the place right now.

The crystal shop would provide a place where she could clear her head, her body and her emotions from being around both handsome knights. There was just something comforting about certain kinds of stones. Perhaps she would purchase one, since she hadn't packed any to bring with her.

"Well, then, enjoy the rest of your day, mistress," he said with a bow. "I must attend my horse," he turned away then, as if dismissing her.

*Well. So, he's finally interested in attending to his horse. I wonder if the real Sir Cedric is different than the white knight for the show Sir Cedric, or if they are one and the same. I suspect they might be. But it's too early to know. I barely know him.*

She left the field headed for the crystal shop.

The fairgrounds had quieted until they were silent now that the jousts were over. Musicians had set up at the tavern and on stages to perform again. The bustle of the tiltyard had given way to the hum of distant voices, instruments being tuned, and the creak of wagons full of armor being hauled back to the knight's campsite.

Mia entered the crystal shop and immediately her tension began to ease. She ran her hand through a box of mixed stones, but there were too many types and colors, which would just jumble her energy more, so she refrained from that habit and removed her hand.

Calming stones, that's what she needed.

She moved over to the basket of rose quartz and picked up a polished pale pink stone which fit perfectly in her palm. She liked the feel of it and closed her eyes, listening to her body, and liking the stone even more, as she slowly began to calm.

The noise and scents of the fair seemed distant, here in the tent. She was glad for this small oasis amongst the visual, auditory, and scent stimulation. She closed her eyes and focused on the stone and on her breathing.

*Yes, this one. And perhaps one to wear?*

She opened her eyes again and looked through the hanging necklaces, found some with polished rose quartz on silver chains and tried them on until she had the one with the longest chain on. The polished heart shaped stone was beautiful, and it called to her.

*Perfect. But would it go with my gown tonight?*

*This longer chain will leave the stone down in my cleavage. That would hide it beneath the dress.*

She liked the idea.

Rose quartz was a heart stone, a stone of love. Perhaps it would bring the thing she most wanted. True love.

Handing them to the shop keeper, she said, "This one to wear and this one to place under my pillow."

"Then you will always be surrounded by love," the woman said, smiled at her handing her change and a bag with her stones.

Mia reached in, removed the necklace and placed it over her head. "Might as well start now," she said. "It can never be too early for true love."

"Wait," the woman said. She took out a bundle of white sage and said, "Let me sage you. Many hands have picked up these stones, and if you are wearing it right away before cleansing, this would be best."

Mia nodded and the woman lit the sage and proceeded to wave the smoke around Mia's head, neck, and down her whole body.

No matter what anyone said about her beliefs being woo-woo, the sage wafting around her made her feel better.

As if the woman had read her thoughts, she said, "You know native Americans believe in the cleansing power of sage. Many cultures use sage for cleansing."

Mia nodded.

"Here," the woman said, grinding the smoking ends of the sage bundle on a large seashell. "Take this with you. Cleanse when anyone has touched your stones, or your person." She examined the end to make sure it was out and then tucked it into Mia's bag.

"Thank you," Mia said.

"You're welcome," the woman replied. "Sleep well tonight."

Mia left the crystal shop and walked to the edge of the field. As she looked out and lingered, she recalled Sir Alaric's quiet directions. Past the tiltyard. Beyond the armorer's tent. Against the tree line. There she would find the barn.

Her steps carried her almost without thought, curiosity pulling her farther from the heart of the festival. She wanted to see the horses, the great destriers, up close, without the roar of the crowd. Wanted to see how they were cared for by the knights and squires. She told herself it was harmless, just a glimpse behind the spectacle.

The stables came into view: a long barn with stalls open to the cooling evening air. Horses snorted and stamped inside, their hides gleaming with sweat. The smell of hay, leather and animals was strong, but not unpleasant.

Mia slipped closer, careful not to draw attention. Then she heard voices.

"...you pressed too hard," came Sir Alaric's low voice, edged with steel.

Sir Cedric's laughter followed, bright and careless. "Pressed? I merely gave the crowd what they wanted. A show. *You*, on the other hand, ride as though every tilt were war itself."

"Every tilt *is* war, when a lance can break a man's neck," Sir Alaric snapped. "One day, your vanity will cost you more than bruises."

"Oh, come now," Sir Cedric drawled, the sound of him shifting armor accompanying his words. "You brood so heavily, Sir Alaric, one wonders how your horse bears the weight. A knight must win hearts as well as matches. The crowd adores me. And so," his voice dipped, amused, "do certain ladies."

Mia's breath caught. She froze, hidden in the shadows between two stalls, her heart hammering, aware of the heart stone against her skin.

Sir Alaric's reply was sharp, but quieter, as if he meant it to cut deep. "Charm is fleeting. Honor is not. And no lady worth her salt would mistake the two."

There was a pause, heavy with unspoken words.

Sir Cedric chuckled again, but the sound lacked some of its ease.

Mia pressed a hand to her chest, over the heart stone, unsure whether she wanted to hear more, or whether she dared be caught listening. She held her breath, pressing back into the shadows as the argument sharpened and then dulled into tense silence.

The horses shifted restlessly in their stalls, as if sensing her nervous energy.

She should leave. She knew she should. And yet, she stayed rooted, torn between the golden knight's reckless laughter, and the dark knight's grim warning, feeling as though whichever path she chose, it would change everything.

A squire passed by with a bucket of water, and she darted farther into the darkness between the stalls, her skirts brushing against rough timber.

Sir Cedric's voice came again, lower now, almost conspiratorial. "You take the world too seriously, Sir Alaric. Not every fight ends in blood. Sometimes it ends in a kiss."

Sir Alaric's reply was little more than a growl. "Spare me your pretty words. They're worth less than the hay at your feet."

Mia's pulse thrummed in her ears. The air between the two knights felt like a drawn bowstring, stretched to breaking. If they discovered her there, eavesdropping, she wasn't sure which would be worse, their anger, or the weight of their questions.

One of the horses tossed its head, snorting. She bit her lip, waiting for one of the knights to turn and see her. But neither knight moved toward her hiding place.

Slowly, carefully, she stepped back, her slippers barely whispering against the trampled straw. Another step. Then another. She edged toward the far end of the stables, heart racing.

Sir Cedric's laugh rang out again, though harsher this time. "One day, old friend, you'll learn that your brooding darkness doesn't win hearts. It only drives them away. Everyone is drawn toward the light of a white knight. No man can best me. I will always be victorious."

Mia slipped beyond the last stall, and into the cooler shade of the trees before she could hear Sir Alaric's answer to Sir Cedric's taunting and bragging. The shadows of the trees welcomed her as she hurried back toward the tents, her breath coming fast.



They hadn't seen her. She was certain of it.

And yet, even as she tried to shake off the tension of what she'd overheard, she couldn't silence the echo of their words. Sir Cedric's charm, Sir Alaric's warning. Both had been speaking of knights and honor. But in her bones, Mia felt the truth: they were also speaking of her.

## Chapter Seven

Mia hurried back to Finn's tent, once she was sure the knights wouldn't see her. Sir Alaric might have stayed in the barn to help care for his horse, but she was certain Sir Cedric wouldn't have as he would soon leave that to his squire.

She suspected he would have dumped all the work onto his squire already and left, before she arrived, if he hadn't been having words with Sir Alaric. He seemed to take the squire for granted. Much like a real prince might have the concept of different levels of classes and other people being beneath him.

*I'm pretty sure European princes aren't out in the barns mucking out stalls. That's what their employees are hired to do*

Though she admired the way Sir Alaric took care of his horse first and the way he treated his squire, she wouldn't fault Sir Cedric for behaving like a prince. She could see him in a movie role as prince charming. It was a role he would excel at. And he was so very handsome.

The horses were cooling down in the barn now and drinking water, and that was what Mia needed to do. Hot, and stickier than she'd been while watching the lists, she couldn't wait to reach the tent and cool down.

She and Lilly reached the tent at the same time.

"Well, hello," Lilly said. "Great minds work alike." She laughed. "Did you come back for water and to get out of this heat?"

"I did," Mia said. "I'm hot, tired, and sticky."

"You and me both." Lilly stepped inside first.

Mia followed and let the tent flap fall, for privacy.

"Wow, it's warmer in here than I thought it would be," Lilly said.

"Shouldn't a tent be cooler?" Mia asked.

"No idea." Lilly looked up at the canvas over their heads. "Must be this heavy canvas. I bet it doesn't breathe the way a modern tent would."

Mia was ready to peel off her sticky clothes. The heat was getting to her, bringing her usually high spirits down. She dug through the ice in the cooler, and extracted a chilled bottle of water, then opened the cap, and took several swallows. She flopped down and sat upon the cooler, brushing at the trickles of sweat snaking down the valley between her breasts.

This was supposed to be her vacation, her man-hunting, romantic, fall madly-in-love-with-some-gorgeous-guy vacation. Here she was, believing the promise of finding her soul mate. Thinking Sir Cedrick might be the one. But now she was unsure.

Right now, she was discouraged. Discouraged, sweaty, and thirsty. She glanced in the mirror and saw how red faced and sweaty she really was. How her red hair was full of tangles from the wind and that her lips were now chapped from their time in the sun.

"I've had too much sun," she said. She also had a headache moving in and wasn't up for any more time with the knights, handsome though they were. It was never going to work out. She and Lilly would go home Monday night, and she would again be without a boyfriend.

*These men are just playacting. None of this was real.*

She dropped her aching forehead into her hands as she moaned. "Oh, Lilly, why did you talk me into this weekend? What was I thinking? Life isn't a fairy tale." she said morosely, wanting to believe, but knowing fairy tale like things never happened to her.

"Because you can't sit around waiting for the love of your life to swoop in to carry you off," Lilly said with a shake of her head. "And because this weekend is supposed to be fun for you and me."

But that's exactly what Mia had been doing before this weekend. Passively waiting for her prince to arrive.

"Why not? We're surrounded by knights in shining armor," Lilly said. "Two of them seem to be interested in you, so maybe one of them will carry you off into happy ever after."

Usually, it was Mia carrying this line of thought, but right now she just didn't have it in her. She was surprised that Lilly

had picked the fairytale up and was carrying it for her, as if it was something important to Mia that she had dropped.

Lilly usually the practical one. She'd had to become practical after her mother died when she was young, and she'd become the one to cook and to look after her other siblings, to help her father. The eldest, she'd become mature at an early age.

The only time she cut loose was with Mia. And Mia didn't know what she would do without her. Lilly was the best friend she had ever had.

"I'm not saying it can't be one of them," Lilly said. "But you expect the perfect man to drop into your lap without lifting a single finger. That's not going to happen. You must let the guy know you're interested. Try to get to know him. See if things can grow from there."

"They're all just," Mia sighed. "So intimidating. And being argued over makes me want to run away from them."

"But it hasn't made you run," Lilly pointed out. "You've stood still and handled it well."

"It's not exciting, the way it is in my books," Mia said. "This rivalry between them. There's something which feels bad about it. Something is off here, between these knights."

"Really?" How would you know this," Lilly said. "I think you're letting your imagination run you into a different direction than usual. Think what are the facts."

Mia took a deep breath. "The facts are, I went to the barn, was going there to see the horses, but then I heard Sir Cedric and Sir Alaric talking in the barn, so I hid."

"Mia!" Lilly exclaimed. "You didn't!"

"I did," she said. "And I could hear them. They really don't like each other. It's not all for show. In fact, it's probably the truest thing they've showed us. And they're both interested in me. I feel like I'm accidentally stepped into some kind of private war."

"Now you *are* being fanciful," Lilly said. "These guys are hired to come here and act like they're at war, play acting. They may both be interested in you and that's causing friction, but I very much doubt there is some kind of actual war going on."

"Well, I don't like the way it makes me feel," Mia said. "Like some prize thing to be won and lorded over the other man."

"Then let them know that, and tell them to stop," Lilly said.

She made it sound so easy. Her practical advice always did.

"I'll try," Mia said. "It's so hot in here. I need to cool down."

Mia stood up and removed her sweaty skirt, chemise and bodice. Standing in her underwear had never felt so good.

"We need more air. This unusually warm spring day would make anyone cranky, and no wonder you have a headache. Keep drinking your water." Lilly cracked the back flap on the tent, on the side which faced the woods, so any breeze might enter.

"Thanks," Mia said. "I don't know why I thought this tent would be cooler. But then I've never stayed in a tent before."

"I thought it would too," Lilly said. She'd undressed down to her underwear. She pulled all the water bottles out of the cooler and took the cooler out through the back tent flap.

Mia assumed Lilly was going to dump the water. "I guess you're not worried anyone will see you in your underwear," she called as she started giving herself a fast sponge bath with a couple of bottles full of water.

The cool water felt so good on her overheated skin.

"Nope, not back here," Lilly called back. Then she shrieked and Mia heard water being dumped on the ground.

"Anyone who heard you will come running," Mia said as Lilly stepped back inside, soaking wet, and carrying the empty cooler.

"Well, that's one way to cool down," Mia said with a laugh.

"Indeed," Lilly laughed too. "It was cold."

Mia was correct that a shriek would draw attention, and soon, one of the knights who'd run up to the front of the tent. "Ladies?" He called in. "Is everything alright?"

"Yes, we're fine," Lilly called out to him. "Don't come in. We're dressing."

He coughed and then cleared his throat. "Very well then. Call out if you need assistance."

They both silently giggled now, their eyes wide.

"Yes, sir," Mia said, keeping her voice from giggling more. "We will."

Lilly pattered around the tent, shivering from the cool water still dripping down her hair and back.

"No doubt you'll be refilling the big water cooler with ice," Mia said.

"Yes," Lilly said. "I'll ask Finn where to buy ice after we head back out. It's a small price to pay to cool down in this heat."

"Why have you and Finn not discussed showering?" Mia asked. "Surely these workers, especially the men, get cleaned up somewhere around here. It must get terribly hot wearing all that armor."

"It slipped my mind," Lilly said. "I'll ask him when I ask about the ice. You're right. They're working here all summer and have to take showers somewhere."

Mia rubbed her ribs. "It feels so good to have that bodice off at last," she said. "I'm not keen on putting it back on."

Lilly held up her sweaty clothing and sniffed it. "Everything is too sweaty. I can't see us wearing these again. Let's wear

the gowns we wore last night. We only wore them for a few hours.”

Mia sighed with relief. “Yes, let’s do that. I’m glad I’ll be comfortable tonight. I won’t wear that bodice again. It’s made me too sore.”

“Likely from Sir Cedric using it as a harness to haul you on top of his lap!” Lilly laughed. “I don’t think they were designed for that.”

“No, I suppose not,” Mia said. “It also wasn’t helped by the wooden saddle either, which was quite hard.”

“Every time you are on your own here, something exciting happens with one or more of the knights,” Lilly said. “Have you realized that?”

“Well, it’s not my fault they come around when you aren’t with me.”

“I’m not saying it’s bad, Mia,” Lilly said. “It’s been good. And look at you being brave enough to sneak to the stables and then sneak back. You’ve become more daring!”

“Yes, I suppose I have,” Mia said.

“That is so much better than hiding in a book,” Lilly said. “Now you are starting to really live and have real life adventures. What will our next adventure be? Do you want to watch the third Jousting event for the day, do something else, or rest?”

“There’s no rest to be had, in here in this tent, at this time of day, with it so hot,” Mia said. “I’m for sitting in the shade of the pub, with something cool to drink, first, before we go watch the jousting.”

“Wonderful idea!” Lilly said. “Here, I’ll lace you up, then you do me, and then we’ll head there, afterward. We’ll wait until just before the jousting begins to go over to the jousting field. By then, the sun will be edging its way down.”

“I’m in mind of a cold root beer,” Mia said. “And a giant pretzel. Want to share one of those pretzels with me?”

“Yes! Sounds fabulous,” Lilly said. By now, she’d dried her body off, and dusted it with lavender scented powder, before putting deodorant on. She stepped into her dress, pulled it up and slipped her arms into the sleeves.

“You’re faster than me,” Mia said. “I’ll lace yours first.”

Lilly walked over and got laced up. “I’ll share my powder if you’d like some.”

“Thank you,” Mia said. “I love the scent of lavender.”

“Who doesn’t?” Lilly laughed. “This will help us not feel so sticky if we get hot again.” She handed the powder to Mia who applied it and then handed it back.

Stepping into her dress, Mia said, “I can’t have this dress laced so tight tonight. That would hurt.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Lilly said. “You just tell me when.”

Mia, with her dress now on, turned and Lilly laced her in, loose enough that she could still bend and breathe, and do anything else she needed to do.

“Thank you,” Mia said. “I’ll be more comfortable tonight.”

“Ready to head down to the pub for a cold drink?” Lilly asked.

“Yes,” Mia nodded. “Let’s go.”

They headed straight for the pub, and Lilly said. “I need to ask Finn about more ice, and about showers. I suspect, if we’re in the pub, the likelihood is higher of him finding us, over me finding him.”

“It did sound like he spends a lot of time there,” Mia said.

Once at the pub, Mia ordered a cold root beer and Lilly ordered a pale ale.

Few were in the pub, so the service was almost immediate. After a first sip, and both agreeing their drinks good, Lilly said, “There’s the bonfire masquerade ball tonight. I think we’ll have time to shop for masks, after the joust ends. And we’ll need a bite to eat.”

“This heat has stollen my appetite today,” Mia said.

“You’ve had quite a day, between the way it started out, the excitement of the first two jousts and the heat,” Lilly nodded. “I’m not surprised. But at least you had a good breakfast to give you energy for the day. Served by a handsome knight.”

“I did,” Lilly agreed. “I’m ready for some quiet now.”

“This *is* your quiet, my friend,” Lilly said. “Balls are not quiet affairs. Nor will the last joust be.”

“These jousts,” Mia frowned down at her mug. “They’re more dangerous than I thought they’d be.”

“I was surprised by that too,” Lilly said.

The second tent they shopped in had the largest selection of masks and men’s hats with plumes. As they stepped inside, Mia said, “I didn’t realize people would be so plummy!”

Lilly laughed. “I like your word for it. Yes, very much plumage will be about tonight at the ball. We too must be in our plumage!”

“I think you must have this one,” the proprietor said, holding up a mask, a filigree of black and gold, and offering to place it on Mia’s head.

She nodded her permission, and he sat the masque upon her.

Looking into his small mirror for shoppers, she saw the mask curling like wings over her eye and delighted, she said,

“What fun we shall have tonight!”

Lilly, distracted by a silver moon-shaped mask, reached out for it. “Yes,” she agreed, her focus on the silver moon.

Placing the mask on her head, she walked over to the mirror and peered over Mia’s shoulder. “I’m getting this one,” she said.

“But there’s no plumage on that one,” Mia said.

“It doesn’t need it,” Lilly continued to look in the mirror. “This one calls to me.”

“Then that is the one you must have,” the proprietor said.

After removing their masks, they purchased them.

“Allow me to wrap them for you,” he said. “The whole point of a masquerade is trying to guess who is behind which mask.”

“It sounds delightfully fun,” Mia said.

He wrapped the masks and handed them over. “Ladies, it has been my pleasure.” He bowed. “Enjoy tonight’s ball.”

“Thank you,” they both said. “We will!”

By the third Joust of the day, the meadow shimmered beneath the sunshine. Mia watched it shimmer and wondered if there was something wrong with her eyes since Lilly couldn’t see it. She wasn’t going to ask her anymore.

When she got home, she was going to make an appointment with the eye doctor, just to make sure there wasn’t something wrong with her.

The lists were alive again, with the thunder of hooves, and the cries of the crowd. Music floated from a nearby pavilion where dancers spun in bright skirts.

Mia and Lilly each used their new white parasols to keep the heat from beating down on them, making them sweat more than they already had been. It was an unnaturally hot spring day in May. One fairgoer said she’d heard on the news that it was a record breaker.

The sun bore down heavily. Mia was glad they’d refreshed themselves back at the tent.

They stood near the barrier rope, pressed between laughing children, and flushed noblewomen who fanned themselves.

Sir Cedric was on the field, his white and gold surcoat vivid beneath the shining sun. He tilted against Sir Rowan once more, the clash drawing gasps from the audience as both lances splintered mid-strike.

When Sir Cedric turned his destrier to salute, his eyes found Mia’s instantly, the corner of his mouth curling in that infuriating, magnetic smile.

A shadow fell across her.

“You shouldn’t let him charm you so easily,” Sir Alaric’s voice said at her shoulder. He stood beside her, close enough that she caught the scent of leather and steel. “He’s as dangerous as any foe in the lists. Perhaps more.”

“And you’re not?” Mia asked, tilting her head.

A hint of a smile ghosted his lips. “At least I’d tell you where the danger comes from.”

“Even if it comes from you?”

“Even so,” he nodded. “I would.”

Before she could reply, a ripple of movement passed through the crowd. A momentary disruption, like water disturbed by a stone.

Lilly, who’d been leaning over the rope to watch Sir Elias prepare for his match, suddenly flinched. She looked down.

“Lilly?” Mia’s voice sharpened. “What’s wrong?”

“Something brushed my ankle,” Lilly said. “I thought it must be a stray dog. It had a long skinny tail.”

They both looked down but saw nothing except dust and the hem of Lilly’s skirt. Then they heard faint chittering, quickly swallowed by the cheer of the crowd.

“What was -” Lilly said, but her words cut off as Sir Alaric moved past them in a fluid stride, muttering, “ratteem,” his gaze fixed on the narrow gap between two vendor tents behind the lists.

Mia stared after him.

*Ratteem? What does that mean?*

Sir Cedric was suddenly there too, after dismounting mid-cheer, and tossing his reins to his squire to catch.

“Stay here,” he told Mia.

Both knights vanished into the gap; the sunlight swallowed by canvas walls.

The crowd’s noise seemed to recede, leaving only the drumbeat of Mia’s heart.

Seconds later, Sir Cedric reemerged, his smile back in place, but his eyes sharper. “Nothing to worry about,” he said smoothly, as if the words could erase the tension in his jaw.

Then he flashed that brilliant smile for the crowd and went back to his horse.

Sir Alaric followed, silent, though his hand stayed close to the dagger at his belt.

They stood near the start of the lists and talked among the other knights. Clearly having something urgent to discuss.

Lilly shivered. “It wasn’t nothing,” she murmured, when the knights were out of earshot. “Whatever it was... it touched me

with its tail. Some kind of animal is loose.”

Before Mia could respond, the herald’s horn blew for the next match, and the crowd swept them toward the fence again.

But as she turned, she caught sight of the great horned owl once more, circling above the tents, silent against the blazing blue sky, keeping an eye on the people below.

\* \* \*

They headed back to Finn’s tent to prepare for tonight’s masquerade ball and ran into Finn returning from it. “I borrowed a mirror for you,” he said. “And have to have it back to Missus McCullers in the morning. And there are two fresh party gowns for you to wear tonight.”

“How lovely,” Lilly said.

“What a nice surprise,” Mia said. “Thank you, Finn.”

Inside the tent was a wooden mirror on a stand one of the ones from Missus McCullers costume shop. And the new gowns fit perfectly. A yellow one for Lilly and a green one for Mia.

Mia stared at herself in the mirror. She hardly recognized herself.

Her mask, a filigree of black and gold, curled like wings over her green eyes.

The green dress was a becoming shade and highlighted her wavy red hair which spilled down over her shoulders, like a waterfall, catching the lantern’s light.

“Knights, beware,” Lilly said, stepping beside her, wearing the moon mask.

Her yellow dress was the perfect shade for her, with her brown skin and brown eyes,

“Why?” Mia asked.

“We’re dangerous tonight.” Lilly winked which made Mia laugh.

“I don’t feel dangerous,” she said.

“But you are,” Lilly insisted. “And one or more knights is in danger - of losing his heart.”

At that, Mia smiled.

They stepped out of the tent and went toward the fair. On the way they would pass the knights circle.

A fire was already blazing and across from the fire from each other, Sir Cedric and Sir Rowan were already needling each other, their rivalry spilling past the earlier competition in the lists. Sir Rowan’s red and black tunic caught the ladies attention each time he gestured sharply; his voice clipped.

“Some of us win with skill,” Sir Rowan said, “not by charming the judges from a saddle.”

Sir Cedric’s grin sharpened. “Some of us don’t need charm to beat our opponents, though it helps with the company afterward.” He turned to Mia as she and Lilly had drawn closer and winked.

A sudden rustle cut through the laughter. Dry grass shifting just beyond the tree line. The sound was too quick, too deliberate to be the wind.

Sir Rowan rose, scanning the tree line.

“Probably a hedgehog,” he said, though his eyes stayed on the tree line longer than seemed casual.

Sir Alaric didn’t move, but his hand brushed the hilt of the sword lying at his side. “Hedgehogs don’t watch,” he murmured.

Mia glanced toward the sound and caught a glint. Two points of reflected firelight low to the ground.

But when she blinked, they were gone.

“You ladies look lovely,” Sir Cedric had turned his full attention to them. “I hope to see you at the ball.”

“We will be there,” Lilly said. “After we dine.”

“Excellent,” he replied.

As the ladies continued to the food tents, the delicious scents of roasting meat filled the air. Everyone it seemed was milling about. Likely with the same idea of eating before the ball.

“This will be quite a large ball,” Mia said. “Look at all the people!”

“The fair still closes at the regular time for the general public,” Lilly said. “And the only way to attend the ball is to wear a mask. No mask, no entrance. Finn explained that this is a celebration to start the season off right, a bonus for the employees.”

“Oh!” Mia said. “So, we won’t be dancing with complete strangers.”

“Even if we don’t know them, someone here likely will,” Lilly said. “That’s much safer.”

“I agree.” Mia was feeling better about the idea now. She mostly just wanted to dance with Sir Cedric and Sir Alaric.

Hopefully neither would get mad at her for wanting to dance with them both.

“I think we’d best find something filling to eat for dinner,” Lilly said. “Finn told me that some of the men who make mead will be offering tastes tonight, and I want something solid in my stomach before trying anything with alcohol in it. But not anything that could get on our fine dresses.”

“Good idea,” Mia said eyeing Lilly’s dress. “That yellow will show every stain if you drop the littlest thing. Mine is a little more forgiving but we still should try not to soil them. I’m thinking roasted chicken sounds good. It sure smells good.”

“I could go for that,” Lilly said.

“Are you ready for a night of enchantment,” a woman dressed as a fairy asked as they passed her on the way to dinner.

“Yes, I am!” said Mia.

Lilly laughed. “I am too!”

“Then come by the fairy grove before you dance,” she said, “And try some of pucks pink surprise punch.”

“Oh, that sounds dangerous,” Lilly said.

“Is this ball just an excuse for a drinking party tonight then?” Mia asked.

“No, it’s an actual ball with dancing,” Lilly said. “And all the knights are supposed to be there. Which one would you most like to dance with? If you must pick one.”

“I don’t know,” Mia said, not as quick to answer that as she had been before. “Sir Cedrick, I guess.”

Though she’d been leaning more toward Sir Cedrick since she’d arrived, it was becoming harder to do that as she got to know Sir Alaric.

“I would say you should dance with them all, but I don’t think there are enough men to go around for all the ladies that are here,” Lilly said.

They purchased chicken and biscuits, then found seats and enjoyed their supper. Both had eyed the corn on the cob but neither of them wanted to arrive at the ball with something between their teeth.

“Oh, I did find out where the showers are,” Lilly said. “There are two. One for ladies and the other for gents. And they are behind the costume shop, where the permanent buildings are. Finn said there are busy times and times no one is using them, like during the jousting.”

“I’m glad you found out,” Mia said. “And glad there is a building, not a curtain strung up outside somewhere. So then there should be lights, like in the costume shop.”

“Yes,” Lilly said. “I got the impression that is where they have water lines and electric run. The other areas of the encampment don’t have either one.”

They finished eating, cleaned their hands and bought some chocolate mints from the candy lady, then walked to where the ball was being held.

The central fire pit glowed orange and gold shooting flames up and lighting the area around it. Lute music wove through the air. Everyone was in costume with masks, some with cloaks, and dramatic flair. A violinist played a haunting tune near the beer cart, the tune drifting toward them.

Performers danced with flaming hoops, brightness against the darkening evening.

The atmosphere shimmered, drunk on fantasy, candlelight, and smoke.

Mia twirled, laughing. For the first time, she fully relaxed, ready to have fun.

*What could be better than a Renaissance Masquerade Ball!*

Sir Cedric found her first. He appeared as if summoned. Ever the white knight, he was dressed in light blue, silver and white, his half-mask white. He extended his hand silently.

Mia took his hand, and he led her to the dancing circle.

They began to move to the music and the world blurred around her as they moved.

He was smooth, effortless, his hand always just where it needed to be. But there was heat in his touch that wasn’t entirely comforting.

“You wear mystery well,” he murmured, his fingers brushing her back, as he twirled her.

“Thank you,” she said, her eyes catching a glimpse of the herald beyond his shoulder, all decked out in red and purple wearing a purple mask. The shimmer now over there, where he had stood, was a blur of red and purple wavering in the air.

“But there’s a shadow behind your eyes tonight,” he added as he’d been watching her eyes. “Something troubles you.”

“I’ve been seeing things,” Mia said cautiously, that shimmer distracting her from enjoying the dance with Sir Cedric.

*What is that?*

His lips brushed her ear. “Some truths are only revealed when you stop seeking logic.”

The music shifted, and then the song ended.

Sir Cedric bowed. “Another time,” he said. “We shall meet and dance again.” Then he disappeared into the crowd where the herald had been as the firelight flickered, leaving Mia to stand alone where he’d left her.

*He’s a tease, and he flirts with all the ladies. I wonder where he’s gone off to.*

## Chapter Eight

Mia wandered to the far edge of the camp, and stood at the treeline, looking up at the moon while moonlight spread over her hair and shoulders. She'd needed a break from the noisy ball, and the riot of costumes and colors.

"Walking alone?" Sir Alaric's voice came from the shadows, calm and low, but edged with concern.

Mia startled slightly but then smiled. "Just... thinking. The festival is... overwhelming at sometimes."

He stepped closer, the torchlight catching the gold threads of his courtly garb. "It can be," he admitted. "But danger likes the quiet corners. That's where it hides."

She glanced at him, feeling the pull of his presence, as strong as the pull to Sir Cedric had ever been. The pull to Sir Alaric was steady, protective, grounding. It did not make her feel she needed a break from him. "I suppose I'm lucky you're here, then."

Sir Alaric's dark eyes softened, and for a heartbeat, the world narrowed to the space between them.

He extended a hand, not commanding, just offering. "Stay close. For your own sake. I wouldn't want anything to happen to you."

He paused. "If you desire a quiet walk away from the party, I will walk with you."

Mia hesitated for a moment, looking into his eyes. Then, seeing only kindness and caring, she placed her hand lightly in his.

The touch was brief, tentative, yet electric, surprising them both. Her eyes widened and his deepened, yet neither spoke.

She was aware of her pulse and the warmth of his skin, the strength of his calloused fingers. The hand of a warrior who would protect.

They began to walk together, side by side, through the quiet trees. Shadows danced around them, but she felt a curious calm with him. If there were anger lurking here, safety followed in his steps.

A woman's shriek, followed by much loud laughter spread to where they were walking, and she turned her head. "No wonder I found the party to be loud."

"The more they drink, the louder it will get," he said.

"Do you ever wish for a life without all this..." she gestured vaguely toward the jousts, the magic, the chaos. "...drama?"

Sir Alaric lips quirked into a small, almost shy smile. "Sometimes. But then I remember why I'm here. And who I'm here for." His gaze met hers, unwavering.

Mia's breath caught.

The playful, teasing charm of Sir Cedric had its thrill, but Sir Alaric offered something entirely different. A certainty she could trust. He wasn't dazzling with flare. He was steady, reliable, and undeniably present with her.

A soft rustle from nearby drew their attention. Alaric moved instinctively in front of her, shielding her, his hand still lightly brushing hers.

He watched and whatever it was moved away, further back into the darkness.

"See?" he murmured, eyes flicking to hers. "Courage isn't the absence of fear. Choosing a companion means knowing who has enough to stand beside you when danger comes."

Mia's heart swelled, the tension of the moment melting into something warm and urgent. "Then I suppose I'm exactly where I need to be," she whispered.

Sir Alaric's fingers closed around hers, not in haste, but with deliberate care. "And I won't let anything take you away from it," he said softly.

The torchlight flickered across his face, shadows playing in his dark eyes, and for the first time, Mia could see what choosing him, in a world of chaos and magic would be like.

The great horned owl called from a nearby oak, its cry echoing over the meadow as if in approval, and Mia allowed herself to lean just slightly closer, a subtle closeness, tentative yet intimate, knowing that trust, and maybe something more, had quietly taken root under the moonlit sky.

She'd never in her life asked a man to dance. It had always been a wait for them to ask situation. For a date, for a dance.



But she was getting the feeling that if she didn't ask him, it might not happen.

Now she was working up the nerve to try to ask him.

Taking a deep breath, scared to ask, she dove in anyway. "When I came to this ball, I was hoping you would ask me to dance," she said softly.

So soft, he had to bend forward to hear her. Which brought them closer.

Not a bad thing, at all. Though she hadn't expected that, she'd just been feeling shy about asking him. Being closer was nice.

He gave her a big smile. "Milady, I would be honored to dance with you, if you'll have me," he said. "If you say yes, I will be the happiest of men."

*Oh my. So, he did have fancy manners when he wanted to use them.*

"Thank you, Sir Alaric," she said. "Yes, I would love to dance with you."

"And I will most happily escort you back to the ball now, for our dance, if you'd like," he said. "Unless you wish to extend our walk."

"I would like to go back to the ball and dance now," she said. "I feel most refreshed from our walk beneath the moon."

He smiled and then turned to escort her to the ball.

Something about being around Sir Alaric had made her feel bolder. Bold enough to ask for what she wanted.

And now one of her wishes was going to come true.

He led her back to the party and at the edge said, "We'll have to don our masks again to enter the ball area."

"I don't mind," she said.

After placing their masks on, they entered the party and moved toward the dance floor.

People made way for him, and a small circle opened around them, so they began to dance. With her eyes looking up into his, she didn't notice if there were any shimmers. In fact, she had forgotten all about the shimmers while she was with him.

As they danced it was like time and place and everything around them receded. There was only him and her and the music they moved to, as if in a dream.

When the dance was over, they stopped and she stood slightly breathless, only looking up at him. "I enjoyed this so much," she said. "I feel like Cinderella at the ball."

"You're glowing," he said. "As if lit from inside."

She beamed up at him, feeling the happy glow inside of her.

"You're a romantic," he said. "I'll bet you love fairytales."

"Why yes, I do," she said.

He smiled deeper. "Come with me, princess, and allow me to fetch you something cold to drink," he held out his arm.

She was more than happy to hold on and let him guide her. She still felt like she was floating on air.

They met up with Lilly and Sir Elias who had just finished dancing. He went with Sir Alaric to get the ladies something to drink.

"Have you satisfied both your wishes?" Lilly asked. "And danced with both knights?"

"Yes, I have," Mia said. "And it's been wonderful. A magical evening."

"I'm glad." Lilly watched Sir Elias getting her a cup of something. "I told him I wanted to try the mead. But not to let me get drunk. I hear it's made with honey and just want to try it."

"Oh, I didn't think to tell Sir Alaric what I wanted," Mia said. "I guess I'll be surprised."

"They aren't at the same bartender stand," Lilly said. "So, we might be getting different drinks."

The knights returned with mead for Lilly and fruit punch for Mia.

"It's nonalcoholic," Sir Alaric said. "I didn't know if you drank alcohol, or what your preference are, so I erred on the safe side. But if you want something else, I'll get it for you."

"Thank you," she said. "I usually drink wine or lemonade. Lilly is the one who likes to try all kinds of alcoholic beverages." She took a sip. "This is good."

"And how do you like the mead?" Sir Elias said. "Is it up to your expectations?"

"Way better," Lilly said. "It's sweet and smooth."

"I'm glad you like it," Sir Alaric said, then he turned to Lilly. "Mead can go to your head more than you think. So, sip on it."

"Yes, this is a sipper," Lilly said. "Want to try it, Mia?"

"Oh, I don't know," Mia said. Then curiosity got the better of her. "Okay yes, let me try."

Lilly gave her a sip.

"That's good!" Mia said.

After a bit, Lilly danced with Sir Alaric and Mia danced with Sir Elias. They all got along quite well, and the ladies were happy about that.

Then Sir Rowan asked Mia to dance, and she said yes.

Sir Alaric didn't seem to mind her dancing with other knights. At least he wasn't displaying any signs of jealousy. That felt much better than him and Sir Cedric fighting over her.

Maybe it was just that he didn't like Sir Cedrick.

He was talking to the blacksmith over in the corner when Mia finished the dance and was ready for a rest again, so she mingled and said hello to other cast workers she'd met.

But soon, she was ready for another walk. By nature, she was an introvert and needed to be away from crowds when her energy dropped low, to sort of recharge.

*I won't go far*, she thought, as she stepped away from the party again. *It will be fine.*

She looked up at the moon, and then watched the stars for a few minutes before starting to walk. It was a beautiful night, and one she would always remember.

Still feeling that glow of happiness, she reviewed the evenings happening so far, in her mind and didn't pay attention to how far she was walking or what was around her. She was too wrapped up in that happy glow.

Sir Cedric stepped from the shadows with the ease of someone who belonged to them, and she jumped, startled.

"I find you in the quietest places," he said. "First the water fountain and now the trees."

"They're the only ones that feel real to me here in this place," she said. "Everything else is make believe."

His blue eyes pinned her, roaming over her as he studied her. "You want real, Mia? Or do you want the fairytale version that listens to your heartbeat and answers it?"

She hesitated for a moment from answering, not truly knowing what she wanted.

"Sometimes a fairytale can become real, when a white knight comes along at just the right moment." He spoke before she'd had enough time to think and as he spoke, he stepped so close they were almost touching.

His hand skimmed her arm, a gentle brush across the tiny hairs which brought her arm awake and aware of his touch.

She inhaled sharp as her skin came alive with feeling. Then she shivered.

"I haven't stopped thinking about you," he spoke low. "From the moment I first saw you, you have filled my dreams."

"I don't know what's real anymore," she whispered.

"Then let me remind you."

He bent to kiss her, and his lips brushed hers soft and slow.

For a moment, Mia surrendered to his kiss, closing her eyes.

His mouth masterfully confident, he deepened the kiss, and she fully responded.

But as his lips lingered against hers, something felt off, his energy felt off.

She opened her eyes.

Sir Cedric's face.

*Was it flickering?* A shimmer at his temple, like oil on water.

*Who or what was she kissing?*

She pulled back, breath sharp. "What was that?"

He tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

But his smile didn't quite reach his eyes this time. And something in them frightened her.

He could see the fear in her widened eyes, so she hurried to make something up.

"There's something behind those trees," she said as she pointed. "Or someone."

"Never fear milady," he said with that dimpled smile and suddenly he seemed more solid again. "I shall kill thy foul dragon that stalks thee."

As soon as he had stepped into the darkness behind the trees, and she could no longer see him, she turned and walked away. She felt like being around people now, but not at the ball. Instead, she would wander through the shops, just for a short while. After that she would head back to the ball.

There was nothing new to shop for. She'd been to all the shops by now. But it was interesting how the shops looked different at night. Most were running masquerade ball specials, with lower prices on select items.

She paused and watched through the tent entrance gap of the fortune tellers' tent, as a woman sat down to hear her fortune. Then she headed for the knight's circle, wondering if she would find any knights there.

As she walked, she thought about everything that had occurred since she'd arrived. Running through it all in her head.

Something about Sir Cedric had gnawed at her since the kiss.

She thought of his perfectly timed compliments, the too-precise way he tilted his head.

*It was like he was a man performing the idea of affection, instead of feeling it.*

The owl's warning echoed again. *Roses without roots.*

Sir Cedric had given her a rose.

She paused near his tent, hearing something. Inside, voices murmured. One familiar, one not. Quietly arguing.

"You're playing too close, Cedric. You've been warned."

"She's useful," Sir Cedric said. "The owl's chosen her. If we play this right..."

Mia's breath caught. She didn't hear the rest.

"You forget yourself," the second voice hissed. "This isn't courtly games Not your bedroom playground."

"Come now," Sir Cedric said. "A dalliance does no harm and gets me closer to the girl."

"If the girl awakens the bond, she may not be stoppable. That's not what the Master wants. He would be angry."

Sir Cedric sighed. "She's falling for *him*, anyway. The brooding one."

"Ha! Sir Alaric? He's broken. Still mourning that Isolde girl. He'll fail again. He can't protect her."

Mia stepped back, twig snapping underfoot.

Silence.

The tent flap lifted. Sir Cedric's face emerged, golden, smiling.

Too late, she stuffed the feather into her pouch, as he saw her.

"Mia," he said smoothly. "Out for a walk? Not going back to the ball?"

She forced a nod. "Just... went shopping to clear my head. But they expect me back."

"Let me walk with you," he offered, taking her arm. "We will clear your head together."

The glamour shimmered around his face, but now she *saw it*. A faint distortion.

A shimmer like the heat over a fire. A flicker behind the eyes.

She brushed her hand against her pouch. Inside it, the feather hummed.

When she touched it, his smile faltered, just for a breath.

And behind the illusion, she caught a flash of something older. Sharper.

Something not quite human.

And he was now guiding her away from the ball, not toward it.

She pulled away and took a step in the other direction. "Actually... I think I'll head back to the ball. They expect me and will come looking."

He watched her with narrowed eyes. "Be careful in the dark, Lady Mia."

"I always am," she said.

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She stumbled back to the party, across twigs and a rock which hurt her feet in the fancy slippers, disturbed by what had happened.

Sir Alaric stood speaking with Sir Elias near the fire pit, their heads bent together as they spoke and nodded.

She stood catching her breath, wondering whether to approach them.

*And where is Lilly?*

She'd been dancing with Sir Elias the last time Mia had a glimpse of her.

But Sir Alaric had noticed her immediately and was already walking over to her. "Lady Lilly, you are pale. What is wrong?"

Her wide eyes looked at him. "I think Sir Cedric... I, I think he's not what he seems."

Sir Alaric glanced back at Sir Elias, who'd now followed him over.

They exchanged a look.

"Step over here with me and we shall speak of this," Sir Alaric said.

He moved her to a less crowded area, so their conversation could be more private, and Sir Elias joined them.

"Old magic," Sir Alaric said. "It doesn't work on everyone. Those with the Sight can see past the glamour."

"I don't have the Sight," Mia said. "That was my grandmother. I'm just... seeing shimmering in the air."

"You saw through him," Sir Alaric said gently. "That means you do."

Sir Elias nodded. "We've suspected for days. He's using something."

"This place," she said. "I see shimmers, but that's all. I don't really see anything like people or animals, just the air shimmering with something. With colors. But tonight, Sir Cedric had a shimmer. As if he was there and then suddenly not there and then there again. I had to come back here, away from him."

Sir Alaric nodded.

"Stay with Sir Alaric," Sir Elias told her. "I'm going to go get Lady Lilly."

"Where did she go?" Mia wrinkled her forehead, now worried about her friend.

"Just to the porta potties and there was a line, so I didn't leave her alone," Sir Alias said. "She insisted I come back and watch for you. She'll be relieved to see you."

"I needed to step away for some quiet," Mia said.

"Alone in the dark isn't a good idea here," Sir Alaric said.

Once Sir Elias stepped away, Mia looked around at the costumes and masks.

Sir Alaric turned to watch the crowd with her.

“I think he followed me there,” she said.

“Very likely,” Sir Alaric said.

“I kissed him,” Mia blurted out. “He seemed real, and then, he didn’t. It no longer felt like kissing him.”

Sir Alaric didn’t look at her but continued watching the crowd. “I know.” He said it softly with no jealousy, as if he already forgave her for kissing his rival.

“I wasn’t expecting it,” she said.

He turned to look at her, his dark eyes now soft with a look of kindness as if he understood, and he was listening.

“You think I’m naïve,” she said, while telling herself that yes, she had been naïve.

“I think you wanted to believe in the illusion,” he said. “Everyone does, once.”

They stood in silence as she took that in and decided he was right.

The masquerade continued, all the people in masks dancing, talking, drinking. She watched them and then said, “You’ve never worn one, have you? A mask? The kind that people show to the world when they are really someone else.”

“No.” He shook his head. “It’s not in my nature to play such games. I am who I am,” he said. “For good or for bad. But I have worn regret.”

He reached around to his side, pulled out a small dagger, flipped its point toward him and reached it out to offer it to her.

“Take this,” he said. “You might need it. Glamours can deceive the eyes, but cold iron cuts through. And there are dangers in the night for ladies who insist on walking alone.”

She looked down at the dagger in her hand. “I’ve never had a knife,” she said. “Other than my kitchen knives. I wouldn’t know what to do with it. And I have nowhere to carry it.”

“Many ladies carry one upon a belt, or in a purse,” he said. “Some hide them about their person in their dress.”

“I can’t keep your knife,” she said.

“It’s but one of many,” he said. “I collect knives. And there is an old wives’ tale which may or may not be true. That you must never give someone a knife, but you can allow them to buy it from you.”

“Sir Alaric, may I bestow my favor on you,” she said, touching the ribbon holding her hair back. “It’s only a ribbon, but I would be honored if you would wear it in the lists.”

“I am most honored Lady Mia,” he bowed down on one knee. “And will wear it to honor you.”

She handed him the knife and then reached back and untied her hair ribbon. Then she held it out to him.

Instead of taking it, he held out his arm for her to tie the ribbon around and waited while he did so before rising.

“I will protect you and your honor from this day forth,” he said and then took her hand. “You are under my protection now, and all here will see this and know it.”

Her heart leaped at his words.

*Goodness, she thought. I had no idea the giving of favors would be such a serious thing.*

“Thank you, milord,” she said.

It was exciting to have her own knight to protect her.

He rose and offered her the knife again. The seriousness in his face made her wonder why he was worried about her.

She took the knife and then held it in her hand, not sure what else to do with it. “Can you,” she paused. “Can you keep it for me for now and may we dance?”

“Of course,” he said with a smile.

She liked him ever so much more when he smiled.

He took the dagger back, placed it in his belt and held out his hand. “Milady, would you care to dance?”

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That night, in her tent, Mia removed her mask & stared into her own eyes in the mirror.

She wasn’t sure which unsettled her more: the growing danger...

Or how much she wanted to believe in Sir Alaric.

In her sleeping bag, Mia couldn’t sleep. She opened her book to read. But it had changed.

A line had been scrawled across the next page in black ink which covered up the words of the book

*The knight you dream of wears a borrowed face.*

Mia was finally asleep in the tent when she dreamed again. It began with the sound of hooves in the mist.

Mia stood alone in a moonlit glade. Mist curled around her bare feet. Trees loomed around her, tall and ancient.

An owl landed on a branch before her. Massive and majestic, with eyes like glowing embers.

It spoke in a deep, echoing voice.

“He wears a borrowed face. The gleam on his armor is not his own.”

Mia turned to ask what it meant. But the owl flew away.

In its place stood a knight in shadowed armor, reaching toward her with clawed hands.

She woke with a gasp, tangled in her sleeping bag.

\* \* \*

The next morning broke in a blaze of sunlight, the festival already stirring to life. Minstrels tuned lutes in the meadow, their bright notes mingling with the ring of blacksmith hammers, and someone began playing a flute.

The scent of fresh bread drifted from the vendors' tents as laughter carried on the breeze.

Mia and Lilly headed to the cafeteria to break their fast.

Looking about her, as they neared the food court area, Mia realized the energy was slightly off. Vendors were whispering, several of the knights they passed appeared tense.

"Something is going on," she said.

"What?" Lilly asked.

"I don't know, but can't you feel it? The tension in the air."

A knowing suddenly hit her.

*Something has happened.*

They passed two older women and heard the words, "Young woman missing."

Mia's eyes widened.

"I'll ask Finn what's going on," Lilly said. "Let's put our breakfast order in first."

"Okay," Mia said, and they got in the pastry and coffee line. "I can wait for it if you want to find him."

"Thanks." Lilly walked over to the tavern, the first place to look for him.

After Mia picked up their food and drinks, she turned to glance at the tavern.

Lilly paced near it, arms crossed, impatient. It looked like the tavern wasn't even open. Finn appeared shortly after, they spoke and then headed toward Mia.

She found a picnic table for them, sat everything down and waited.

"Morning Mia," Finn said.

"Morning Finn," she said. "What's going on?"

"A young woman is missing," Finn said grimly as he sat down. "Her name was..."

"Tess," Mia interrupted.

"Right. Tessa," he nodded. "Did you know her?"

"No," she said. "Her name just came to me."

He gave her a quizzical look but continued. "She's only twenty-one. A college student here to work this summer. She was supposed to work the bakery booth this morning. Never showed up."

"Drunk and wandered off?" Lilly asked, hopefulness in her voice.

"Doubtful." Finn said. "She didn't drink. And her bag was still in her tent. Phone too," he added. "Her car is here, but no Tessa."

Mia's fingers tightened on her mug. A strange chill ran down her spine. She just knew.

*Something bad had happened to Tessa.*

But what, she had no idea.

A few of the knights now stood nearby in hushed conversation. Sir Cedric was among them, speaking low to Sir Gareth and Sir Thorne. Sir Cedric looked up mid-sentence and caught Mia watching. He gave her a slight, knowing smile.

It didn't reach his eyes.

And again, she saw a shimmer. A short one and then it was gone.

"She's of age, so the police can't put a missing person out on her yet," Finn said. "She was last seen at the masquerade, so it hasn't been that long."

Lilly finished her breakfast roll. "I forgot something in the tent," she said. "I'm headed back to get it."

"Not alone," he said. "I'll go with you."

"I'll wait here," Mia said.

"You'll be all right here," Finn said. "Just don't go wandering off."

"If you want to go shopping, call me," Lilly said. "So, I know where you are."

Mia nodded and watched them go as she finished off her apple Danish. Wiping her hands on the napkin, she thought about the great horned owl. Pulling out a small notebook and pencil, she began sketching the owl from memory.

Sir Alaric approached quietly and looked down at her drawing. "You saw him again, didn't you?" he asked.

Mia didn't ask how he knew. "In my dream. He spoke this time."

Sir Alaric sat beside her. "That's no ordinary owl. It's a guardian spirit. Very old."

"Old magic," she echoed. "Like my nana used to talk about."

He held out his hand, closed around something. "I brought you this," he said. "Hold out your hand."

She held her hand out.

He opened his hand, to show her a smooth, flat stone carved with a symbol.

*The eye of an owl.*

“Keep this on you,” he said as he placed it in her hand.

The stone carried his warmth, and she felt it against her palm. A comforting warmth.

“It will ward off glours,” he said. “Maybe more.”

She turned it over in her palm. “Why are you helping me?”

“Because someone, or something, is watching you,” he said, his gaze intense. “And I don’t think it’s just me.”

His voice was quiet, but fierce beneath.

Mia felt heat rise in her chest. Not fear. Something else. Trust. Wanting him. Wanting his arms around her, to hold her and make all danger go away.

\* \* \*

Mia and Lilly wove through the crowd, skirts swishing, drawn toward the lists, where the knights were polishing armor, and testing lances, for the day’s tilts.

Sir Cedric stood near the horses, his white surcoat hanging open as he ran a cloth along the gleaming length of his helm.

When he saw Mia, his smile lit like sunlight on water. “Good morrow, my lady. Did you dream of my victory?”

Before Mia could muster a reply, a commotion erupted near the edge of the encampment and frustrated, fearful voices rose.

She and Lilly exchanged a glance and then turned to follow the current of people to a merchant’s tent.

The scene inside was... wrong.

Clothing and trinkets lay scattered across the ground as if swept aside by an impatient hand. A satchel lay ripped open, its contents half-chewed.

Tiny footprints, too small for a human child, too many to count, dotted the dirt in erratic, swirling patterns.

The merchant, pale and shaking woman, stammered to the gathered onlookers. “I, I swear, they weren’t here when I closed last night. And... and the sound. Like claws on wood. Chittering and chittering.”

Sir Alaric stepped forward from the crowd, his calm dark gaze sweeping the scene. “Mistress Young, was anything taken?”

She nodded. “Bread. Dried meat. And... and a silver hair comb.”

Sir Cedric appeared at Mia’s side; his voice pitched low. “It’s nothing you should trouble yourself over. Mischievous thieves, nothing more.”

But Sir Alaric’s glance toward Sir Cedric was sharp enough to cut. “You know better.”

Before Mia could ask what, he meant, the air shifted.

A whisper of movement brushed past her ear, and she looked up to see the great horned owl perched atop the merchant’s tent pole. Its feathers rippled in the light wind; its golden eyes fixed directly on her.

The world seemed to narrow to that gaze. The noise of the crowd fell away.

The owl’s beak opened. Not in a screech, but in a low, resonant voice she felt and knew more than heard.

*They watch. They want. Beware the dark between the tents.*

Then the owl was gone, lifting into the sky on silent wings, vanishing against the bright morning sun.

Mia turned to Lilly, her pulse racing. “Did you hear?”

But Lilly shook her head, frowning. “Hear what?”

From somewhere beyond the festival’s music and chatter came a faint squeak, like the sound Mia had heard before.

And this time, it felt closer.

\* \* \*

Early morning at the food court area the energy felt slightly off. Venders were whispering to each other and the knights appeared tense.

Mia picked at her croissant as Lilly paced nearby, arms crossed.

“Her name was Tessa,” Finn said grimly. “She was supposed to work the bakery booth this morning. Never showed.”

“Drunk and wandered off?” someone offered weakly.

“Her bag was still in her tent,” Finn said. “Phone too.”

Mia’s fingers tightened on her mug. A strange chill ran down her spine.

A few of the knights stood nearby in hushed conversation, Sir Cedric among them, speaking low to Sir Gareth and Sir Thorne.

Sir Cedric looked up mid-sentence and caught Mia watching. He gave her a slight, knowing smile.

It didn't reach his eyes.

\*\*\*

"Let's go and watch the jousting warmups," Lilly said. "Sir Elias told me when they'll be practicing."

"That sounds like fun," Mia said.

She and Lilly walked toward the practice field.

Lilly paused and put her hand on Mia's arm before they walked near enough to attract attention. "Mia, wait. It looks like they are fighting for real. Maybe we shouldn't go over there."

Sir Cedric and Sir Alaric were squared off in a verbal spar.

Their horses pawed at the dirt as if sensing the tension.

Sir Alaric scowled, making his dark features even darker. "You always did think you deserved more. Even the girl, now?"

Sir Cedric's smile sharpened, less charming and more deadly. "You're just upset she doesn't look at you like that."

Mia watched from the sidelines, heart pounding. Were they talking about her? Fighting over her? "These aren't rehearsed lines," she murmured. "This is *real*."

Sir Alaric threw the first punch, and it hit hard.

Several knights rushed to pull them apart and it was only then that he saw her. He stood still, the darkness in his eyes softer when they lit on her.

Sir Cedric's lip was bloodied, and he turned to look at her.

She could see that his pride was hurt as well. But she felt only a cold chill. Because when Sir Cedric met her gaze ...his eyes shimmered again.

Just for a second. But that second was long enough.

There was something very off about Sir Cedric and she needed to keep her distance from whatever it was that he was or had. It felt dangerous.

"Lilly," she whispered. "Let's go."

They went back quietly and then headed for the tavern.

Mia now wanted to be among people.

As they sat at the tavern after placing their order, Mia said, "Sir Cedric is dangerous. I don't want to be alone with him."

"What did he do?" Lilly squeezed her hand. "Are you okay?"

"He hasn't done anything yet," Mia said. "But I'm afraid of what he might do. There's something wrong with him."

"Okay," Lilly said. "Twin time activated."

Mia gave her a small smile, hearing the old code they'd used when they were teens which meant no one went anywhere without the other. It was how they kept each other safe from mean girls and boys with bad intentions.

But Sir Cedric wasn't a boy, and whatever was wrong with him seemed not of this world.

"You'll be okay Mia," Lilly said. "And we have Sir Alaric and Sir Elia who will look out for you too."

"Thanks, Lilly," Mia said.

"Always here for you, girlfriend," Lilly said.

"You're the best," Mia smiled.

"Hey, want to go watch the belly dancers?" Lilly asked. "We don't have to spend all our time around knights. There are other entertainments."

"That sounds like fun," Mia said. "I wonder if that's something we would ever be able to do?"

"After they perform, we can hang back and ask them," Lilly said. "This will be fun!"

They went to the stage where the belly dancers were to perform but they weren't on for another hour.

"What about archery?" Mia said. "I've always wanted to try that."

"Then let's do it!" Lilly said.

Walking to the archery field, Mia said, "We've spent all of our time watching these knights and we've missed other things"

"Well, that was your big dream, girlfriend," Lilly said. "Ever since you were a girl, you've wanted to meet a knight or prince charming who would whisk you away to a happy ever after. I was thinking this would give you the closest thing to it."

"Oh, Lilly you didn't need to make this weekend all about me?" Mia said. "The world does not revolve around me. This weekend should be about you, too."

"Are you kidding?" Lilly said. "Do not think I wasn't wanting a hunky knight for myself. No ma'am. I would not be turning that down." She laughed and Mia laughed with her.

"Come on, let's shoot some stuff. I hear that is a good stress reliever," Lilly said.

A young man in his early twenties was manning the archery field and as he had no archer lined up it looked like they'd have his instructions all to themselves.

He'd heard Lilly and said, "Archery is a great stress reliever. And did you know that woman shot archery in medieval

times? Women can be quite good at archery. It just takes practice. Care to give it a try?"

"We'd love to," Lilly said. "Set us up, and show us how."

"My pleasure," he said and then he proceeded to do just that.

After twenty tries Mia's arm was tired. And her thumb was scored with tiny little marks from the fletching of the arrow because she hadn't known at first how to put the leather thing on that would protect her hand.

She'd started shooting while he was working with Lilly who had one hundred questions and he'd given her the go ahead but not seen that she had no protection on that hand. It wasn't until she had shot half her arrows that he had turned, noticed her bare hand and said, "My lady! Stop! That must be painful!"

"It is," she said. "I don't know why anyone enjoys this."

"First," he gently took the bow and arrows from her and laid them down, then picked up the leather glove like looking thing that lay on the ground where it had fallen. "You must put this on, so you don't hurt your hand. So sorry. I thought you knew when I showed Lady Lilly."

After he got her geared up properly and shooting the right way, she finally hit the outer target once. "I'm not very good at this," she said, disappointed in herself.

"Not bad for a beginner," he said. "You just had a rough start. It will get easier."

"Archery is harder than it looks," she said.

"True, but it is easier once you know how," he countered.

"May I watch you shoot?" she asked.

"Of course," he said. "Happy to."

He geared up and began to shoot while they watched him.

The archer was so smooth he could shoot an arrow and have the next in his bow, ready to shoot, his movements smooth and unbroken, like a dancer.

They both applauded when he done, and he took a bow.

"How long have you been shooting archery?" Lilly asked.

"Since I was ten." He said. "I had a child's training bow and wanted to be Robin Hood."

"And look at you now," Mia said smiling. "Very impressive."

"Thank you," he said. "I hope you'll both try archery again. It's a lot of fun."

"Maybe after my hand heals," Lilly said. "Thank you."

"Thanks, Scotty," Lilly said.

"You're welcome, ladies," he said. "Enjoy the rest of your evening."

"We will!" Lilly called back to him as they headed back over to the belly dance stage.

Just in time too, as the dancers were arriving.

The ladies found seats and prepared to watch.

Fascinated by the music, the costumes and the dances, the belly dance hour flew by.

"Wow! That was awesome," Lilly said.

"It really was!" Mia stood. "Are you going to ask them?"

"Sure," Lilly said. "You always leave it to me to do the asking. I was proud of you for stepping up with Sir Alaric."

Mia shrugged but grinned.

"Ladies," Lilly said, as she stepped over to the dancers who were packing up their music and their props. "How hard is this dance to learn and do you know anyone who gives lessons?"

By the time they left they had two business cards and a bunch of places they could go on the internet to see the different styles of the dance and the different troupes and soloists.

"Wow, I had no idea there was so much to it," Lilly said. "So many different types and groups. We ought to take a class."

"That sound like fun," Mia said.

"Then we'll do it." Lilly nodded.

They headed back the way they had come.

The festival glowed beneath a sky deepening from rose to indigo. Torches burned along the paths, their flames flickering in the breeze, and the air was thick with the mingled scents of roasting meat, spilled cider, and trampled herbs. Music still drifted from the minstrel's tent, but the notes seemed muted under the heavy hush of approaching night.

Mia and Lilly lingered near the food stalls, laughing over the giant turkey legs they had finally ordered, when they realized the crowd around them had thinned.

"It's a Sunday night, do you supposed most people have gone home?" Mia asked.

"I'll bet a lot of them don't get Monday off work, so that sounds likely, and they don't have an evening joust on Sundays," Lilly said.

The larger festival square was still bustling, but here between the ale tent and a row of cloth merchants, the light was dimmer, the noise distant.



“It feels weird not to have so many people all around,” Mia said.

“And you’re usually not big on crowds,” Lilly said.

“Does Finn work here all week or just on weekends?” Mia asked.

“These are weekend events,” Lilly said. “During the week they can stay here and practice or make repairs to things, but they can also leave if they want. I’ll be a lot of them have two jobs. I ought to ask Elias what he does mid-week, and you should ask Sir Cedric.”

“Yes,” Mia said. “Good idea.”

The torchlight caught the first glint of eyes. Small, sharp, reflecting an eerie gold.

Then the creatures stepped into view. Half a dozen of them, dog-sized, hunched, their limbs elongated, their rat shaped faces grotesque. Short fur bristled along their bodies, their long, bare tails curling behind them.

The nearest hissed, showing teeth far too sharp for comfort.

“Pretty... soft... warm,” it crooned in a voice that rasped like dry leaves.

Mia and Lilly left up and backed away, almost tripping over their chairs, their skirts catching on the uneven ground.

One of the rat creatures darted forward—fast, impossibly so—closing the gap.

A blade flashed in the torchlight.

The creature screeched and stumbled back, black blood spattering the dirt.

Sir Alaric stepped into the narrow lane between tents, his sword already wet. “Run,” he ordered, his voice low but deadly serious.

From the other side, Sir Cedric appeared, white surcoat snapping in the wind, a dagger in one hand and a short sword in the other. “They’re not after your coin, ladies. Move! Now!”

The rat shifters regrouped, three of them circling to flank.

One hissed, “Wizard... wants...” before an arrow buried itself in its throat.

From the man at the archery range, who shouted, “They are hunting you. Go!”

Mia glanced up, hearing something. There, on the ridgepole of the ale tent, the great horned owl stood, wings mantled, golden eyes burning.

Its voice slid into her mind like a whisper from the dark: *Do not let them take you. Trust the shadow, not the light.*

Sir Cedric caught her arm, pulling her toward the square. “Don’t listen to it,” he said sharply, but there was a flicker of something, was it fear? In his eyes.

Behind them, Sir Alaric’s blade sang as he met the first charging rat creature head-on.

They ran toward Finn’s tent, not knowing where else to go. As they started to pass the knights tenting area, Sir Elias called out, “Over here!”

They ran toward him, and he lifted a tent flap up. “Quick! I’ll guard you.”

They ran inside. He let the tent flap fall, and they heard him call to Gareth.

Holding onto each other, with wide eyes, they both trembled.

“Lilly, I’m scared!” Mia said.

“What were those things?” Lilly said. “Like something out of a scary movie!”

“I don’t know but I want to go home,” Mia said. “Where it’s safe.”

“But Mia, those things are out there,” Lilly said. “We can’t go out there.”

Mia nodded.

They finally sat on a cot, close together, listening and watching. Every so often Sir Elías would poke his head in the tent look around, nod and then pull his head back out. The two knights were covering both side of the tent, nothing was going to sneak past them.

The tent’s heavy canvas muffled the clamor outside, but not completely.

Shouts and the occasional metallic ring of steel still filtered through; reminders of how close danger had come.

Mia and Lilly sat side by side on the cot, skirts gathered in their laps, hearts still pounding. They didn’t speak any more, they only sat and listened. As if listening would keep them safer or let them know what was coming.

Exhaustion finally had Lilly resting on the cot and then she fell asleep.

*I don’t know how she does that,* Mia thought as she looked at her. *There’s no way I’m going to be able to sleep.*

But Lilly could sleep through the most stressful situations. It was as if that was her built in response to stress. Mia always knew when Lilly was upset because she would sleep and sleep and not want to do anything.

Hours later the other knights were back, and all were at Sir Elías’s tent either inside or outside guarding it. Lilly was awake now and watching silently from where she lay. She didn’t sit up.

Sir Cedric paced near the entrance flap, his white surcoat streaked with dirt and something darker. His hair was damp at the temples, his jaw tight.

“You should never have been alone,” he said, his gaze fixed on Mia, his words were meant for her alone. “It’s too dangerous now.”

Sir Alaric, leaning against the tent pole with his arms crossed, gave a sharp snort. “And whose fault is that? You knew they were getting bolder. You should have had a watch on them from the start.”

“They’re not *your* responsibility,” Sir Cedric shot back.

Sir Alaric’s dark eyes narrowed. “I made them mine when I saw the wizard’s creatures closing in.”

She stood up from the cot, the word *wizard* lodging in Mia’s chest like a splinter.

“So, you *do* know what they are,” she said quietly. “What is a rateem?”

Both knights froze.

Lilly’s voice was sharper. “And you know who this wizard is.”

Sir Cedric’s gaze flicked to Sir Alaric, sending a silent warning to him. “Names won’t help you,” he said. “Staying alive will.”

Sir Alaric pushed away from the tent pole. “You don’t get to decide what they know.”

He turned to Mia. “The rateem creatures you saw serve someone who wants something from this festival. Something valuable enough to risk open hunting. You saw how they moved. They weren’t after anyone else.”

Sir Cedric stepped between them, his hand brushing Mia’s arm. Not quite possessive but claiming space. “Don’t listen to him. His shadowy half-truths will only get you killed.”

The flap opened and Sir Elias entered, his blue-and-silver tunic dusty, his expression tight. He stepped over to Lilly and knelt, his voice pitched low. “They’ve scattered for now, but this won’t be the last attempt. I’ll see to it you have guards tonight.”

From outside came the distant call of an owl. Low, resonant, unmistakable.

Mia’s skin prickled.

Sir Alaric’s head tilted toward the sound.

Finn, ducked into the tent. “I’ve packed up your stuff and brought it,” he said.

“Thanks, Finn,” Lilly said.

He placed each of their bags in front of them and stood in front of Mia. “Those things tore a lot of stuff up.” He shook his head then looked at Mia. “Sorry about your book. I don’t know why they did that. And your clothes are in bad shape.”

She unzipped her bag and lifted out her paperback which was in shreds. She held it up by her fingers. “Do they shred stuff to make nests? Because they didn’t take it with them.”

Lilly was sorting through her bag. “Only a few of my things got shredded,” she said.

Sir Thorne stepped into the tent.

Mia glanced at him and scowled. *Now he shows up. He’s never around. Lot of help he is.*

She dumped her bag on the bed and picked up piece after piece of underwear, socks, t-shirt and pajamas. “Looks like they shredded all of mine.” She shook her head. “Geesh, I sound like I’m telling a very bad version of Goldilocks. Look mom they took all of mine.” She sat shaking her head and looking at her things. “There’s nothing left worth taking home but the bag. I’m surprised they didn’t shred that too.”

“Not enough of your scent on it,” Sir Thorne said.

“What?” she looked at him.

“They hunt by scent,” he said with a wry smile.

*Is he trying to make me afraid?*

She watched him without speaking, then turned away to look at Lilly, while the knights grumbled amongst themselves. None of them were getting any sleep, except Lilly, and everyone was tired.

*I’m not going to let him scare me. I’m tired of being afraid. I have Lilly here with me, and all these knights protecting us. I’m going to be okay, and when the sun is up tomorrow, and those things are back in their dark places if not dead, Lilly and I are going home.*

“Looks like I’m stuck in a princess dress,” Mia said. “But I’m supposed to turn this in.”

“I’ll let you borrow my hoodie, and erm, unmentionables,” Lilly said. “Anything you want to borrow.”

“But you didn’t even bring a change of clothes,” Mia said.

“I’ll wear what I wore here, and you can wear my pajama bottoms and my hoodie,” Lilly said. “It will be okay Mia.”

“Our cook is going to get up early and fix you breakfast,” Sir Alaric said. “I’ll bring it to the tent, and you can eat here before you get on the road.”

“Thank you, Sir Alaric,” Mia said.

“Yes, thank you,” Lilly said and then she laid back down. “I’m going to try to get some sleep, so I won’t be sleepy driving us home.”

“Okay, yeah, there’s nothing to stay up for,” Mia said. “Sleep.”

Lilly gave her a thumbs up and then closed her eyes.

The other knights filed out of the tent and Sir Alaric was the last to go.

“Wait,” Mia said. “Can you stay and talk to me?”

“Yes,” he said, then he sat on the ground and folded his legs.

He had to be tired.

“So many strange things have happened this weekend for which I have no answers,” she said. “Can you help me to understand what’s been going on?”

He closed his eyes and nodded. Then opened them again to look at her.

“Ask away,” he said. “And please, just call me Alaric. The Sir is just for out there in the Ren Faire.” He waved his hand. “Not between you and me.”

She smiled. “Thank you, Alaric.” She glanced down and then up again. “Is there a you and me?”

His eyes searched hers. “Do you want there to be?”

“I think I would like that,” she said. “If you do.”

“I know I would like that. You’ve just been through so much.” His eyes searched hers again, assessing. “How are you doing now?”

“I was afraid before,” she said. “But not right now. You stopped them and we are protected. So, I guess I’m doing okay, considering.”

“You’re doing great,” he said. “Considering.”

“From when I first got here things have been strange. First, I dreamed of an owl, and one showed up and looked and me. Then I kept dreaming of the owl, and the real-life owl, it started talking to me.” She frowned. “I probably sound crazy.”

“Not crazy at all,” he said. “I have seen that owl. It watches you. It follows you. I’m not surprised at all that it talks to you.”

“But the crazy thing is,” she whispered. “I can understand what it says.”

“You’re not crazy, Mia,” he said. “I have seen things that no one can understand. And this place, these fields and these trees draw strange men and creatures here.”

“I get these feelings, and what my grandmother used to call the knowing. When it happens, I just know something, just she used to. I can’t explain it to you.”

“You don’t have to,” he said. “It’s one of the psychic senses, and in olden times was called the second sight. You might see something or hear something or know something and then it happens. It’s said to be passed down through bloodlines.”

“Well, my nana must have given it to me then, because mother never had a fraction of it. I had to pretend I didn’t so she wouldn’t flip out and tell me I was crazy or lying.” Mia shook her head. “So, I just shut up about it most of the time. But it’s gotten stronger here.”

“A lot of things have gotten stronger here,” he said. “Madame Merlina left yesterday before it got dark and said she wasn’t coming back. And we lost our costume mistress as well. She told the owners that her sciatica was acting up and she needed to be on bed rest. Hinted at retiring and not coming back.”

“Do you think they read their cards, and the readings told them to go?”

“I think both women are wise in many ways, and something told them,” he said.

“Well, I wish something had told me. Having those things chase me was terrifying. I may never sleep again without nightmares.” She yawned. “Even though I am exhausted.”

“You need to sleep,” he said. “I won’t let anything happen to you. Before you go to sleep, can I have your phone number?” He pulled his cell phone out of his pants pocket.

“Sure,” she said and rattled her number off to him.

He put it into his phone and said, “I’m going to call it, and then you’ll have my number. Any problem, any problem at all, anything that spooks you, you call me.”

“Okay,” she said. “Thank you.”

They’d brought another cot into the tent for her to sleep on as Lilly was on Sir Elias’s cot. He pointed to it. “Why don’t you get comfortable. I’ll stay in here with you and keep watch. You have a knight outside patrolling, and he gets relieved in an hour with the next one. We will keep watch while you two sleep.”

She got up went over and got settled, but then after staring at the tent roof, turned to him and said, “Could you come over and hold me?”

“Yes,” he said. Then he started to get up. “But it’s going to be close, both of us on that little cot. They aren’t really made for two.”

“I don’t mind close,” she said. “In fact, I’d like that very much.”

“You know Mia, anything you want or need, all you have to do is ask.”

“That’s really nice of you,” she said, as he settled in next to her and wrapped his arms around her enfolding him with his strength and his warmth. “This is really nice.” She smiled and closed her eyes. Her body started to relax as she got warm and soon, she was asleep.

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Nine

“Breakfast is served,” Alaric called as he carried in their food.

Lilly and Mia both woke up. Lilly sat up immediately and Mia rubbed her eyes.

Sir Elias had taken his place inside the tent watching over the women and he stood. Pulling a trunk over between the cots he said, “This will do I think.”

He told Lilly, “I’ll escort you to the porta potty and back, once you’re ready.”

“Yes,” Lilly stuck her shoes on quickly. “More than ready.”

Sir Elias laughed. “Thought you might be.” He opened the tent flap for her. “Did you sleep well?”

“Like a log,” she said as she stepped out.

“She’s lucky that way,” Mia said. “I slept once you were holding me, and I didn’t dream at all.” She yawned.

“I’m glad,” Alaric said. “Do you want to eat now or head to the porta potty?”

“Porta potty,” Mia said. “You know women. Always have to go. I know it’s a pain for you guys.”

“Why would your need to go be a pain for me,” he said.

“Oh.” She sat up and put her shoes on. “Well, it was for my ex. Any time we took a day drive anywhere it was a major deal if I need to stop two hours down the road.”

“Your ex sounds like an ass,” he said. “Unless a woman is keeping a man from going when he needs to go, there is literally no pain for the man.” He shook his head.

She laughed. “Well, now that you put it that way. Okay I’m ready.” She stood. “But if it’s daylight, why do we need an escort?”

“You’ll need one while you’re here,” he said. “Should have realized that before.”

“That girl, her name was Nessie. Did they ever find her?”

He shook his head. “No.”

Soon they had eaten breakfast, said their goodbyes and there was nothing left to do but put their bags in the car and head out.

Sir Elias loaded the bags in the back and then came around to Lilly and took her into his arms. “I want you to drive carefully,” he said. “And let me know when you’re home.”

“I will,” she said.

Then he kissed her.

Mia smiled watching them. “It’s good to see her happy. He seems like a good man.”

“He is,” Alaric said. “I wish you’d had a safer environment this weekend. And I hope the good will outweigh the bad.”

“Well, I met you, and that part has been all good,” she said.

He smiled down at her and said, may I kiss you milady?”

“Yes, you may.”

He slid his arms around her and dipped her in a kiss which took her breath away. She kissed him back as if her life depended on it. And because she didn’t want to leave him though she did want to leave this place.

They came up for air, and then he let her go and said, “I’m glad you’ll be home safe soon. You’ll call me once you get home.”

It wasn’t a demand, for he wasn’t bossy, or a request, because he wasn’t wimpy. It was more a quiet expectation that of course she would.

“Yes,” Mia suddenly burrowed in close as she could get, next to his chest and within his arms. “The minute I get home.”

He gave her a big squeeze and said, “After you’ve locked all your doors and secured all your windows.”

She raised her head leaned back and looked at him.

“What? You thought your knight knows nothing of modern security?” He laughed. “We need to get to know each other in the mundane modern world as well, my love.”

“What if we find out we aren’t suited for each other in the mundane world?”

He smiled down at her with love in his eyes. “In any age and era, I could love you Mia Louise Harkness. Your heart and soul are ageless, and love doesn’t care what year it is.”

“You are the most romantic man I have ever met,” she said, smiling up at him with tears in her eyes. “How did I ever get so lucky?”

“I’m the lucky one,” he said. “And I’ll never forget it.”

“Come on, you guys,” Lilly called from the driver’s seat. “We do need to get on the road.”

They pulled apart and then, placing his hands on each side of her face, he bent to kiss her, soft, gentle, sweet. A kiss with as much love and caring that he could put inside, to hold until they could get together and do it again.

Mia didn’t remember much of what came after that, other than the silly smile she’d carried with her to her side of the car, as she’d gotten in, and waving to him as he stood there watching and waving back.

She had a new boyfriend who was a real honest to God knight, not a man playing a knight for a movie or on the stage. Not a man pretending anything. He’d always been honest with her.

He’d chosen her and she’d chosen him. She didn’t know what the future held for them, but she knew he would protect her if he could, and he would be there for her when he could.

That seemed an almost impossible thing to find in the modern world and she felt like the luckiest woman alive.

Mia was living her dream.

THE END

# Acknowledgments

It takes a team to bring a book to life so readers can read it, and this is especially true for a disabled author trying to write a book.

This story was originally started before my stroke in 2023 and was only 13 pages long at the time. It took two months before I could read a simple text message, as my eyes had issues, so I listened to audiobooks. Tried citation but that's not much good if you can't read what you wrote. Eventually with good medical care especially neural PT, I was able to start writing new pages again and in 2025 started putting new books out. It's been a long two years and feels so good now to be back.

First, and most of all, I thank God that I am alive today and that the blood clot in my brain did not kill me. The Billings Clinic saved my life and I am so very thankful for them. I'm also thankful for all my friends, family, and my readers for the many prayers, cards, messages and flowers. I've never felt so loved and it was this love which helped me to heal.

Every day we are alive is a beautiful and a gift I am thankful for.

This book was written for a special project and the how and why is almost a story itself.

This project tapped me on the shoulder after I finished Montana Delta Rodeo Cowboy: Bodyguard Protector. I literally had just finished filing and putting away everything from the book as it was done and had released in July. Sat back in my chair and needed to what book project to work on next. I logged onto Facebook for a quick five minutes while I was thinking and what popped up on my newsfeed (in more than one place) was an invitation to write a fundraising book. The project would raise funds for victims of the Texas flooding. It felt like a tap on the shoulder.

Talk about divine timing. Ask God and your guardian angels, hey what project should I start next?

Viola. Here is your answer.

I had goosebumps. Sent a message saying yes, I wanted in, I wanted to help. Then I was in.

The next question, what book am I going to write? I looked through every book I'd started (12 of them to choose from) This one had few pages, but it just kept jumping out at me. Why? About the same time I was seeing romantasy everywhere every time I went online. Romantasy is such a popular genre right now, and though it's a new one for me, okay, yes, I'm doing this one. Maybe it will have a wider reach and help out more than one of my others. I read through those 13 pages and got excited. It's been fun writing this book even with the short deadline to get it done and surprisingly to me, did not bring the stress which sometimes comes on a short deadline. Was this book meant to be? For me, it was. Now I hope that it can help some people.

This one is for them and for you, my readers.

Thank you to everyone involved in the project. First thank you to the wonderful Skye Turner for creating this wonderful project, and for inviting me. Thank you to Amy Briggs who did the cover (I love the heroine's hair and the knight is so handsome just like I pictured him) and thank you to all who are reading the ARCs and to promoting all of our special fundraiser books.

Renaissance Fairs are a thing I love and I've attended a couple.

I've also been a member of the medieval reenactment world of the SCA (Society for Creative Anachronism) which I enjoyed playing in for many years before my stroke. The list of my friends there is long. My household in the SCA is Shadow Legion, a mercenary fighting and service household. Bobby Buls taught me primitive archery many years ago, and my household has a knight in charge and many squires. I've tried on chainmail and a helm and let me tell you that armor is heavy an hot in the sun.

For the jousting on horseback research I had to look outside my reach of friends and spent hours watching jousting videos. It is an incredibly dangerous sport when using solid poles with metal tips in full contact jousting. This is not what you will see at Renaissance Fairs. This part of the book is fictional using real life research examples. My thanks to all the men in those videos. Those guys are amazing.

Thank you to my VA Melissa Ammons.

To my cover designer Amy Briggs.

To all my ARC readers and reviewers.

And to Sara Reyes for marketing advice and promoting my books.

Thank you to my family, especially my dad Jack Bishop (RIP), my sister Kim, and my sons, Wayne and Josh, for their support and encouragement all through the years from day one.

I must give a great big thanks to Mike, my husband of 44 yrs, who likes to say he's just the 'bus driver.' He is so much more. I could not have written this book without him. He has been my rock since I became disabled and has gone above and

beyond without complaint, encouraging and helping me. Now that is love.

To all of my readers, new and longtime, thank you for giving this new book a chance and for supporting our fundraiser. Writing in a new genre for me isn't the easiest, there is a learning curve, but it has been fun. I hope this story is fun for you too.

My infinite love and gratitude to you all.

I couldn't have do this without you.

Love,

Debra

# About the Author

Debra Parmley is an adventurous, multi-genre author and world traveler who, after living for 23 years just outside Memphis, in Bartlett, suggested to her husband that they not wait for his retirement to follow one of their dreams. In 2020, they sold their house and moved into a 43-foot motorhome full-time to travel the U.S.

Published since 2008, this bestselling, award-winning, multi-genre author has published more than 50 books.

A Gemini, born June 7th, and sharing a birthday with Prince, Debra loves purple, polka dots, imagining stories, and playing with words.

Debra married her high school sweetheart, whom she asked out on a five-dollar bet. She has been married to her Air Force veteran husband for 44 years. Debra enjoys writing military romantic suspense and making sure her veteran heroes have a happy ever after that will last.

She also writes historical romance, contemporary romance, dystopian romance, urban fantasy romance aka romantasy, fairytale romance, holiday romance, poetry, and nonfiction memoir and travel tales.

Being an adventurous author and world traveler, Debra has visited over 13 countries and even escorted a bus full of clients through Scotland when she worked as a travel agent.

She has swum with dolphins off the island of Moorea in French Polynesia, walked the plank of a pirate ship off the island of Grand Cayman, sailed the seas on many cruises, ridden the cog train to the top of Pike's Peak, and lived in their motorhome on the sandbar known as Hatteras Island, NC.

She likes to climb lighthouses because she is afraid of heights, and she is always determined to try.

In June 2023, Debra was faced with new challenges after a blood clot in her brain disabled her. In the summer of 2024 she moved near Chapel Hill, NC to receive neural PT at UNC, and became a North Carolina author. She continues to write and travel and she winters in Florida.

You will find danger, action and adventure, and romance in her stories, backed by the belief that "every day we are alive is a beautiful day" which is a part of everything she does with her writing and her life.

As Debra Bishop, she writes fairytales and children's stories.

You can read about Debra's travels on her Beautiful Day Traveler blog <https://beautifuldaytraveler.wordpress.com/>

She also writes *Tales From the Trailer* travel articles for Fresh Fiction and *Cover Model Corner Interviews* for Affaire de Coeur magazine.

Follow Debra's Beautiful Day YouTube Channel: [youtube.com/channel/UC27hTWse4gLJxTETQw6i7xw/](https://youtube.com/channel/UC27hTWse4gLJxTETQw6i7xw/) for travel videos, videos of Debra reading first chapters from her books, and some poems.

For more about Debra visit

[www.debraparmley.com](http://www.debraparmley.com)

As Debra Bishop, she writes fairy tales, fantasy, and children's books.



# Also by Debra Parmley

Book 1

Book 1

Book 1

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Vague Directions: Into the Woods

Chivalry on the Meadow - 2025

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To Catch an Elf: Pennsylvania Fighter Pilot

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- Everything Begins in the Belly
- Twilight Dips

**WRITING AS DEBRA BISHOP:**

The Sweetest Day - Hansel and Gretel fairytale

**Children’s:** coming soon