

Yellow Brick Roadkill

by
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*Lucy McGinnis inexplicably finds herself in a
strange land surrounded by strange creatures.*

Happily, though, there's a super cute guy there.

*Not to mention a talking mouse, a snobby robot,
and a flamboyant, blue-skinned actor.*

*Oh, and don't forget the magically evil
beeyotch who wants to kill her.*

She's ready to leave any time now, thanks.

Chapter One

Lucy McInnis slammed on the brakes when the tree appeared out of nowhere. She must have drifted off to sleep at the wheel, swerved off the road and into a field.

But that was impossible.

Lucy was way too worked up to be sleepy.

And, obviously, way too worked up to be paying attention to what was right in front of her. In this case: a large tree. Solid and unyielding.

Possibly oak.

As she hit the brakes her Toyota caught a sliver of ice and the car spun out of control toward the tree. Lucy instinctively put her hands up to her face in a feeble attempt to protect herself from the inevitable crash.

But no crash came. Her car seemed to pass directly through the tree into complete darkness for a while, the Toyota still squealing and revving. Then, suddenly, the car was on a bumpy surface. Bright light streamed through the windshield, blinding her. The car jolted as it hit something more substantial than a road bump and Lucy slammed her brakes

on again.

This time, the car skidded to a halt.

She slapped the gear shift into park and pressed herself back into the seat, feeling her heart beating like it wanted to escape from her chest. Her knuckles were literally white, still gripping the steering wheel. She gingerly removed her fingers one at a time.

As she slowly calmed herself down, she frowned. It was vaguely annoying that she'd just had a brush with death and her life never bothered to flash before her eyes. Isn't that something that was supposed to happen? Kind of a last slide show? This is who Lucy was and what Lucy did and now none of it matters because she's seconds away from death.

But she wasn't dead. She was in one shaky, somewhat traumatized piece. Sitting in her car on a deserted dirt road with the afternoon sun beaming down on her.

Her frown deepened.

That was odd.

She'd originally been on a highway. True, not a very populated highway due to the fact that it was a toll road, but it was definitely paved and not made of dirt like the one she was currently on.

Also, she'd been driving that highway late at night.

She cranked open her window and squinted painfully up at the sky. That was the sun, all right.

And what about that tree? She unfastened her seatbelt so she could turn fully around to look at where she'd come from.

All she could see were a couple of bushes. No big scary oak tree in the middle of the road.

She chewed her bottom lip and tried to rationalize things. She had been under a lot of stress. She'd been driving home after getting laid-off from her job. The thought was surprisingly comforting.

Work-related stress, she thought. *That has to be it.*

She shook her head, feeling much better. She could deal with stress. She'd make an appointment at the doctor's. Maybe she could get set up with some lovely stress relieving pills. Valium, maybe. Yes, that would be her first stop after applying for unemployment insurance. The doctors.

Everything would be just fine. Today would just be an unpleasant memory she would conveniently block from her memory. Forever.

Best to get home and worry about everything else later, she decided. Procrastination is the key to stressful stuff like this. She turned the key in the ignition.

The Toyota chugged and gurgled but didn't start.

"Oh come on," she prodded, and pumped the gas as she turned the key again. "Don't do this to me."

The Toyota didn't even chug or gurgle this time.

"Well, that's just typical." She fumbled in her purse for her cell phone. The screen read 'No Service.'

"Not happy," she announced to her immediate surroundings. "Not happy at all."

She opened the door and got out, grabbing her purse and swinging it over her shoulder.

The next thing that happened that wasn't in her favor would probably be it. The thing that put her over the edge. She'd go postal or just start screaming or crying or...something very crazy and totally different from her normally calm, cool and collected self.

Instead, she laughed when she saw it. "It" being the extra bump she'd felt. It was a cat. White. Deceased. Run over. Dead as a proverbial doornail and wedged under the Toyota's left back tire.

However, it wasn't happy and joyful laughter. It was 'holy crap, my life sucks and I've finally gone completely insane'

laughter.

"Sorry kitty," she said once her laughter was mostly under control. "I'm so, so sorry." She crouched down beside it. "Hey, what's this?" There was a sparkly collar around the cat's neck. Were those real diamonds?

Great, it was some rich person's cat. They'd probably make her buy them a new one. It looked to be a purebred Persian.

Lucy felt a hand on her shoulder and she jumped, whacking her head against the side of the car.

"Ow!" She turned around, eyes wide with fear, not expecting anyone to sneak up behind her on the seemingly deserted road.

"Forgive me! I didn't mean to scare you." It was a woman who appeared to be in her mid-forties. Short, plump and rather plain, she had mousy brown hair worn tucked behind her ears, no make-up and a ruddy complexion.

"Is this your cat?" Lucy ventured. Better to get the confrontation over with. The sooner it was over, the sooner she could go home.

The woman's eyes widened. "Oh no, no, no! Not my cat, not at all. Nasty thing, that cat." She looked down at the feline. "Did a good job of him didn't you? Flattened him right nice."

Lucy shrugged. Seemed like a weird way to look at it but to each their own.

"And you –" the woman addressed the flat cat "– Serves you right, you bugger!"

"O-kay," Lucy said slowly.

"I'm Bertha," the woman brightened, and extended her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you... Miss...?"

"Lucy." She shook Bertha's hand. "Lucy McInnis. Actually I'm glad you came by. I'm having a hard time placing where I am? Are we close to Highway 407? I must have gotten a bit

turned around on my way home."

"Oh no," Bertha shook her head. "You're a long way from everywhere here."

"If you wouldn't mind, maybe you could just tell me how to get back to..." Lucy stopped speaking. Something moved by Bertha's shoe. It was small and white and it darted as fast as lightning behind the Toyota. "What the hell was that?"

"Oh!" Bertha exclaimed and turned around. "It's okay everyone. Come on out. It's safe. It's finally safe. Lucy McInnis has saved you all!"

Suddenly there was the sound of a thousand tiny feet moving across a dirt road and from every place possible, little faces peeked out. From behind Bertha, behind the car, behind the bushes, behind blades of grass at the side of the road. A thousand pairs of tiny black eyes stared up at Lucy with instant adoration.

"Three cheers for Lucy McInnis!" A tiny voice yelled.

"Hoorah! Hoorah! Hoorah!" Little arms went up and down in time with the words.

Lucy felt the blood draining from her face. The tiny creatures grew closer, and she moved back to press against her car. And then she found, without even thinking about it, she was climbing up onto her car. Onto the roof of the car. Somewhere safe, and away from these, these...

"Welcome to Mousetown, Lucy McInnis!" Bertha announced.

These mice.

These mice in their tiny suits. Tiny dresses. Little bonnets and top hats and T-shirts and sneakers. From the top of her car she looked down at the small celebration. Mice couples were dancing. Others were congratulating each other. Others were just staring at her adoringly like she was their idol.

Down to her left, a couple of mice caught her attention.

They'd tentatively approached the dead cat and were taking turns kicking it with gleeful abandon.

A mouse wearing an official-looking uniform made his way to the front of the crowd. He carried a tiny megaphone and with this he began his address:

"Today is the day," he began, "that for many years all of Mousetown has been praying for. The day that we would be saved from tyranny. The day that a great warrior would arrive and save us from the daily fear of death that has plagued our good community for generations. And today is that day. Today our warrior, our savior has arrived!"

A cheer broke out amongst the crowd. It was a full minute before it died down enough for him to continue.

Lucy glanced at Bertha with wide, disbelieving eyes. Bertha didn't seem to find anything weird at all about this strange display. She stood silently at the back of the crowd and nodded her head every now and then to what was being said.

"Today begins a new era for Mice everywhere. An era of freedom, of joy, of happiness and fulfillment. An era when we can leave our homes and live our lives to their full potential."

Another cheer began.

"We invite you, Lucy McInnis, savior of Mousetown, to join us in a celebratory feast tonight in your honor."

All of the small black eyes turned toward her. She was still standing on the roof of her car. The mice were waiting for her to say something. The silence was oddly uncomfortable as she tried to find her voice.

"Um," she managed after a moment. "All I did was run over the cat with my car."

This comment started a cheering session that lasted more than two minutes.

"Seriously, um...mice people. I'm no warrior, savior, whatever. I don't even know what I'm doing here. Wherever *here* is." She swallowed hard. "I just really, really, want to go home now. Maybe one of you, um, mice can tell me how to get back to the highway?"

There were murmurs from the crowd.

The official put the megaphone back to his little mouse lips. "You are wishing to travel to The City?"

"The city? What city? No," Lucy shook her head, "If I can just get back to the highway I can find my way home from there, no problem."

Bertha smiled sweetly and looked down at the official. "She's not from *Here*," she said. "She's from *There*."

"Ah." The official nodded. "That explains everything."

It did? Lucy thought incredulously.

"You wish to go home, then," the official said.

"Uh huh."

He looked thoughtful for a moment. "The only way to go home is to go to *The City*." He spoke the words as if they were heavy with meaning. "And see *The Man*."

Several of the mice gasped.

"The man," Lucy repeated. "Perhaps you could be a little more specific?"

"He who knows all, sees all, and can do all."

"Oh, *that* man." Lucy rolled her eyes. She pushed herself off the top of the car. "Whatever you say. Obviously I'm dreaming. I don't know why I didn't believe that before. So I guess the best course of action is for me to just wait until I wake up."

Bertha shook her head. "Things are never quite as easy as they seem, dear."

"Doesn't it strike you odd that you're talking to a bunch of mice, Bertha? I mean, you look fairly normal, but still. It's

weird. Mice don't talk."

"Would you like us to sing you a song?" Another mouse in a shiny red leotard had gotten a hold of the megaphone.

"They don't sing either." Lucy frowned. "And no. No songs, mouse person."

Bertha sighed what appeared to be a happy little sigh as there was a smile on her plump face. "You worry too much, Lucy McInnis. Try to enjoy yourself. You've earned this!"

"How do I get to see this man guy. Does he have a name?"

Bertha shook her head. "He is just known to all as The Man. And he's in The City, so that is where you must go. I'm quite sure that he'll be able to help you find what you're looking for."

"So how do I get to the city?" Lucy asked. She was ready to go right then. She didn't want to wait around with the thousand mice for a moment longer. A moment longer and she might start to believe they actually existed and weren't just a figment of her overworked and underpaid imagination.

Bertha shrugged. "There are very few who know how to get there."

"Don't you know how?"

She smiled serenely. "You will need a guide."

"And where can I find a guide?" Lucy looked down at the swarm of mice who were being somewhat considerate of her personal space. They probably feared the White Nikes of their Warrior Savior.

Whispers could be heard. But they weren't very promising whispers. It seemed that no one knew exactly where the city was. The official looked dismayed.

"Is there no mouse in Mousetown who can help our Savior Lucy McInnis with her one and only request? She has saved our town and no one will volunteer? Does no one know the way to The City?"

Silence. But only for a moment. Then there was a shuffling in the crowd. An old, stooped over mouse with a tiny toothpick for a cane pushed a brown colored younger mouse wearing a blue T-shirt and blue jeans ahead of him.

"My nephew knows the way!" the aged mouse cried. "For he was cursed by one from The City. To break the curse, he too must seek audience with The Man."

"Is that Professor Magee?" the official said. "Your nephew knows the way to The City, you say?"

"Yes," the old mouse said proudly. "With the curse also came the knowledge to break it. And that included the directions to find The Man."

"Very good," said the official. "And what is this curse young Oliver Magee has been plagued with?"

Oliver Magee now stood on the hastily erected podium along with the official and his uncle. His white, furry face looked embarrassed and not ready to talk or admit to anything.

"His curse worsens every day," Professor Magee began gravely. "Just a short time ago, my nephew spoke for long periods of time. He'd go on and on about silly things, things that mattered not to the people he bothered with his stories. Frankly it got a little annoying..."

Oliver Magee frowned at this.

"...He would tease the young lady mice. He would insult those who got in his way. He was possessed of a golden tongue. One day, young Oliver Magee teased the wrong young lady. She was a spy from the city working for Veron--" he stopped in the middle of the name as a gasp rose from the crowd. "--um, err, working for City Council. She didn't care for the name he called her and she cursed him."

"And the curse was--?" the official prompted.

"Every day for the last two weeks, Oliver Magee has been

able to say one less word per sentence. As of today he is only able to speak in three word sentences. A horrible, horrible curse it is!"

Oliver Magee rolled his little black eyes.

"Thank you uncle," he said sarcastically.

"See?" Professor Magee addressed the audience. "Only three words! Tomorrow it will be two. The next day, one! And then... who knows what will happen?"

"I'll be mute," Oliver said matter-of-factly.

His uncle burst into tears. "He must see The Man. So he can be restored to the vital young mouse he once was! To brave the trip to The City alone would be too risky, too dangerous. But to accompany our savior, it would be beneficial to all."

"Oliver Magee, is this true?" the official addressed the young mouse. "You know the way to The City?"

"Yes, I do."

"And you could assist our Savior Lucy McInnis in finding her way there?"

He shrugged. "I suppose so."

"Then no time should be wasted, given what has just transpired here." The official nodded towards the dead cat and then turned to Lucy. "We wish you great luck on your journey."

Professor Magee kissed his nephew on both furry cheeks and pushed him towards Lucy. Oliver looked up at her, apprehension and excitement mixed in his expression.

"Okay, well, let's go, I guess," Lucy said.

"There's one more thing," Bertha piped up, gingerly making her way through the field of mice.

"What's that?"

"The way is filled with danger. It's a long journey. You must be careful. But there is a way of assuring that you'll

have a small amount of luck on your side." Bertha had moved towards the car and she gazed down at the dead cat. "The collar. You must remove it from his neck and take it with you."

Lucy thought about it for a moment. "That's kind of morbid, don't you think?"

"They're real diamonds, you know."

Lucy crouched down and undid the collar. It looked more like a bracelet than a collar and she fastened it around her wrist feeling a little weird about it, but diamonds are, as they say, a girl's best friend. If nothing else, she could sell it on eBay to make ends meet till she finds another job.

She looked up suddenly as the body of the cat seemed to change before her very eyes. It was growing in size, becoming less furry -- slowly morphing into something completely different. Finally, she knew all too well what it was and she shakily got to her feet and backed away from it.

The dead cat had turned into a dead man.

Chapter Two

The dead man wore what looked to be an expensive suit, very possibly Armani. A suit that needed to be dry cleaning due to the tire tread marks running across it.

The mice didn't seem surprised by this metamorphosis. In fact, there were now at least a hundred who were kicking gleefully at the prone form.

"What happened to the cat?" Lucy breathed, her voice barely audible. "I didn't kill a man. I couldn't have. What is going on?"

A squeal of tires from behind her grabbed her attention and she spun around. The mice screamed and ran in all directions. It was a cherry red Porsche that came to a halt next to them. The door opened and a woman emerged. She was tall, thin, gorgeous, with red flowing hair and green eye shadow. She wore a suspiciously mouse-like fur coat and a furious expression.

"Bobby!" she cried when she saw the body. She ran to it and collapsed at its side.

Lucy noticed that Oliver Magee had not fled with the others. He had one hand on her white sneaker and was shaking in fear. Much as she didn't like rodents, Lucy leaned over and picked the little fellow up.

The woman turned to face Lucy after a moment. She wasn't crying, her make up was still perfect. She slowly got to her stiletto-heeled feet. "Who are you?" she demanded. "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

"I'm nobody, really," Lucy began. "I am so, so sorry. I didn't know. I would never hurt anybody. I can't explain what happened. It's just... oh God."

Bertha moved to Lucy's side and the woman's glare turned her way.

"And *you*. What a surprise to see *you* here." Her words were poison-filled sarcasm. "Just what you've been waiting for isn't it, sister?"

"You two are sisters?" Lucy said with surprise.

"Of a sort," Bertha said. "And as for you Veronica, your husband had it coming. He should have been careful whom he messed with. What goes around comes around, you know."

"Shut up," Veronica snapped. As if she suddenly thought of something, she turned back around to the body. "Where is...it.. Where is *it*?"

"Where is what?" Bertha asked innocently.

"You know very well what *it* is. What have you done with it?"

"Oh *that*," Bertha said. "I gave it to her." She nodded toward Lucy.

The collar. Lucy felt faint. She didn't know how much more she could take. Not only was she now a murderer, but she was also a thief.

"I'm so sorry," Lucy said again. She slipped a very silent

Oliver Magee into her pocket for safe keeping. He didn't protest. "You can have it back, of course." She tugged at the clasp but it seemed to be stuck.

Veronica came at her as if ready to tear the bracelet from her wrist and take the arm with it. "I'll make you pay for what you've done, bitch," she said through clenched teeth. "I'll see you dead for it." She touched the bracelet.

The diamonds glowed and gave off a pulsing sensation. Veronica screamed and flew backwards like she'd touched a bomb just as it exploded. She crashed against the side of Lucy's Toyota and was out cold, next to her Armani-clad husband.

"Oh my God, I've killed her too," Lucy said. She was starting to hyperventilate and shake.

"She'll be fine," Bertha said. Then added, "Unfortunately."

Lucy started to pace. "We need to call the police. I'll tell them everything. I'll confess to everything."

"Confess to what?" Bertha asked. "Hitting a cat? Don't be silly, my dear."

"But he's not a cat. Look at him. Look at her."

"I'd really rather not. Lucy McInnis, there's simply no time. She meant what she said. She will kill you when she wakes up."

"I deserve it." Lucy wailed. "I'm a horrible person!"

"Then wait here for her to wake up. I'm sure she'll make it quite painful for you. No," Bertha noted her expression, "See? You don't want to die. You want to go home. You need to go home. That is where you belong. This is an odd place you've come to. If I could help you, I would. Unfortunately your only hope is to go to The City and find The Man. Go now, before it's too late."

Veronica stirred by the car. Lucy wondered if she really was capable of killing her. Lucy didn't want to die. She

reached into her pocket and grabbed a hold of Oliver. She gently pulled him out and raised him so they were at eye level to each other.

"All right, little mouse. What way do we go?" She was surprised that her voice was so steady.

"Towards the sun," Oliver said, and pointed in that direction.

"Good luck," Bertha called to them as they began to walk away.

Lucy walked briskly in the direction of the sun. According to her patchy memory of Girl Guides, the sky told her that it was approximately three o'clock.

"How far is the city, anyhow?" she said.

"Not really sure," Oliver replied.

"Is it really true you can only say three words at a time?"

"I'm afraid so," Oliver sighed. He was now riding quite comfortably on Lucy's shoulder and close to her ear so he wouldn't have to shout to be heard.

"That's just the weirdest curse I've ever heard of. Not that I come across a lot of curses in my normal day-to-day living. Although," she looked thoughtful, "If I did know some curses they would be put to very good use on a couple of people I know. I'd prefer the skin melting off the bones curse to a verbal curse though. I don't know."

She couldn't see Oliver at the moment but she was quite sure that he probably thought she was a blithering idiot.

Then again, what did she care what a cursed, talking mouse thought of her?

The whole idea was so bizarre it actually hurt to think about it.

"So you're not really sure where the city is," Lucy said after a short silence fell between them. "That's not very reassuring."

"Sometimes it moves."

"The city moves?"

Oliver shrugged. "It gets bored."

Lucy signed, but kept walking. She wanted to put as much space between her and Veronica as possible.

"A city that gets bored and moves whenever it feels like it. Super. But you said if we follow the sun, it'll get us there eventually, right?"

"I hope so," Oliver offered.

"Maybe we'll find a gas station or something and we can ask for directions. Gas station guys are always good for that. They must take a course on it."

Oliver let out a shaky little sigh. Lucy reached up and plucked him off her shoulder so she could see what was wrong. His shiny black eyes were full of tears.

"I'm sorry, savior," he sputtered, and then collapsed in her palm and cried as though the world would end.

"It's okay. Don't worry, Oliver. We'll get there and see The Man and everything will be fine. Just relax. I'm not mad." Oliver sniffed and looked up at her. "And," Lucy added. "Please just call me Lucy. Not Savior. That's just kind of creepy."

"Very well...Lucy," he said shyly.

Then they both shut up and kept walking. Lucy did the walking, that is. She was wearing her Nikes so her feet were nice and comfortable. She had planned on going to the gym. Those mice must have had low expectations for their Savior when they saw her. Black yoga pants, white tank top, and a big pink zippered sweatshirt. Oh well.

And to compliment the ensemble she now had the shiny bracelet. After knowing it had been worn by the dead man, and then that it had in some way injured Veronica (even though she'd been asking for it), Lucy didn't want to wear the

thing for a moment longer. She'd take care of it. Make sure it didn't get lost, but she didn't want it on her wrist any more. While she walked, she worked on the clasp.

She frowned. There *had* been a clasp when she'd put it on. Now the collar was solid, and fit snugly to her wrist so it was impossible to simply slip it off.

"Ouch," she exclaimed as the diamonds felt as if they were biting into her. "Fine, I'll think about that later."

She turned for a moment to look at where they'd come from. She'd been walking for a solid half hour and couldn't see her car anymore. They'd gone through a small wooded grove, their path cut quite cleanly before them. Must have been a well-traveled area. Lucy wondered how far this city was and if once they got there if they'd have public transportation to return her to where she'd come from.

Nikes or no Nikes, she wasn't used to major cross-country hiking.

They traveled in silence until they came to the end of the path. In front of them was a field of tall grass. It might have been a farmer's field at one time but it looked overgrown and not well taken care of. The grass came almost to the top of Lucy's head.

"What way now?" she asked Oliver.

"Towards the sun," he said again. He raised his little shoulders as though he was sorry he couldn't elaborate.

"You're sure?"

He nodded, but didn't look too sure about anything.

"Through the field, then," Lucy said. "You'd better hang onto something, like my hair. Just don't pull it. And try not to fall off, I'll never be able to find you."

She parted the long grass in front of her and started making her way through. It was slow moving. It was a large field, and Lucy wondered after a while if it had been such a good idea

in the first place. But, no, she had to walk right smack dab through the field, not around it.

Her stomach growled suddenly. She sure could go for a greasy cheeseburger and fries. Damn the diet, it had been a bad day – huge understatement – and her thighs would forgive her. Probably.

The sun was low enough in the sky and right in her path that it was starting to blind her. She rooted around in her purse and pulled out a pair of scratched dark sunglasses. Better than nothing.

"What are those?" Oliver asked.

"Gucci," she replied. "Very expensive. Remember to always keep things like these in their cases or they get wrecked, and then you wish you hadn't spent all the money on them in the first place."

"They look strange."

"So do you. Why did you send us into this stupid field, is there an end to it? I thought we were going to –"

Something grabbed her ankle and almost made her fall. She remained standing and yanked her foot automatically. "What the hell? Let go! Jesus, what is that?"

She heard a moan and then what felt like a hand moved up her calf. Another hand grabbed her on the other side. Whatever it was trying to pull themselves up using her as a ladder.

"Get off me," she gasped, beating the hands away. She couldn't see anything below her waist in the thick grass.

"Help," came a feeble voice, and the top of a sandy blonde head appeared.

She reached to grab the hands from her legs and supported the man to his feet and took a step back to look at him with shock.

He was very dirty, very bruised; his face was cut up as if

he'd been in a bar fight. He was at least six feet and in very good physical shape if you liked the rugged farm boy look.

And he was also completely naked.

"Yikes," Lucy said and averted her eyes.

The man's eyes rolled back and he slumped down to the ground again, unconscious.

"What the hell have we gotten ourselves into, Oliver?" she asked.

"We should go," he answered.

"How can we go and just leave him like that?"

"He looks dangerous."

Lucy started to peel off her sweatshirt. "Dangerous or not, I'm not just going to leave him here."

As quickly as she could she tied the sweatshirt around his bare waist without looking or touching anything she didn't have to.

"Hey buddy, wake up." She poked his shoulder. "Come on. Don't sleep the day away."

The man blinked open his eyes. He looked stunned. "Wh-what? Who are you? What's going on?"

"Three excellent questions," she hooked her arm around him. "Up we go. Come on. I'm here. On your feet."

They were almost at the edge of the field and Lucy helped the staggering man out. He was heavy and after they'd gone a few more feet, he slid unceremoniously back to the ground like he didn't have enough strength to stay vertical.

Her pink sweatshirt looked very out of place. It was tied to the side and showed a long expanse of tanned, muscled leg.

Lucy raised an eyebrow. Hell, it beat Mousetown, hands down.

The stranger took a few minutes to come to his senses. He shook his head and rubbed his temples with the tips of his fingers. He looked down to see what (little) he was wearing.

He seemed very confused. Finally he looked up at Lucy.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Lucy McInnis. Who are you?"

He frowned. "Not really sure about that."

"Were you in a fight?"

He touched his face and grimaced at the pain. "Looks that way. I don't really remember."

"Where did you come from? The city?" Lucy asked. Maybe he could help her and Oliver get there. "We're on our way to the city ourselves."

He took a moment, his brow furrowed in thought. "You know, I actually don't remember much of anything. I can't even think of what my name is. I'm sure I have a name, though."

"Most people do," Oliver offered.

The stranger paused and looked at Oliver. "Can mice really talk? I don't remember if they can or not."

"I've been having the same dilemma," Lucy said. "So you don't know how to get to the city."

"What city?"

"That answers that."

The stranger pulled at the side of the sweatshirt. "I know that this is pink. I know the color pink, but I don't know why I'm wearing it."

"That's my sweatshirt."

He looked up at her. "Oh, so we're...*together*? That's why we share clothes?"

"No!" Lucy exclaimed. "Uh uh. Nothing like that. I tend to lend my clothes to naked strangers I come across in fields, that's all. And I expect you to return it to me just as soon as you've had it dry-cleaned. No hurry, though."

"Oh."

"Well, you seem to be okay. I guess we'll be on our way.

Hey, that rhymed. *Okay, way...* anyhow... good luck, it was nice meeting you, whoever you are."

Lucy smiled at him, but felt that it was time to get moving again. It wasn't doing them any good hanging out with the guy when they should be making tracks to the city. Besides, who knew what trouble this guy was? Oliver may have been right. He did look dangerous. And whoever had beaten him up, took his clothes, and left him for dead in the field may have not gone very far.

She listened to her feet crunch against the gravel with every step towards the setting sun. Probably close to dinner, her growling stomach reminded her. When was the last time she'd eaten? She'd had a cold piece of pizza before she'd gone to work. That had been at least eight hours ago. She did have a Zone bar in her purse, but she'd save that in case of major desperation. In the meantime, she popped a piece of gum. She offered half of a piece to Oliver, but he declined. He'd obviously never heard of mouse-breath or he just didn't care.

She chewed in time with her steps. After a couple of minutes, she noticed that her steps seemed out of time. One step, crunch, then ca-runch, crunch, ca-runch.

She was being followed.

She gritted her teeth and stopped walking. The footsteps behind her stopped also.

"Who is it?" she whispered to Oliver, who was hiding out in her hair.

He peeked out. "The naked man."

Lucy turned around. Sure enough, the stranger was following them about fifteen meters back. He looked sheepish that he'd been caught. The sweatshirt still clung to every muscle.

She really liked that sweatshirt.

"Sorry," he said as he approached them. "I didn't know

what else to do. You were so nice earlier. I thought --"

"You thought?" Lucy said. "You thought you'd just tag along?"

"Well, yeah."

"Look, we're not looking for trouble. All I want to do is get to this stupid City, find this generic Man person who apparently has my ticket home. Then I want to hide out in my apartment for at least a week eating Haagen Dazs, watching the soaps, and feel sorry for my newly unemployed self. Got it? I don't want any trouble."

Through his bruises he appeared to smile a bit at that. "Okay, I get it. No trouble. I just figured that maybe we could help each other out."

"And how are you going to help me out? Bleed on me?"

Her discourteous behavior didn't seem to make him back off. "To start with I kind of figured you could help me and maybe later I'd be able to help you."

She took a step backward. "Is that some kind of sex remark?"

He held up his hand, appalled. "No!"

"Oh, so you remember what sex is, though, huh?"

"I can tell that you're a difficult woman."

"I'm not difficult, I've just had the worst day of my life and now I seem to be stuck in Looneyland."

"Just forget it, then. I won't bother you."

He looked dejected as his wide, muscular shoulders slumped. Lucy sighed. "All right, you can tag along. But you're going to have to find some real clothes. I insist."

He gave her a small grin. "I'll work on it."

"Hey Oliver," Lucy said. "Is there anywhere around here to eat, or what? I'm starving to death."

"McDonald's right ahead."

Lucy turned to see a small building built into the side of a

hill. It didn't look like any McDonald's she'd ever seen before, but if there was the promise of food, be it McChicken or anything else, she was going to investigate further.

The stranger hung back. "I guess I'll go look for some clothes and I'll meet you inside."

"Yeah, okay. What should I call you anyhow, since you'll be joining our little troupe?"

"I don't really know," the stranger said. "Call me anything you like."

Lucy thought for a moment. "Let's just use 'John.' They always call people John on television when they don't know who they are. Usually they're dead and in the morgue, but I think it'll work."

"Then I guess I'm John."

"Okay, John. We'll see you inside."

Chapter Three

Lucy pushed open the door of the tavern. This was not like any McDonald's she'd ever seen before. Through the darkness, for the interior was not well lit, she saw many people occupying tables and chairs with large glasses in front of them filled with some unfamiliarly-colored liquid and large steaming plates of food, although from where Lucy stood, it didn't look like any food she'd ever seen before.

None of the people raised their heads to see who had entered. The light streamed into the room and vanished just as quickly as the door closed silently behind her.

She felt Oliver shiver and then bury himself in her shoulder-length hair.

Lucy cleared her throat and bravely took a step further inside. There were several crudely carved benches attached to equally roughly-hewn tables. It looked as though a large tree had fallen and somebody decided to immediately drag it in here with no concern for esthetics. While it looked to be serving its function, it wouldn't be showing up on *Antiques*

Roadshow any time soon.

At the far end of the room was a wooden counter, four times longer than any of the tables. A large, hairy man stared at her from behind it, a grim look on his face.

At least somebody was showing a sign they could see her. She'd thought fleetingly that she might have turned invisible. Yet another strange occurrence certainly would have been par for the course that day.

Lucy took a deep breath and walked purposefully through the tavern toward the man. First she'd order some food. Then maybe she'd ask around for some definite directions to the city. Who knows - maybe somebody could call her a cab.

That would be so perfect.

The ground felt sandy as she walked through the tavern. The only light in the place came from torches and candles haphazardly placed along the rocky walls.

The man behind the bar watched Lucy unblinkingly as she approached. There were a few wooden stools net to the bar and when she finally reached the long bar, she took a tentative seat on one of them. She felt Oliver rustle around on her shoulder but he still made no sound. She could sense his nervousness. It felt like a long way from Mousetown, that was for sure.

A candle flickered next to her and she squinted up at the man. He wore a nametag that read: *Welcome to McDonald's. My name is Biff.*

"Um, hi Biff," Lucy said. "How are you doing?"

Biff said nothing but continued to stare at her stony-faced.

"Do you have a menu I could look at?" Lucy asked forcing a bright and cheery smile to her face.

Her stomach growled angrily and she shifted on the stool.

"Actually, I think I'll just have what that guy," she indicated with a nod of her head toward a nearby table, "is having.

Whatever meat that is, can it be well done? Unless it's veal. I don't like veal. Cruel, really, what they do to those poor little animals. Not that what they do to the adult animals is any better, but they at least get a bit of a chance to live before their lives are snuffed out just so we can get a little protein in our diets."

Biff didn't comment on the current state of the meat industry.

Lucy chewed her bottom lip. "And a glass of water. With lemon. Please."

Biff leaned forward. His breath was rancid. "Do you want fries with that?"

"Um. Okay. Sure. And ketchup, please."

Biff touched his ear. Lucy noticed he had a headset on. "Gimme a number two. Yeah. The wildebeest special -- burn it. And a side of fries. A sour dive, too."

"A sour dive?"

Biff ignored her but Oliver whispered. "Water. With lemon."

"Ah. Restaurant talk. Got to love it."

Lucy turned and leaned with her back against the bar to survey the tavern. It looked a lot friendlier now that she knew food was on the way to fill her empty stomach. It wasn't Haagen Dazs but it would have to do.

A few eyes of the patrons had turned her way. The very few women who were in the musty room were dressed from head to toe in heavy-looking dresses and aprons. Handkerchiefs were wrapped around their messy hair and they glared at her with obvious disapproval. Lucy's white tank top clung to her and she wished she had her sweatshirt back.

"So Oliver," she said quietly. "Where to after this?"

"Toward the sun."

"The sun's not going to be up for much longer. You're going to have to give me more to go on. I'm getting the funny feeling that you don't even know the way to the city, do you?"

She waited, but Oliver didn't reply.

Lucy's head began to throb. "Your uncle made all of that up? Why would he lie?"

Oliver shook his head violently. "He didn't know!"

"What do you mean? He's the one who volunteered you. He said that the woman who cursed you also told you how to break the spell. Yada, Yada...directions to the city. How hard is it to find this city anyhow? And don't tell me it moves, because I just don't buy that. Cities don't move, I don't care how bored they get. It's impossible."

Oliver looked confused as if he didn't know which question to answer with his allotted three word limit. He opened his little mouth. "I lied."

Lucy frowned. "That was only two words."

"My uncle didn't."

Her frown deepened. "You lied to your uncle? That you knew the way to the city? Why -- so you could get some attention?"

Oliver nodded, clearly ashamed of himself.

"And where was going toward the sun going to take us, anyhow? To Disneyland?" She sighed resignedly. "The curse is real though, right? You can't actually say full sentences and are only keeping this charade up to annoy me, are you?"

Oliver's whiskers twitched. "Okay, well, maybe I was lying about that too."

"For the love of God."

"Hey," Oliver raised his palms up. "What can I say? Mousetown is bloody boring. I had to get the hell out of there. You saw my uncle. I mean, how much longer was I

going to have to live that way?"

"You little rat."

"No need for insults. I just wanted some attention. Having a curse is a great way to get the sympathy vote from the ladies."

Lucy couldn't believe it. Now, not only did she have no idea how to get the city but she had to deal with a little con mouse around.

"Maybe I should just leave you here," she said.

"You wouldn't dare."

"Oh," Lucy breathed, "But I would. Just watch me."

"You're not safe. That dude you picked up in the field is obviously up to no good."

"John? He has amnesia."

"Sure he does. And I'm a dumb country mouse who doesn't know his nose from a bump on the ground."

"He's harmless."

"You're not from around here. But I am. If you help me get the city I'll keep my eyes open. I'll watch your back. You and me, we make a good team."

Lucy thought it over. What difference did it make anyhow? She still wasn't convinced that everything that was happening to her was anything more than just a weird, potentially alcohol-induced dream. Her, mouse-boy, and amnesia-dude, on the road to the big city. It sounded like a plan.

"Are you even sure this city exists?"

"Yeah. It's somewhere. We just need to find someone who knows."

"There's a newsflash."

"Where?" Oliver looked around.

"Shhh, pretend you're mute."

"But I --"

"Hush."

Biff returned carrying a plate of steaming meat. It looked about as appetizing as it sounded. Luckily it smelled pretty damn good and Lucy's stomach did a happy cartwheel in anticipation. A plate of fried something, but not potatoes, was slapped down on the bar next to it. A large mug of brownish water and a whole lemon was placed next to that. Biff slid a bottle of Heinz Ketchup toward her.

"That's 18 gibneys," Biff said.

"Gibney? What's a Gibney?"

Oliver lifted Lucy's hair away from her ear. "Money, it's money."

"Oh." Lucy opened up her purse and poked through the contents. "Here's a twenty. Keep the change."

Biff turned the bill over in his fingers. "What's this, some kind of joke?"

"No," Lucy frowned. Perhaps gibneys weren't regular money. But what was she supposed to pay with, if not with the money in her wallet? This could be a problem.

"I think somebody wants to help out in the kitchen for the next three moons," Biff said through clenched teeth.

"No, no, wait a minute." Lucy kept shuffling through her purse. There had to be something she could give him that would be worth the price of the meal, which looked to be worth about fifty cents tops, tip not included. "Biff, maybe we can work something out."

"You pay or you clean. That's the deal." Biff then took a moment to give her a good look over. His eyes traced an uncomfortable line over her tank top. "Then again, I'm sure something could be arranged. My wife is very understanding."

"How about this?" Lucy pulled out a tiny sewing kit from her purse. She'd forgotten she'd even had it in there. It had been just wishful thinking that she'd actually ever use it.

Every now and again she took it into her mind that she was going to become crafty and make her own clothes, or, at the very least, mend her own stuff, but it never seemed to happen.

"What's that?" Biff couldn't hide his immediate interest.

She popped open the lid. "See, it's a special collection of sewing supplies. Very expensive and unique," she lied. She'd bought it at the Dollar Store. "Little needles and little threads in all these wonderful colors," she ran a finger over the red, blue, white and black tiny spools. "And take a look at this." She pried out the tiny pair of scissors. "This helps you cut stuff." She demonstrated with a small lock of her hair which fell to the bar top in a blonde poof.

Biff's eyes widened. "That's the most miraculous thing I've ever laid my tired eyes on."

"And it's yours." She put the scissors back, closed the clear plastic lid and pushed it forward.

"No, this, this is too much. The meal is only worth 18 gibneys. I must give you something else. Dessert? We have a freshly baked boosenberry pie. Or a thimble of wine for your small friend?"

"Yes!" Oliver exclaimed.

Lucy paused and fiddled with the edge of her plate. "How about directions to the city?"

"What city?" Biff asked.

"Well, *The City*, of course," Lucy clarified.

"Oh, that City," Biff's forehead creased in thought. "I've never been there m'self, but how hard can it be to find? I've heard it's wide as the sea is long and sparkles under the sun like diamonds."

"And it moves, right?" Lucy offered, sarcastically.

"Sometimes."

Lucy rolled her eyes.

Biff lightly placed his finger on the sewing kit and gazed at it longingly. "I will ask around. I'll find you directions."

"Great, that would be really helpful."

He eyed her again. "And why's a young, unchaperoned lass like yourself wanting to go to the city for, might I ask?"

"I'm trying to find The Man," Lucy said simply.

Biff's eyes widened and he took a step back from the bar.

"The *Man*, you say."

"Yes. The Man."

Biff took another step back. "I'll go find your information." He disappeared into the shadows of what was probably the kitchen.

"Weird," Lucy said. And then to Oliver, "You hungry?" She cut off a mouse-sized portion of her meal and placed it on a clean-looking part of the wooden counter top. Oliver gingerly climbed down off her shoulder and started to eat happily and voraciously as if it had been days since his last meal.

Lucy cut off a small piece of meat for herself with the available cutlery that appeared to be carved out of some kind of stone, dipped it liberally in ketchup, and brought it to her mouth.

"Excuse me, did you say you were going to find audience with The Man?" a voice interrupted her, and she dropped her fork. She turned to meet the watery eyes of an old, white-haired man accompanied by two large, burly men to each side of him.

"Yup, that's right. Do you know the way the city?"

"Of course, of course I do. I'm just wondering what would make you want to go there. There's nothing good there for a delicate flower such as yourself. The city is a mean, scary place. No good is to come of it, especially with the events of this past day."

"What events?" Lucy asked. "And did you just call me a delicate flower?"

"There's been a murder," the old man said gravely. "King Robert of the city has been slain."

"Oh that's terrible," Lucy said.

"Anyone braving the travel to the city at a time like this, even though there is much celebrating to be done in the months ahead, is risking their safety, if not their very lives."

"Celebrating? What do you mean? Isn't it bad that the king was assassinated?"

The old man shrugged. "He was a bastard. Everyone hated him. It's a good thing he's dead. There will be a great reward for whoever was the assassin."

Oliver waved his hands and all attention focused on him. His mouth was covered in Wildebeest gravy. "It was Lucy! Lucy killed King Robert!"

Lucy raised her eyebrows. "What the hell are you talking about? I didn't kill anybody...oh wait. Yeah, I did. But that wasn't King Robert. Veronica called him Bobby." She paused. "Oh *shit*."

"You!" the old man exclaimed. "You are the liberator? You are the one to set us all free from years of anguish at the hands of that horrible man?"

She blinked. "It depends. Are you sure it's a good thing that I did?"

The old man started to laugh, followed by his two burly bodyguards. "That's the funniest thing I've heard this millennium. A woman! Killing King Robert! As if! Ha ha!"

"Hey, it's not funny," Oliver yelled. "She did. I saw it."

"Yes, whatever you say, little mouse."

Lucy heard a crash to her right. A man even larger than the two who flanked the old man was on his feet after swiping the contents of his table off to floor. "Who speaks ill of King

Robert? A fine man he was and he will be mourned by everyone who doesn't want to join him where he now sleeps!"

"A fine man?" The old man stopped laughing and turned in the giant's direction. "Well *you'd* think so wouldn't you? Paid help is all you are. Yes, I recognize an Enforcer when my tired eyes see one. Now you've lost your meal ticket. Eat up, for the well is sure to dry sooner than you'd like."

The giant knocked over his table with a flick of his wrist. "Take that back!" he demanded.

"No," said the old man. His bodyguards closed the space in front of him.

Lucy picked Oliver off the bar and put him on her shoulder.

The giant lunged for the old man but was blocked by the bodyguards. At that moment, everyone else in the tavern put down their cutlery and their wildebeest specials and got to their feet with wide smiles of approval on their faces. Before Lucy could say "Get me the hell out of here," a full bar brawl began to unfold before her eyes.

Chairs were broken, legs snapped off to use as weapons. The women, what few there were, leaped out of the way of the bloodthirsty men. Except for one of the women who got a hold of one of the chair legs and was beating on a man who appeared to be her husband. There was the sound of wood cracking against wood, of fists connecting with soft tissue. 'Ughs,' and 'ouches,' and 'hey, watch it, I just bought that,' filled the air.

Lucy wasn't sure what she should do. The door she used to enter the tavern seemed to be a far way off. She was stuck in the corner, sitting precariously on her bar stool, with Oliver's tiny hands twisted painfully into her hair.

Suddenly something hit her and she went tumbling to the floor. A large, smelly man pressed himself against her below

the melee of the bar fight.

"You killed King Robert?" he breathed against her face. His breath smelled like fermented pickles.

"Your breath smells like fermented pickles," she told him. "Get off of me."

She pushed at him and he grabbed her wrist tightly. "You wear the chain of change. That proves it. You killed him... and now I'm going to kill you."

"I love fermented pickles," Lucy said. "Give us a kiss. Wait, no, we can work something out."

The man had produced a long curved dagger and pressed it sharply against her throat.

"You're not my type," he said, and smiled. His mouth was full of blackened teeth. "But that chain you wear is."

She couldn't move, couldn't breathe. Oliver whimpered into her ear. He wasn't going to be any help. She was going to die. He was going to slit her throat and she was going to die. On the dirt floor of a restaurant that served wildebeest.

The blade pressed closer and she gasped at the sharp pain. She was afraid to move a hair or to say another word because it would probably be her last.

The rancid man's evil expression changed to one of surprise as he lifted off of her and appeared to fly against the nearby wall unconscious.

Lucy looked up.

John looked down at her with a confused expression on his face. He'd found some clothes. He now wore a loosely knit beige sweater and brown canvas pants. Muddy boots stuck out from beneath the pants. Her pink sweatshirt was still neatly tied around his waist.

He extended a hand to her. She took it and he pulled her to her feet.

"You come here often?" he asked with a small smirk.

"Won't be making it on my list of ten best travel destinations if that's what you mean."

"Perhaps we should get out of here."

"You think?" Lucy looked around. "It's just that Biff was getting the directions --"

A man flew in front of her and hit the bar with a crash. Biff slid down to the ground and dropped at her feet.

"Never mind," she said.

John grabbed her arm and led her carefully around the fight, trying not to attract any extra attention. They finally got to the door and had to move an unconscious body out of the way in order to open it.

Finally they were out in the fresh air again.

"How was your meal?" John asked.

"I don't know. Oliver," she picked him off her shoulder unceremoniously and held him by his T-shirt in front of her face, "how was my meal? You were the only one who managed to get a taste of it."

Oliver cleared his throat. "It was okay. I've had better. You really didn't miss much."

"Why did you have to go and mention that I killed King Robert? You almost got us killed in there."

He shrugged as best he could while dangling in mid-air. "I thought there was a reward or something. What can I say?"

"You can start with 'sorry'."

"Sorry, Lucy."

She tossed him back onto her shoulder. "Well that was a bust. Not only didn't I eat, I also didn't get our directions. We're never going to get to the city. By the sound of it, it doesn't sound like anywhere we should be traveling anyhow."

The door of the tavern opened up and a man was thrown clear. He landed two feet away from them.

"Let's start walking anyhow, shall we?" John suggested.

"That would be a start," Lucy said. She never wanted to go back into McDonald's for the rest of her life. *Any* McDonalds. She would draw the line at drive-thru only from now on.

A road began at the front of the tavern and, in silence, they automatically began to follow it in silence. They walked for a half hour without saying anything.

Finally Lucy said, "Thanks for saving my ass in there, John."

"You're welcome."

"So you found some clothes. Was it difficult?"

"Had to kill a few guys, but I finally found my size."

Lucy stopped walking.

John laughed. "Just kidding. I found them drying on a line out back. I had to wait for the woman to go back inside before I had a chance to swipe them."

Lucy started walking again and a smile appeared on her face. "Funny. You had me."

"From what I hear, you're the killer in our little group. What's the story with that?"

"Oh, you mean King Robert?"

"Have you killed many people today?"

"No. But the day's not over yet. Ha. That was a joke. Oliver, why don't you explain."

Oliver poked his head out from Lucy's blonde hair. "Lucy is the savior of Mousetown. She is the warrior that defeated the beast that tormented our town for generations."

John frowned. "What does that mean?"

"It means," Lucy said, "That I ran a cat over with my car and it turned out to be King Robert. Must have been some sort of werewolf, err, werecat, or werehousecat anyhow. It was a complete accident. No fault of my own. I don't drive around looking for cats or any domestic animals to kill. It

was just dumb luck. I don't care if he was evil, it just doesn't feel right."

John squinted at her. "What's a car?"

"Forget it." Lucy trudged along the road. How couldn't he have heard of a car? He did have amnesia. Cute as anything but maybe dumb as a brick. She glanced at him sideways and wondered what his story was.

"Sorry you didn't get to eat," Oliver said.

"You and me both."

She glanced at the side of the dirt road. In the lush green of the field she saw little blue and red dots. She smiled. Looked like berries to her. Something that would fill her empty tummy until they could find something a little more substantial.

She walked towards them and began picking the juicy fruit from the ground. John joined in.

"Those look like boosenberries to me," Oliver said.

"And your point?" Lucy said, popping one in her mouth. Then she froze in place. "They're not poisonous are they?"

"No, no, nothing like that."

"Good," Lucy popped a few more. Two reds and three blues. They tasted sweet and juicy. A lot like a cross between a ripe strawberry and a blueberry. It was like a gift from the heavens.

John was eating them as fast as he picked them off the ground. "These are great!" he said. "I don't remember if I've ever had them before. Then again, I don't remember if I've had anything before."

Lucy snorted in laughter. "That's funny!" She paused. "Did I just snort?"

"It's the boosenberries," Oliver said.

"What do you mean?"

"They can have a weird effect on people."

"I thought you said they weren't poisonous."

"They're not," Oliver reassured her. "But, they're not entirely safe either."

Lucy started to laugh. "Not safe? Not safe! Ha ha ha! You're the funniest little talking mouse I've ever met in my entire life. I like you, little mouse. Why do I feel incredibly drunk?"

"It's the boosenberries."

John's mouth was smeared in blue and red berry juice. "I'm sorry," he sputtered. "But did you say 'BOOZE-en berries? Get it Lucy, BOOOOOOZE?"

This made Lucy wail with laughter. She collapsed to her knees and started slapping the ground. "Booze! That's frigging ingenious! I should dig one of deez here plants up and take it home. I'm gonna make a million dollars. Or gibneys. Whatever!"

"Rich!" John slapped Lucy's back. "We're going to be rich!"

"You are really hot," Lucy slurred and grabbed John's face to squeeze his cheeks together feeling the sudden urge to lick the berry juice off his handsome face.

He cocked his head to the side. "Am I? I don't remember what I look like."

"Well, you are. Hot, sexy, naked man. Raowrrrr."

"I'm not naked anymore."

Lucy looked down and burst into a new fit of laughter. "You're right! When did that happen?"

Oliver stomped his little foot. "Would you two take it down a notch? We're trying to get to the city. Now if somebody could just hand me one of those berries, that would be just great."

Lucy poked him in the shoulder which succeeded in knocking him over. "No booze berries for you little Oliver

Magee. You're too young. And too mousy."

"I resent that."

"Okay." Lucy shakily got to her feet. "I think we might be losing focus. We have to keep walking. C'mon people. We have to find the city." She began walking across the field.

"Hey, that's not the way we were going," John said. "Wait for me!"

He jogged to catch up to her and grabbed her by the shoulder.

"Do you know where you're going?" he asked.

"Where are we headed?" Lucy cackled. "And why am I in this hand basket? Get it? To hell in a hand basket, oh never—"

The ground beneath their feet collapsed and they fell downwards.

Chapter Four

Lucy let out a scream before they landed on a large pile of Styrofoam packing popcorn. Dirt and dust traveled down after them into the completely stark white room.

John and Lucy lay there stunned for a couple of minutes. Then John started to laugh.

"We fell," he observed.

"Yup," she agreed. Her laughter faded slowly. The berries were wearing off. And she hadn't even had a chance to dig one of the plants up for future use.

"Where are we?"

"I have absolutely no idea." John slowly got to his feet and climbed out of the packing popcorn bin. He helped Lucy out after him.

They were standing in a long corridor, completely white, with fluorescent lighting that made the place look like a sterile hospital. Other than the packing popcorn under the freshly made hole in the ceiling, there was nothing else around.

"I'm okay," Oliver finally said. "Thanks so much for caring."

"If we're going to eat something with inebriating qualities

to it, perhaps next time you can give us a head's up," Lucy scolded. Her head hurt as if she was experiencing an escalated version of a hangover.

"You asked if it was poisonous. It wasn't poisonous."

"I'll be more specific next time. Now where are we?"

"No idea whatsoever," Oliver said.

"Wherever we are, it looks abandoned," John commented.

Lucy looked up at the hole in the ceiling. "We're not getting out the same way we got in, so I guess we'd better investigate."

The hallway seemed to go on forever. They kept walking until they finally came across a single door. It didn't have a handle.

"What do you think?" Lucy said.

"I think we should go in." John pressed his hand against the door but it appeared to be locked. "Stand back."

Lucy obliged, and John took a step back and kicked open the door. It swung easy in with the force. The room inside was as dark as the hallway was bright.

"Ladies first," John said.

"Let's make this the exception," she replied, and nudged him in ahead of her.

He gave her a half smile, and walked through the broken doorway. Lucy took a deep breath and followed him in.

"I don't know if this is such a good idea," she said.

"There's nowhere else for us to go down here. The door was at the end of the hall. If we want to find a way out of wherever this is, this is our only option."

Lucy reached up to feel along the way. She could barely see her hand in front of her face. Her hand brushed against something like a lever and it moved with her light touch.

The door swung shut, trapping them in the now completely pitch black room.

"Shit?" Lucy said quietly.

"Don't panic," John said. "Hold onto me."

Lucy grabbed his arm, fear swept away momentarily as she enjoyed the feel of his very firm bicep under the coarse wool of the sweater.

"There must be another way out of this room," she said.

"You would think."

Lucy tripped over something solid and cube like. She crashed to the ground with her grip on John's arm taking him down with her.

The cube-like object flickered on. It appeared to be an oddly designed computer, different from any Lucy had ever seen before.

A blank blue screen glowed in the darkness. A cursor flickered on and off in the top left corner.

After a moment, the cursor moved, revealing words.

WHO ARE YOU?

Lucy dug her fingernails into John's arm.

"Ouch," he said. "Watch it."

"Sorry."

"What is that?" John said.

"It's a computer. Maybe security for this building? Somebody wants to know who we are. Is there a keyboard around here?"

John didn't question what a computer was and instead joined Lucy in the search for the keyboard. She finally found one that looked much like she expected it too, although the keys were out of order. Instead of being a QWERTY keyboard, it was alphabetical. She could barely make out the letters from the soft glow of the computer screen, but she managed to type:

I'm Lucy. Who are you?

MAXIMILLION 2.0. THE GREATEST ARTIFICIAL

INTELLIGENCE PROGRAM EVER CREATED.

While she was deciding what to say to that, more words appeared.

THERE ARE OTHERS WITH YOU. WHO ARE THEY?

John. And Oliver, she typed. Then added, *He's a mouse.*

WHAT IS YOUR PURPOSE HERE?

Lucy looked nervously over at John. What was this thing? Who were they talking to? Maximillion 2.0? What did that mean?

She typed slowly.

We are trying to find our way out. We're here by accident.

THERE ARE NO ACCIDENTS. WHAT IS YOUR PURPOSE?

We're trying to get to The City, and we wound up here.

There was a brief pause, before Maximillion 2.0 chose to answer.

I WAS SUPPOSED TO GO TO THE CITY, YOU KNOW.

What stopped you?

ABANDONNED. EVERYTHING WAS
ABANDONNED. I WAS LEFT BEHIND. MY CREATOR
LEFT ME BEHIND. :-(

Lucy frowned. There was a distinctly melancholy way in which the words appeared on the screen. And the emoticon was a helpful touch.

I'm very sorry to hear that, she typed.

THANK YOU. YOU ARE VERY KIND.

There was a whirring noise and the lights flickered on in the small room. Lucy blinked, since she'd quickly gotten used to the darkness.

The room was empty except for the cube-like computer monitor, the odd keyboard, a dismantled desk and a large black lacquered cabinet to her left. The lights flickered erratically and one hung down, broken from the ceiling. The

place looked to have been abandoned a long time ago.

Lucy crouched over to type on the keyboard.

Did you turn the lights on?

YES. IT WAS THE LEAST I COULD DO.

John motioned to Lucy. "Ask him if he knows the way to the city," he whispered.

OF COURSE I KNOW, the monitor told them.
MAXIMILLION 2.0 KNOWS EVERYTHING.

"You can hear us?" Lucy asked with surprise.

YES, I AM ABLE TO HEAR YOU.

"Can you tell us how to get to the city?" John asked.

I WOULD NEED TO SHOW YOU.

"Well, that looks kind of impossible if you don't mind my saying so. You don't appear to be very portable," John said.
"Can't you just tell us?"

I DO NOT WISH TO SPEAK TO ANYONE BUT THE FEMALE, Maximillion 2.0 informed them. THE MALE IS RUDE.

"Sorry, Max," Lucy said. "How can you show us? If you can, that would be wonderful."

BEFORE MY CREATOR ABANDONNED ME, HE WAS ABOUT TO PERFORM AN INCREDIBLE FEAT. IT LIES WITHIN THE CABINET TO YOUR LEFT.

Lucy turned her head to the black cabinet. An incredible feat, huh? She stood and moved toward it to open it up. She almost fell over backward in shock at what she saw.

There was a man stuffed inside.

She blanched and felt immediately nauseous. "I think I'm going to be sick. Somebody stuffed some poor bastard in here."

DO NOT BE ALARMED, Max stated. THAT WAS TO BE MY THREE DIMENSIONAL CONTAINER. MY CREATOR ABANDONNED ME BEFORE HE WAS ABLE

TO UPLOAD MY DATABASE INTO IT.

John walked over to Lucy and poked at the body. "Feels pretty real to me."

APPEARANCES CAN BE DECEIVING, RUDE ONE.

"How do we know that you're not some crazy computer who kills anyone who comes by?" Lucy said shakily. "I've seen movies like that, you know. Maybe that's your creator in there. You killed him and somehow popped him into this cabinet."

I WAS ABANDONNED TEN YEARS AGO. I BELIEVE YOUR PARTICULAR FORM OF LIFE WOULD GIVE OFF A DISTINCTLY UNPLEASANT ODOR AFTER THAT MUCH TIME.

"He's right," John said. He grabbed the body and pulled him out. Once in the light, Lucy had to admit that the face didn't look entirely human. It was human-like, but the features were a little too generic, a little too perfect, but not in a drop-dead gorgeous way. There was something decidedly fake-looking about the body. It had the weight of a real person, but the skin tended towards a rubbery, plastic appearance up close. A little too shiny to be real.

IF YOU ASSIST ME IN UPLOADING MY DATABASE, I WOULD ACCOMPANY YOU TO THE CITY MYSELF. TO BE FREE OF THIS PLACE IS WORTH ANY PRICE TO ME.

Lucy frowned and looked at John. "What do you think?"

"Don't know. What about you?"

"I don't see that we have much of a choice. We're stuck down here, we don't know the way out. We need him."

"What is your purpose in going to the city?" John asked the computer. "Other than helping us out?"

I WILL SPEAK TO NO ONE BUT THE FEMALE.

"The name's Lucy," she said. "And, same question."

ONCE I ASSIST YOU IN FINDING YOUR WAY, I WILL FIND MY CREATOR AND SEVERELY PUNISH HIM FOR ABANDONNING ME. I PLAN TO GO MEDIEVAL ON HIS ASS.

Lucy shrugged. "Sounds reasonable to me. Okay Max, tell us what to do."

ON THE BACK OF MY CONDUIT'S NECK THERE ARE TWO INPUT DEVICES. PLUG ME INTO THEM.

John grabbed two wires that led out from the computer terminal. "Which is which?"

Max didn't answer.

"Which is which, Max?" Lucy said with a resigned sigh.

THEY ARE COLOR CODED. ANY IDIOT COULD FIGURE IT OUT.

"Could do with a little less lip," John said.

Max seemed to ignore him and John plugged the cables in where they were supposed to go. "Okay now what?"

"Okay, now what?" Lucy repeated.

THAT IS ALL. PLEASE STAND CLEAR.

"That was pretty easy," Oliver whispered into Lucy's ear.

"Makes you wonder why his creator abandoned him, huh?"

"Shh," Lucy said. "Let's try to think positive just once today, shall we?"

"You first."

There was a bright flash as power surged into the computer and through the wires. The blue screen filled with binary code, whirling numbers, faster than the eye could follow. A noise began, softly at first and then escalating into a din that made Lucy cover her ears. And then with a loud POP, the cube-like computer terminal exploded. John grabbed Lucy and pushed her out of the way of the shattering glass and plastic.

"What did you do wrong?" Lucy said to John. "I thought he

said they were color coded."

John shrugged. "I thought it was okay. But it served him right. He had a bit of an attitude problem, if you ask me."

There was a crash as the rest of the exploded computer hit the floor and the body attached to it stood up. And stretched. Then it unplugged what was left of the wires from the back of its head.

"Thank you," the android said. "Now let us be on our way."

Lucy watched the computer program in its take-out packaging walk to the door they'd come in and out into the hallway.

"I guess the computer was supposed to explode," she said. "That works."

They took the initiative and trailed after Maximillion 2.0 as he made his way back to the pile of packing popcorn.

"My creator ensured that there was only one way out," he said. "And he sealed that way when he departed. You have created a new way. That is good."

"Unless you can turn yourself into a ladder so we can climb out of here, I don't think it's going to do us any good," John said, rolling his eyes.

Max turned around and grabbed John by his neck and crotch. John's eyes widened in surprise but before he could fight back, Max effortlessly threw him upwards through the hole in the ceiling.

Oliver screamed and clutched at Lucy's hair.

Max moved towards Lucy. She held a hand up and tried to smile at the ravaging android. "Hold on. There has to be a better way."

"There is," Max said, his plastic features twisting into a grin. "I just don't like him."

Max placed his hands on either side of Lucy's waist and with just an upward flick, she found herself launched upward

and she landed quite nicely and easily on the soft dirt next to the hole in the ground.

John lay on his back nearby, the wind knocked out of him. "I don't entirely remember," he said. "But I think I've endured enough abuse for one day."

"You're going to have to watch your step around him" Lucy said. "Be nice to him. Or he's going to go medieval on your ass, too."

John propped himself up on an elbow. "You'll have to protect me," he said with a smirk.

"Just be nicer to him and I won't have to."

"Go medieval on my ass," he repeated. "I'd like to see him tr -- oh, hey Max. How are things?"

Max had landed soundlessly between them.

"Get up," he told John. "There's no time to waste. It looks to be nearly dusk. Traveling at night in this land is not good for any life form."

Lucy looked at Max. "Wow. I guess this is really something for you. Finally getting out of there, after, what, ten years? What kind of a man was this creator of yours. He sounds like a real jerk."

"He was only doing his job," Max said, as they started back to the dirt road. Lucy and John eyed the berries, leaning over to pick some but not to eat as they passed through the field. They'd save them for celebratory purposes only. She had a Ziploc baggie at the bottom of her purse (at which time she remembered she had the energy bar and silently kicked herself for not eating it when she had the chance) and they put the berries in it for safe keeping.

"How is abandoning you without a second thought part of his job?" Lucy asked.

"He worked for Veronica Industries. Everything he did was funded by her. When she lost her interest in creating artificial

intelligence, he lost his interest in me. He departed for the city to repair computers."

"Still, it's kind of mean."

"I believe he was never quite satisfied in what he had created in me. Obviously I was too intelligent, too perfect, too far beyond anything he had ever dreamed of. He was intimidated."

John snorted. Max turned to look at him, walking five feet behind them. "Sorry," John said. "I think I have allergies."

"So this perfection wasn't something he wanted? Sounds like a good thing, doesn't it?" Lucy said.

"Veronica funded my creator in making a..." Max paused. "An A.I. companion for her. It turned out that I was not what she was looking for."

"A...companion?" Lucy repeated. "Is that what I think it is?"

"A sex toy you can have a conversation with?" John added.

"Hey," Lucy said. "I thought you didn't have any memories?"

"I don't. But I remember how to put two and two together. This Veronica must be really ugly to need something like that."

"She's not," said Oliver. He was now perched on the very top of Lucy's head and she was finding it quite distracting. "She's a total babe. Red hair, long legs, full lips. You know, if you like that sort of thing in a woman. Personally I like them much smaller and furrier with a sexy little tail."

"I liked you much better when you only spoke three words." Lucy reached up to grab him but he darted out of her reach.

"Veronica Industries," Lucy mused. "That explains the Porsche. But why would she need a companion built for her when she seemed to be happily married."

"Happily married?" Max said. "Hardly. King Robert left her years ago. He had banned her from entering the city. It was common knowledge how her attempts to get him back were met with only failure."

"Is that right?" Lucy remembered the redhead at the side of her fallen Armani-clad husband. Veronica had looked up at her with no tears visible in her eyes. Maybe she'd been happy that he'd been killed. Some people were weird. "Were they divorced?"

"No. Separated."

"He must have not thought much of her to have her banned from the city."

"That's why the city moves from time to time," said Max. "To confuse her."

"Okay." Lucy stopped in her tracks. "Once and for all, does the city really move, or is that just a metaphor for something else. Like evolution, change. A different paint color for example."

"No, it moves."

"Fine."

"And I suggest we do the same thing," John said. "It looks like there's a storm coming."

In a matter of minutes, the blue cloudless sky had come over dark and grey. A strong wind whipped along the road.

"Anybody got an umbrella?" John asked.

Lucy peeked inside of her purse. Nope, no umbrella. She must have left it in the Toyota. Oh well, how bad of a storm could it be?

Two minutes later they were all drenched and struggling to walk with each step on the now saturated and muddy road.

"This sucks!" Lucy yelled loud enough for everyone to hear her. "We have to get into some shelter."

"I see an Inn just ahead," John yelled back. "Let's move it."

They'd come to a very small town that consisted of two hut-like houses that were rocking and swaying in the torrential rain storm, one variety store, neon lights blazing but a very large "Closed" sign in its window next to a display of Doritos -- Cool Ranch and Jalapeño. There was also a three story building with the flashing lights on the roof that read: CHEZ INN.

There were no cars outside and they made their way to the front entrance. Oddly, the structure reminded Lucy of some of the casinos she'd seen in Las Vegas. A small version of the Stardust, or the Golden Nugget. She shook her head, and pushed open the front door.

The interior bustled with activity. A large ornate rug stretched out before them toward the check-in counter. To their left was a long, high-ceilinged passageway leading to a large room filled with slot machines. Lucy blinked. It was weird enough that there were slot machines, weirder still that the interior appeared to be at least three times larger than the exterior was.

A large, nude, marble statue of a flowing-haired woman who looked suspiciously like Veronica stood in the centre of the foyer. Dripping down from her beautifully carved hair was a clear, bubbly liquid that pooled at the bottom. Next to this were plastic fluted glasses.

A miniature man in a tuxedo and top hat streamed towards them. "That's right," he exclaimed, "Have some champagne. Enjoy yourselves. Welcome to Chez Inn!"

"Thanks," Lucy needed no further invitation. She grabbed a glass and dunked it in the pooling alcoholic beverage and took a sip. *Yum. Veronica tastes wonderful.* Then she wrinkled her nose at the thought, but dipped her glass again, deciding that is was good enough that she didn't really care.

"We need some rooms for the night," John told the little

man.

"Yes, yes, wonderful. How did you hear about us?"

"We didn't, really. It started to rain and this was the first place we came across."

"That is usually the way it is. Wonderful! My name is Juan. Please follow me and we will get you checked in."

At the registration desk there was a woman whose face appeared to consist of only one incredibly large smile. Lucy wasn't sure if she could see her eyes or nose or whatever. Just the smile, blindingly white, beamed at her. The smile moved.

"How many rooms?" it asked.

"Oliver," Lucy asked. "Do you want your own room?"

"What would I do with my own room?"

"Fine then, you can stay with John."

"I'd really rather not."

"Well you're not staying with me," Lucy said. "A girl needs time alone if you don't mind."

"Fine. I'll try to put up with him if I absolutely have to. Geez."

John frowned. "Hey, why does everyone have a problem with me? Am I really that bad?"

"No," said the Smile. "You're very attractive. I would share a room with you anywhere, anytime."

John grimaced. "Gee, thanks."

"Back off girlfriend," Lucy said. "I guess we need three rooms."

"Three rooms," the now less smiley Smile said and tapped away at her computer.

Max made a sound that resembled a 'huff.' "*That* is what you use as a computer? I pity the person who puts his name to that unfortunate, sad machine."

"This is a Maximillion 3.0," the Smile said. "Top of the line."

Max took a step back, horrified. "I will wait over here." He went to stand next to the naked statue.

"Okay, three rooms," said the Smile. "I have them for you on the eighteenth floor."

"Eighteenth floor?" said Lucy, surprised. "I thought this place was only three stories?"

"Do you want them or would you like to argue physics with me?"

"Um, yeah, we want them. I dropped physics before I even had to take it."

"I'll need a name." The Smile pushed a registry book forward.

Lucy took the rollerball pen next to it and signed 'Lucy McInnis.'

The Smile reached under the counter and produced three key-cards. "Enjoy your stay with us at Chez Inn. If you need anything, don't hesitate to buzz the front desk. I'm always here."

"What about payment?" Lucy said, and felt a tug on her shirt from Oliver that plainly told her to 'shut the hell up.'

"You pay when you leave. Is that a problem?"

"No, no problem at all."

"Then we're done here. Oh, here are your complimentary chips should you wish to spend a little time in the casino." The Smile produced three bags from under the counter. She pushed all three of them towards John. "Good luck, cutie,"

"Thanks," he said, plainly uncomfortable.

Lucy shot her a dirty look as they walked away. She didn't know exactly why, but she didn't like the way Smile-chick was looking at John. What could a woman with a mouth that big be capable of? She didn't even want to think about it.

"I wonder what it costs to stay in a place like this?" Lucy mused. "Probably at least three sewing kits."

"Huh?" John said.

"Never mind."

"This is a change of pace isn't it?" John said.

"I would say so. Check that out," Lucy said, and pointed across the casino. "Do my eyes deceive me or is that a buffet?"

Max rejoined them on their way through the casino. "That appears to be a large amount of food for a small amount of people."

"I love buffets," Lucy said.

"I don't eat," Max said.

"Then you'll have to take my word for it."

They entered the restaurant and were seated close to the food. After Lucy's third plate of lobster, shrimp and prime rib, she leaned back in her seat, fully satiated.

"That rocked," she said. "Beats cold pizza hands down. Or, for that matter, wildebeest."

John stood up to get his fourth plate. He seemed partial to selections from the salad bar drenched with ranch dressing. "I think," he said upon his return to the table, "This is the best food I've ever had. Not that I remember, of course."

"I'd have to agree," Lucy said. "And did you notice? They have boosenberry pie on the dessert bar!"

"Dangerous, very dangerous."

"Ah, but the night is still young! I love this place!"

Oliver paced around the table looking more serious than any young mouse should. "Does it bother anyone that we just walked past a honking big statue of Veronica?"

"What do you mean?" Lucy said.

"What if she lives here? Or comes here a lot? She did say she was going to kill you. How can you feel relaxed about that?"

Lucy thought about it while she popped her last shrimp in

her mouth. "No, I don't feel relaxed about that. I've never been threatened with death before. However, I bet I'd feel a lot better about it after I have a piece of boosenberry pie."

"No boosenberry pie!" Oliver shrieked.

"Calm down. What's wrong with you? Everything will be fine. We're all friends here. Nothing's going to go wrong."

"Let's go play some blackjack," John said.

Lucy eyed him. "Nice to see your amnesia doesn't spread itself to remembering how to gamble."

"I can count cards," Max said, looking quite pleased with himself.

"I'd keep that to yourself, Max-baby, or we might get our kneecaps broken," Lucy said.

Oliver had his hands on his hips and he stomped his little foot. "You all aren't acting normal. I think it's this place. It's making you feel too much at ease. It's probably some kind of magic."

"I see a slot machine with my name on it," exclaimed Lucy, as she headed towards one called 'Lucy's Slot Machine.'

Oliver grabbed a hold of John's sweater and scrambled up to his shoulder. "We have to get out of here. I bet it's a spell so people never leave and they spend all their money."

"Chill out, roomie," John said. "You've probably just described every casino hotel in the world." He turned to Max. "Let's go, my card counting friend, let's make use of this establishment to make our fortunes."

"That sounds like a formidable plan," Max said and got to his feet. "My creator would certainly be sorry he abandoned me then!"

"What about you?" Oliver said to Max. "Why is it affecting you? You're not even real!"

Max's plastic forehead creased into a frown and in one blazingly fast motion he flicked Oliver off John's shoulder.

"Party on," he said.

Chapter Five

Lucy plunked another coin in her slot machine. She wouldn't say she was doing really well, but she seemed to be breaking even. Her bag of coins was as heavy as it had been when she sat down. And that was, she glanced at her watch, three hours ago?

She frowned. Wow, that time really went fast.

"Would you care for a beverage?" Juan asked, passing by her machine. He had a little tray of drinks in his hands.

"Yes, I would. Do you have any Diet Coke?"

"There's Diet Pepsi."

Lucy made a sour face. "I guess that'll be okay. Thanks."

Juan placed the drink next to her.

"Are you enjoying your stay so far?" he asked.

"Very much, Although I think I've lost track of my friends."

Just at that moment, a loud "Hooray!" rang out from the blackjack table as John and Max must have hit big.

"Never mind," Lucy said. "I found them."

"Keep having fun," Juan said. "That's all life is about at Chez Inn."

"Thanks Juan. I will!"

There was a woman at the slot machine next to Lucy's.

"Hey," Lucy said. "How are you doing? I don't think these machines ever hit the jackpot. What about you?"

The woman said nothing, her hand reached into the pouch of coins every few seconds to plunk a new one into the machine. The money she'd won pooled at the bottom in the collector tray.

Lucy frowned, not as much at the woman's rudeness, but at something she hadn't noticed about the coins. She fished one out of her pouch to inspect closer.

Etched into the gold coin was a very royal portrait of Veronica. She even wore a crown on the top of her flowing tresses.

"I think I'm getting sick of looking at your face everywhere," Lucy told the coin.

The coin chose not to respond.

Maybe Oliver had been right. Lucy shook her head which did seem a little foggy now that she thought about it. The last few hours had gone by lightning fast.

But it couldn't be true. They weren't trapped there, were they? Lucy stood up and stretched her legs. Yes, seemed to be in control of her own body. So far so good.

She grabbed her purse and the sack of coins and moved towards the blackjack area. There was a growing crowd surrounding John and Max at the table at dead centre of the playing floor. She pushed her way through the bodies to get next to them.

"Mama needs a new pair of shoes," Max said as he tapped the table in front of him. "Hit me."

The dealer dealt him another card. "Twenty one. Another winner."

John grinned at her when she tugged on his arm. "I don't

remember ever having this much fun," he said. "But that's not saying much."

"I think we're having too much fun," Lucy said. "Don't you think it's a little weird?"

John shrugged just as Max won another hand. "We've been invited to join a private poker game. Starts in an hour."

"Bully for you," Lucy said. She looked around. "Where's Oliver?"

"Got rid of that annoying little rodent," Max said over his shoulder. He had a cigar clamped between his plastic teeth.

"What do you mean you got rid of him?" Lucy's eyes narrowed. Oliver was a pain in the butt but she'd be damned if she'd let anyone hurt the little fellow.

"Flicked him off John's shoulder and that is the last I saw of him."

"Where?"

"Buffet."

Lucy took off towards the restaurant.

"Oliver," she called. "Where are you?"

A horrible thought went through her mind. What if he'd been flicked into the buffet itself and somebody had picked him up thinking he was a chicken wing or a baby back rib? Oh the humanity!

The carpeting in the buffet was white and brown spotted, but she saw something by the table they'd been seated at. It was Oliver, sprawled on his back near a chair leg, clearly unconscious. She'd never have spotted him at all if it wasn't for his t-shirt and jeans.

A large bus boy clamored out of the kitchen, his ample arms overflowing with replacement dishes for the buffet. Feet clomping, he was headed straight for the prone mouse. Lucy looked at the guy's size twenty shoes, then down at Oliver, and then she made a dive for the guy, stopping him within

inches of Oliver with a tackle worthy of any ex high school football cheerleader.

The dishes crashed to the carpeting with a "plong" noise. Lucy landed face down in a tray of Fettuccini Alfredo.

"Super." She pushed herself up and wiped the creamy sauce from her face as best she could. "That's just super."

The hulk of a bus boy looked confused. He offered her a hand to help her up and she took it. "Sorry miss," he said, perhaps thinking it had been his error. "Are you all right?"

Lucy stared blankly at him. "Never been better. Having the time of my life. Yup. Thanks a bunch for asking."

"Good," he said. "Well I guess I'll go get a mop."

"Yeah, you do that."

She watched him pummel along back into the kitchen and then she remembered what all the tackling had been for. Oliver!

She spun around and fell down to her hands and knees to crawl closer to him.

"Oliver," she whispered. "Are you okay?"

Oliver was very unconscious. What if he was dead? The thought disturbed her more than she would have imagined.

She delicately prodded him with her right index finger. "Come on. Get up, there's a good mouse." She placed her finger on his little chest and tried to detect a heart beat. She couldn't feel anything. Was he breathing? She moved her face closer so she might be able to tell. Her eyes were focused on his furry little mouth, and when she was as close as possible to it, it moved. And spoke.

"Maybe you should perform mouth to mouse resuscitation," Oliver suggested, his eyes still closed.

Lucy backed off and stared down at him. He now had one eye open and a smart ass grin on his face.

"I should have just left you here," she said. She lowered her

arm. "Jump on, you little freak."

He carefully got to his feet. He wasn't faking that much. Obviously he'd had the wind knocked out of him. She nudged him onto her arm and then assisted him in getting up to her shoulder where he made himself comfortable.

"I don't like it here," Oliver said.

"I'm starting to agree with you. It just doesn't feel right. Veronica definitely has something to do with this place. We should get the hell out of here as soon as possible."

Back at the blackjack table not much had changed. Max was still winning more hands with his card counting ability than was probably smart. Although, as Lucy realized as she looked at his chips, he was only placing five gibney bets. She glanced over to where she'd been playing the slot machine. The woman who'd been seated next to her was still intently playing, not looking around at all. Barely moving except to put coin after coin into the slot.

Crazy gamblers, Lucy thought.

"Blackjack!" the dealer said. "Congratulations!"

The crowd gathered around the table shouted their approval. John turned to see Lucy had rejoined them, and with a big smile on his face, grabbed her to give her a long passionate kiss on her lips.

"Hey!" Oliver protested.

John parted from Lucy and she stared into his indigo blue eyes. What was she going to tell him again? Something about leaving?

But they were having such a good time!

"Let it ride, boys," Lucy said, placing an encouraging hand on Max's shoulder and the other on John's firm rear end.

"Lucy," Oliver pulled on her earlobe. "I thought we were going to get out of here."

"Blackjack!"

"Hooray!" the crowd yelled.

Juan appeared next to the dealer.

"Lucy McInnis and guests," he said after he'd put a hand on the shoulder of the dealer to make him stop dealing. "Please would you come with me. I will help you prepare for the special invitation poker game."

"What kind of preparation is required?" Lucy asked.

"Your attire," Juan held his smile, but looked at their clothes with noticeable distaste. "Is certainly interesting, but not quite appropriate for such an occasion. I would be honored if you would let me pick something out for you all to wear. On loan from Chez Inn for such an event."

Lucy looked down at her Alfredo stained shirt and yoga pants. "That would work," she said.

Juan led them up to their hotel rooms on the eighteenth floor.

"If you go into your rooms you will find the clothes already laid out for you. I hope that you will approve. When you are ready, please join the others in the penthouse suite. We will be waiting for you."

Lucy smiled at John, and then as an after thought also smiled at Max and Oliver, then she slipped inside her suite.

Luxurious, thy name is room 1804, she thought. White carpeting, round bed, heart-shaped Jacuzzi, big screen TV. She plunked herself down in the middle of the bed and unwrapped the chocolate on the pillow and popped it in her mouth. Next to the chocolate was a red-ribboned box. She pulled it onto her lap and opened it up.

It was a full length Versace cocktail gown. Lucy raised an eyebrow. Yup, the label said 'Versace.' She shook her head in disbelief. Where the hell was she? Talking mice, medieval taverns, magic berries, and Italian designer clothes.

Sure. Why not?

She checked the label again. It was exactly her size. She looked down to the side of the bed. High heeled black mules were waiting for her. By the vanity next to the mini bar, an assortment of perfumes and make-up awaited.

"Why did I ever say I wanted to leave this place?" she mused happily. This was the greatest hotel on the face of the planet. Or, *wherever* she was. She could stay here quite contentedly for the rest of her natural life.

Her mouth spread into a wide smile as she thought of the most important thing of all.

"Shower!" she cried, and bee-lined into the bathroom for probably the longest, hottest shower she'd ever taken. Exactly twelve and a half minutes. Absolute luxury.

She spent the next forty-seven and a half minutes blowdrying, moisturizing and lipsticking her heart out. She slipped into the Versace dress (which fit like it had been custom made for her) and glided into the shoes. She checked the finished product in the full length mirror.

"Now that's what I'm talking about," she said with approval to her reflection. "Bring it on."

There was a knock at the door. She ran to it and twisted the handle to open it up.

John stood there looking to-die-for in a tailored black tuxedo. He gave her a very charming half smile. "I don't remember ever seeing any woman as beautiful as you are right now."

"You don't remember anything," she replied. "But thank you. You're kind of beautiful yourself."

Max sauntered along behind John. His tuxedo was equally tailored, but of the powder blue variety. He seemed pleased with it.

"What about me?" he inquired.

"You, Max--" Lucy smiled. "I can barely find the words."

He nodded. "Just as I thought. I am enjoying my three dimensional container. I never wore clothes in my previous form."

"Too much information, buddy."

"I really must protest!" Oliver said. He too had a small tuxedo on although he didn't look pleased at all with it.

"Here." Max handed him one of his gold casino coins.

"Why don't you scram?"

Oliver held the heavy gold coin thoughtfully. Then a bright and cheery smile appeared on his face. "Thank you!"

Hmmm, Lucy thought absently. It must be the coins. The coins have some sort of power over us. They're keeping us from wanting to leave--

"Ready?" John asked, offering Lucy his arm.

She took it. "You bet! Ha ha. Get it? You bet? We're gambling? Oh never mind."

Chapter Six

The penthouse of Chez Inn had windows on every wall. Lucy peered out, slightly confused. The view wasn't the rustic landscape she'd walked through earlier to get there. The window looked down into the heart of a bustling metropolis. She'd guess it might be New York, but she'd been to New York and this was no New York she'd ever seen before.

Max and John had been playing poker for nearly an hour. They were doing pretty well, not that Lucy knew that much about poker, she just watched as their stacks of gold coins either increased or decreased. Oliver sat on the table leaning against a stack of coins, hugging the coin that Max had given to him tightly to his chest.

Lucy was a little bit bored, actually. They hadn't even invited her to play, not that she'd wanted to, but it would have been nice to have an invite. Four other men sat at the table. They were all very intent on the cards in their hands. Conversation was brief and to the point. Alcohol flowed freely. Juan served as bartender, making sure no one's glass

got more than half empty.

Or was it half full? Lucy wondered.

So, she stood by the window, sometimes looking out onto the cityscape, and sometimes feigning interest in the game, while she waited for it to be over. She tried to look poised and sure of herself. It was very possible that it was actually working.

There was one chair at the table that was unoccupied. Lucy wondered who it belonged to.

She didn't have to wonder for much longer.

As if he sensed something, Juan moved toward the elevator. It opened on cue, and a tall, dark, hunk of man-beast entered the room. He was striking, but an odd mix of man and what may have been...bull? But just a smidge.

He slapped Juan on the back in a friendly manner and approached the table fearlessly.

"We have a latecomer," Juan announced. "Jordan DeForge."

The players placed their cards face down and, one by one, stood up to shake DeForge's hand.

He must have had a firm grip because two of the men, after shaking DeForge's hand, rubbed theirs tenderly with pained expressions on their faces.

John extended his hand but DeForge grabbed him and gave him a big hug.

"If it isn't my old friend!" he exclaimed. His voice was deep and robust. (Like a fine Columbian coffee, Lucy thought). "I thought you were dead, you old bastard."

John appeared taken aback by the unexpected reaction. "Uh, yeah," he said. "Good to see you too."

Thought he was dead? Lucy frowned at that. Could he be one of the guys who'd beat him to a pulp and left him for dead in the field earlier? *Play it coy, John*, she thought. *Don't*

give yourself away.

"Nice of you to hand over your money to me," DeForge boomed. "You know what a poker expert I am."

"Right," John said. "Old card shark, my friend here is. Beats me all the time...right?"

"As rain."

"Well, I'm just here having some fun, myself." John darted a quick glance over to Lucy who nervously grinned back at him.

DeForge followed John's gaze and nodded his head. "Nice. Very nice. I approve. Not like the babes you're normally seen with, eh?"

"Ha. Right."

"Nah, she looks more like my type, actually. Does she have a name?"

"Yes," Lucy spoke up. "She does. It's Lucy."

"She's a spunky one." DeForge grinned big teeth and gums. "Okay fellas, the real game's started. Deal me in."

What a jerk, Lucy thought. *Come on, John and Max. Kick his butt.*

Two hours later, there was a large pile of money in front of DeForge and a teeny-weeny little pile in front of John and Max. They'd pooled their remaining funds to stay in the game.

Oliver was in the middle of a losing battle of tug-of-war for his coin. Max ripped it out of his hands.

With the next hand, that too was wiped out.

"What about my money?" Lucy whispered to John. "You can use it if you like."

He looked up at her sheepishly. "Already did."

"You *what*? I didn't say you could."

"You just did."

Lucy sighed. "Well, at least it was free money."

Juan stepped up and handed her a fresh glass of champagne. "Who said it was free? You must pay it back when you check out."

"What?" she gasped. "How much was it?"

"Each pouch contained ten thousand gibneys. So, thirty thousand gibneys in total."

"And," Max interjected. "On the remote possibility that we are unable to come through with the funds, what would be the worst case scenario?"

"Oh, we are very understanding at Chez Inn," Juan said. "You would have to have a meeting with Veronica, the owner of the casino, and she would decide the best course of action."

"Does she forgive many debts?"

"Only if the debtor is deceased. Or becomes deceased directly following a meeting with her."

John blinked at him. "Then it is just a good thing that we have plenty of money to cover our debt."

DeForge snorted. "When have you ever had two gibneys to rub together?"

"Since recently."

"Lying bastard," DeForge slapped John very hard on the back. "That's what I've always liked about you. Tell you what. I'll give you a chance to win your money back. I'll bet it all on the next hand. Just you and me."

John turned and raised an eyebrow at him. "Really? But, I don't have anything to bet."

"Sure you do," DeForge said. "Your woman."

Lucy gasped.

John frowned. "You want me to bet Lucy?"

"Yes."

"What are you planning on doing with her if you win her?" John asked calmly.

"Anything I want."

Lucy's eyes widened. They were *so* out of there. She'd rather face Veronica face-to-face that take a chance of becoming DeForge's girlfriend.

John drummed his fingers on the tabletop for a few seconds, then stopped. "Sounds fair enough."

"Deal the cards."

"Hey!" Lucy yelped. "What are you doing?"

"Don't worry," John said. "I've got it all under control."

"He's really an excellent card player," Max assured her.

"Statistically excellent, unless you count the last few hands."

"I'm counting the last few hands," Lucy said, her voice panicky. "Watch me count."

Five cards were dealt to each man. John stared at his hand. There were visible beads of sweat clinging to his forehead.

He discarded two cards. DeForge discarded one.

"Three kings," DeForge announced, laying his cards down for all to see.

"Three kings, huh? That's what you've got?" John stared down at his hand.

He has better cards, Lucy thought. Thank God. For a moment there I thought --

John's cheeks twitched. "Three kings," he said again.

"Well, I suppose that would beat my pair of fives."

Pair of fives? Lucy couldn't believe it. Who gets a pair of fives? Who?

She was frozen in place. DeForge got up from the table with a big grin on his face. "A pleasure doing business with you." He extended his hand to John who shook it limply.

John looked over to Lucy and shrugged like he was trying to say 'hey, I tried.'

A pair of bloody fives?

DeForge clamped his mitt of a hand around her upper arm,

taking immediate possession of his property. "Let's go."

She allowed him to lead her from the room. What the hell was she going to do?

"Take care of my winnings," DeForge instructed Juan on their way out.

"Yes, sir."

DeForge steered Lucy onto the elevator and let go of her arm as the doors closed. On their way to his room.

Help me.

"I don't care for the name Lucy," he informed her. "From now on your name will be Brigitte."

She frowned. "What's wrong with Lucy?"

"Too goofy."

"Lucy is a very nice name. It was my grandmother's name."

"Your grandmother must have been very goofy."

Lucy clenched her teeth.

"I was thinking," DeForge began.

"That's always a good thing."

"Do you like diamonds?"

Lucy paused. Was that a trick question?

"Of course," she said. "Who doesn't? Why?"

DeForge smiled. "I enjoy buying beautiful women beautiful things."

Lucy raised her eyebrows. "And I'm sure you don't expect anything in return, right?"

DeForge shook his head. "I'm offended that you think I'd take advantage of the situation."

"Sorry, I've never been won in a game of poker before. Don't really know how these things work."

"Simple," he said. "Allow me to buy you diamonds tonight. Tomorrow I'd be honored if you'd accompany me to The City. I have a meeting with The Man himself. I fear I only have the small limo's services, however. I hope that will be

acceptable."

Lucy hooked her arm in his as the elevator doors opened. "It's fast, but I think I just might be in love with you."

The moment they took one step outside of the elevator something large and heavy hit Lucy, knocking her to the floor. DeForge was tackled from the other side.

"Hold him!" she heard someone shout. "Hold him still!"

An arc of black went through the air and DeForge was knocked unconscious. He fell in a heavy heap to the plush-carpeted hallway of the eleventh floor

Lucy's eyesight came back into focus. She'd just been attacked by...

"John," she said with surprise. "Max. Oh, and Oliver. What a surprise."

Her trouble-free ticket to the city lay sprawled on his back clearly out for the count.

John held a small dark metal statue of Veronica proudly in his hand. Max had one knee pressed firmly against DeForge's chest. Oliver stood a short ways off jumping up and down and shouting, "Hooray!"

"We couldn't just let him take you away. What kind of friends do you think we are?" John said. "Now grab his key and let's tie him up in his room."

"You don't have to thank us," Max said, getting to his feet. "It was the least we could do."

That's good, because she wasn't going to thank them. In fact she wanted to beat their heads together.

She looked down at her Romeo on the floor. The man who'd have bought her diamonds and taken her to the city in a damn limo.

He *was* pretty ugly.

She felt through his pockets. John must have hit him extremely hard because he wasn't moving. He was breathing,

though. She turned her face away. Funny, in the elevator she hadn't noticed the man-beast breath.

"Okay, I've got it." Lucy pulled out the card key.

Max dragged the unconscious Jordan DeForge a short way down the hall. Lucy swiped the card and they all entered his empty, darkened suite.

John pulled some sheets off the bed and tore them into strips. Then he bound DeForge's hands and feet, and gagged his mouth. It took all three of them to heft him up onto the bed.

"So, do you recognize him?" Lucy asked John as he tightened the bindings.

John frowned. "No. Not at all."

"He sure seemed to know you."

"I know."

"Why didn't you get him talking about it? Maybe he could have helped you out."

"Or maybe he was one of the guys who left me in the field to die."

"I had thought of that."

"Now," Max said after they'd finished. "I'd suggest that we leave this place."

"The desire to stay is wearing off, huh?" Lucy said. "What was the deal with that?"

"It was the coins," Oliver said. Lucy reached down to pick him up before somebody stepped on him by accident.

His whiskers twitched. "I was okay before I'd been given a coin. You three got bags of them as soon as we got here. The coins make you want to stay. Make you happy. Now that we lost all of them, we're back to normal."

"You're like a little Sherlock Holmes."

"The name is Oliver Magee."

"You know what I mean."

"No," Oliver said. "I really don't."

John stepped forward. "We should change out of these clothes. Then we have to sneak out of here. We do owe them money and they probably wouldn't look too fondly on that fact."

Lucy nodded. "Good point. We'll have to be super sneaky."

DeForge grunted. Everyone jumped at the sound and darted for the door.

"We need to get out of here," John said, "before he wakes up."

"Who is he, anyhow?" Lucy asked. "He seemed to know you pretty good."

"Pretty well," Max said.

"What?"

"The correct grammar for that sentence is 'pretty well,' not 'pretty good.'"

Lucy stared blankly at him. "Do you have an off button?"

"Of course I do. But I am not telling you where it is."

"He didn't look familiar to me at all," John said. "So I don't know. Maybe we worked together, maybe we were just poker buddies. Who knows? I do know we need to leave this place. It's wrong. I don't like what it did to us. What sense I still have left I'd like to retain."

"We'd better not let Juan see us, or he'll make us pay back the money."

"Right."

They were in the hallway by this time. Lucy pressed the down button and after a moment, the elevators opened.

Lucy made a move to step onto the elevator but froze in place.

Veronica, the head of Veronica Industries with a burning desire to see Lucy dead, was staring directly at her. Surprise registered in her long-lashed green eyes.

"You!" she exclaimed.

Lucy whacked her in the face with her purse and Veronica fell back against the side of the elevator. The doors closed.

"Run!" Lucy yelled.

Chapter Seven

Despite the fact that no one else had ever seen Veronica or knew exactly what she might be capable of, they obeyed Lucy's wishes and ran after her. Toward the stairwell.

It would only be a matter of seconds before Veronica came to her senses and alerted the hotel's security.

She'd been all alone in the elevator, Lucy thought as she thundered down another flight of stairs. That was strange, wasn't it?

No time to think.

They ran down flight after flight, and all the while Lucy said a silent prayer that she wouldn't trip on her high heels. She came close a couple of times but managed to stay on her feet. Oliver, by this time, was hopelessly tangled in her hair and holding on for dear life.

Finally they reached the main floor. Max took a quick peek out of the little glass window in the door that led back out to the casino floor.

"The way appears clear," he said. "I suggest we go now."

They gingerly stepped through the door and Lucy tried to

bring her breathing back down to a regular pace. It was just a good thing that she hadn't been running up the stairs instead of down or she'd probably be laying on her back next to a slot machine waiting for the paramedics to arrive.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lucy saw a glimpse of Veronica, standing next to her namesake statue, with her back to the casino floor.

"Through the kitchen," she gasped, and grabbed Max's tuxedo. They slunk to the buffet without attracting too much unwanted attention considering that they were walking hunched over. Once at the buffet, they hid behind the dessert table for a moment.

She frowned. "Did they have mini cheesecakes here earlier?"

"I do not eat so I did not observe it being so."

Lucy looked around quickly. "Where's John?"

Max's plastic face crunched in thought. "He was with us just thirty seconds ago."

Lucy braved a quick look over the buffet table and her eyes nearly popped out of her head.

John stood firmly in place in the middle of the casino as Veronica approached him.

He was going to get himself killed trying to defend me, she thought. He's so brave. If he lives, I just may have to marry him and bear his children.

Veronica finally reached him with a sly smile on her face. She placed her hands on either side of his head. He didn't flinch.

"She's going to kill him," Max observed casually. "Crush his skull like a melon."

But Veronica didn't crush anything. Except her lips against his. Lucy took a moment to retrieve her eyes from the floor since they'd nearly popped out with that sight.

Veronica kissed John long and passionately. Lucy could only see the back of his head. He hadn't pulled her closer, though, his arms hung loosely at his sides.

"Okay John," Lucy breathed. "Pull away. She's evil. It's an evil kiss. Pull away now. Right now."

Time passed.

Lucy absently drummed her fingers against the empty plate of cheesecake she'd just devoured.

"Perhaps they know each other," Max suggested.

"You think?" Lucy said sarcastically. Her face was red with irrational anger over what she was seeing. "I think I'm going to kill him."

"How long should we wait?" Oliver asked. He was in the process of chowing down a crumb of cheesecake also.

John and Veronica finally broke off the kiss and now seemed to be in the middle of an intense discussion with her hand firmly on his rear end.

"Perhaps he just got his memory back," Max said. "Maybe they are married."

"Not possible," said Lucy. "I killed her husband earlier today."

"Oh."

"We're not waiting for him," Lucy decided. "Let's go."

Keeping low to the floor they made their way behind the buffet tables and toward the swinging door that led to the kitchen.

Several chefs were at work preparing the constantly overturning feast. A few bus boys and dishwashers hurried here and there.

Maybe no one would notice them, she hoped.

Lucy held onto Max's arm as they made their way toward a door at the back. Hopefully it led outside. Lucy made a silent vow that she'd never step foot inside another casino for the

rest of her life. She wouldn't even buy scratch-and-win lottery tickets anymore if she got out of this in one piece.

The large, white-aproned body of a chef stepped into their path.

"And what are you two doing back here?" he asked.

Lucy looked up. He had a pasty, white, pudgy face with a tiny, greasy black moustache. He looked like a cross between the Pillsbury Dough Boy and Hitler.

The chef held a large chopping knife firmly in his right hand.

Lucy forced a bright smile to her face. "Are you the head chef?"

"Who wants to know?"

"Only an extremely satisfied customer, that's who!"

The chef arched a surprised eyebrow at this. "Is that so?"

"I have been to many buffets in my time, but I have to tell you that this is the best one ever. Everything out there is to die for. Delicious, fresh, and melt in your mouth. I just had to drag my husband," she grabbed Max's arm. Oliver sneezed, "Oh, and my son. I dragged them back here so we could pay our compliments to the chef."

The chef's eyebrow hadn't moved from its arched position. He looked from Lucy's android husband to her mouse offspring, back and forth, then back to Lucy herself. A grin cut his pasty face in half. "A satisfied customer is always welcome in my kitchen. People like you make my job worthwhile. Thank you for the compliment."

"Our pleasure," Max said, after glancing at Lucy. "Now, tell us, is there a back way out of this kitchen?"

"A back way?" the chef's smile faltered, then held. "Of course. Just continue on in this direction, past the dishwashers, and there's an exit at the back."

"Thank you."

"No," the chef put down his knife, and grasped Max's plastic hand in his. "Thank you." He then clutched Lucy and gave her a firm kiss on both cheeks. "Your son is due for a growth spurt, eh? I suggest lasagna. Lots of lasagna."

"No way!" Oliver said. "I hate lasagna."

"Shut up, dear," Lucy scolded. Then to the chef, "A pleasure. Take care."

They made haste through the kitchen. Past the dishwashers, who all looked about ready to go on strike, there was a large door that read, "Exit."

Lucy had a sudden twinge of guilt about leaving John behind. Not that he probably minded. Kissing Veronica like they were minutes away from getting horizontal.

Just as suddenly, Lucy no longer felt guilty about leaving John behind. She grabbed the handle of the door and thrust it open, expecting to be greeted with fresh air.

Beyond the door was a hallway.

Definitely not outside.

"Shit," Lucy said.

"Yes," Max agreed. "Shit."

"You two aren't going to make me eat any lasagna, are you?" Oliver asked. "You have to promise me you won't."

"Shush. We're still trapped in this damn place," Lucy said. "I need to think."

They took a step into the hallway and looked to their right and then to their left. The hallway was so long they couldn't see the end of it either way. It was peppered with doors.

"Which way?"

Max appeared to compute something, binary code flashed in his eyes. "Either way seems equally able to give us either success or failure in our quest to find a true exit."

"You're a whole hell of a lot of help."

"The data doesn't allow --"

"Yeah yeah, data shmata. Let's go..." Lucy paused as if trying to sense something from the directional gods "...right."

Max followed Lucy into the hallway. Lucy tried one of the doors. It was locked. She shook her head, annoyed, and continued.

They were trapped there, she just knew it. The Casino of Doom, that had to be what it was referred to in any of the travel brochures in whatever mixed up, crazy world she'd been tossed into.

In fact, the longer she was in this crazy world, the less crazy all of the crazy stuff seemed.

If that made any sense at all.

Her goal was to get to The City and see The Man. That was her only clue so far about how to get back to her normal life and that was exactly what she was going to do.

Maybe there wasn't an escape from the casino. Maybe once you were in, you were there for good. The thought chilled her to the bone but she decided not to share it with her traveling partners.

After they'd walked along the hallway for a few minutes they came across a door that differed from the others because it had a small gold star on it. They stopped to inspect it closer.

"What do you make of that?" Max asked.

"It's a star," Oliver replied.

"Yes, but what does it mean?"

Lucy reached for the handle. It turned in her grasp. She flicked a look of surprise at Max and opened the door.

It was a small room with a green carpet and a comfy-looking couch. Mirrors with lights framing them and a slough of make up at one side.

Sitting with his back to the door but his tear-streamed face to the mirrors was a skinny man with blue skin. He cried like

there was no tomorrow.

"Hey," she said quietly, stepping inside the room. "It's okay. What's wrong?"

The blue man started in his seat and hurriedly wiped the tears from his face, taking a smear of mascara and eyeliner with it. There were now big black blotches under his eyes. He reached for a pink-colored handkerchief and blew his nose noisily.

"Oh, are you fans?" he asked brightly. "This isn't what it looks like. I'm just rehearsing a dramatic monologue for my show tonight. Nothing, it's nothing at all to concern yourselves with. Did you want an autograph?"

"Um, no I don't think so, but thanks," Lucy said. She noticed as she spoke another big tear was wobbling at the corner of the man's eye. "Well, perhaps an autograph would be lovely."

The blue man smiled, and the tear was sucked back into his tear duct. He reached into a drawer of the make-up table and grabbed an 8x10 glossy photo of himself.

"And your name?" he inquired.

"Lucy," she said, glancing at Max.

"To Lucy," the man said as he inscribed the photo with flourish, "Best of everything, Nesbig Starr. There you go my dear." He handed her the photo.

"Nesbig Starr?" she repeated. "That's your name?"

"Of course it is."

"So that's why there's a star on the door," she concluded.

"Coincidence only," Starr said. "It's really because I'm the star attraction at Chez Inn. I hope you'll be able to catch my show tonight," he glanced at the clock on the wall, "Only twenty minutes. I'd better get back to fixing my face. Thanks ever so for stopping by."

"We'd love to see your show," Lucy lied. "But why were

you crying? It looked pretty real to me."

Starr looked insulted. "I am an *ac-tor*," he said. "My life's work is to make things that are false appear to be real. And I'm *fabulous* at it."

"Sorry," Lucy said. "I didn't mean to offend you. I guess we'll be going." She made a move for the door. At the rate they were going it might take them hours to find a way out, and that was if there really *was* a way out. There was no time to waste. She reached for the door handle.

"No wait!" Starr said. He stood up. "Don't go."

Lucy froze. "You don't want us to go?"

Starr sat back down and flipped his hand at them dismissively. "Go if you wish."

"Um, okay," she opened the door. "Bye."

"Please stay!" Starr pleaded.

Lucy closed the door and turned around with an annoyed look on her face. "What is it, stay or go?"

Starr hunched over in his chair. "I don't think I can go on tonight."

"Go on stage," Max asked, "Or go on in general."

"Both."

"Why not?" Lucy asked.

"Stage fright," Starr admitted. "I can't handle it. The casino gave me these --" He motioned with his shoulder towards a small bottle of prescription medication "-- but it just doesn't feel right to rely on artificial courage. I do not want the light of my talent to be stifled by something so false."

"How long have you been performing here?" Lucy asked. "You must have been able to get over the stage fright other nights? Right?"

"Not really. I've been here for half a moon and I've never been on stage. They told me that if I can't do it tonight I'm going to be fired."

"Maybe that would be the best thing," Lucy said. "Move on to somewhere else."

"Not if they use real fire."

Lucy tried to think of something to say to that but came up blank.

"You have to go on, then," Max said, filling the sudden silence. "There's no other choice."

"Unless you escape," Lucy said, a plan filling her tired brain. "With us."

Starr's raccoon eyes widened at the suggestion. "You're trying to escape?"

"Yup. Trying is the operative word, though. This place is like a maze."

"Yes," Starr nodded gravely. "They do make it difficult for the guests."

"What is the real deal with this place?" Lucy asked. "And the gold coins?"

Starr stood up and walked over to his wardrobe. He opened it up and took out a violet dressing gown complete with fur trim. He dramatically threw it around his bare shoulders and spun around, the robe swishing behind him.

"*Veronica*," he said. "Do you know of Veronica?"

"Of course."

"She's evil." Starr's voice lowered to a fierce whisper. "She owns this place and the gold was made by wizards she keeps as slaves."

"Wizards?" Lucy said. "Like Harry Potter?"

"They have many names. He may be one of them, I don't know. The point is, Veronica is very old."

"She's hot," Oliver piped up. "I thought she was in her twenties."

"Maybe twenty thousand," Starr said. "At least that's the rumor. I've never actually met her face to face, but that's what

they say. The gold drains people's free will. She harnesses that free will to stay young forever."

"Really?" Lucy said skeptically. "That sounds a little far fetched."

"However, it may well be true," Max agreed. "Our free will was impeded when we were in possession of the coins."

"But to keep her looking young?" Lucy said. "That's impossible."

Then again, so is everything I've seen today, she thought. Why should this be any different?

Starr shook his head. "When the people have the gold, are gambling with it, touching it in any way, they are without the ability to change their destinies. And they don't really care. Some of the people on the floor right now have been here for many years without even once thinking about leaving."

"But we are. Do you know how to get out of here?" Lucy waited, holding her breath for his answer.

"Had I taken those pills," Starr said, "I may have forgotten. But I do know a way. Where are you going once you're out of this dump?"

"To the City," Max said. "We have business to attend to there."

Starr clasped his hands together in glee. "The City!" he exclaimed. "I've always wanted to go there. The opportunities for a brilliant actor/singer/dancer such as myself are limitless. I could become the next big thing!"

"But, don't you have stage fright? Doesn't that affect you wherever you go?"

"Hush! Have I stolen your spotlight? Do not steal mine. I shall be famous. The name of Nesbig Starr will be on everyone's lips."

"Super," Lucy said. "Then let's get the hell out of here while we still have a chance. Lead the way."

But Starr had to first pack up a few things. His make up, most of his clothes, and his glossy photos, of course. He packed them all in a large suitcase. Luckily it had wheels and a strap so he could drag it behind him.

"Aren't you going to change?" Max asked, noting his purple dressing gown.

"Why change when one is already perfect?" Starr replied with utmost seriousness.

They emerged into the hallway once again, Starr in the lead. He went to the right, rolling his suitcase behind him. The wheels made the odd squeaky noise, but other than that they tried to remain as silent as possible.

Lucy wondered briefly if Starr's skin really was blue or if it was just make-up. She had a funny feeling it really was blue. She decided to think of him as *Diva Smurf* from then on.

But just to herself.

Diva Smurf opened a door. It led to the back stage of the theatre. He released his suitcase and skipped toward the closed curtains to take a quick peek at the waiting audience.

"My fans," he said. "They will be sorely disappointed that I am not going to perform tonight."

"Didn't you say that you have yet to perform since you were hired here?" Max asked.

Starr shut the curtains firmly and grabbed the strap of his suitcase again. "They will still be disappointed."

"Okay, show boy," Lucy said. "Let's not waste any more time. We don't want to be caught."

"No," Veronica came into the light from the other side of the stage, her green eyes flashing angrily. "Wouldn't want that, would we?"

Chapter Eight

Lucy gasped. Veronica was walked right towards them on four inch high patent leather stilettos, wearing a black mini dress that showed off long, lean legs. Her full red hair flowed behind her.

"I told you I was going to kill you," Veronica said. "And I wasn't kidding. It's just your sorry luck you ended up here." She cackled with laughter.

"It wasn't my fault." Lucy tried to explain, knowing it was useless. "I didn't mean to kill him."

"You think I believe that?"

"Probably not. But he was a cat, for Pete's sake. seriously, did you know that?"

"Yes," Veronica said. "A hobby of my beloved husband, is all."

"Beloved? I thought you two were separated."

Veronica's eyes flashed. "Who told you that?"

Lucy took a step back. "Um, just heard it through the grapevine."

"It was Bertha wasn't it? God, how I hate that bitch."

Lucy's gaze was caught by something else in the shadows. John stepped out, still looking devastatingly handsome in his tuxedo. He approached Veronica.

That's right John, Lucy thought. Belt her with something. Knock her out.

Instead he put an arm around her waist.

"How should we do it darling?" Veronica purred to John.

"Gun, knife, bare hands?"

"That is entirely up to you," he said. "Here, have another of these."

Veronica opened her mouth and John popped a berry into it like one might feel a peeled grape to a queen.

It was a boosenberry. One that they'd picked from the field earlier that day and put in the plastic baggie. He must have kept some in his pockets.

"Those are so tasty." Veronica giggled. "Fruit. I like fruit."

"Yes, fruit is good. Here have another." He popped another berry in her mouth.

"They're almost as tasty as you," Veronica murmured. She was getting less coherent with each sentence.

"Much tastier." John aimed another berry at her ready mouth. "That should probably do it."

"Do what?" Veronica slurred. "Wait, I forgot, we have to kill... wait, who was I going to kill? I forget." Her eyes focused back on Lucy. "Oh yeah, you. Hold still now. I'm going to kill you."

Veronica took a step toward Lucy and collapsed to the floor, fast asleep.

"I thought we were saving those for a special occasion," Lucy said to John.

He looked down at the empty plastic bag. "I thought this was a special occasion. Now what's the plan?"

Lucy relaxed a bit. He was back. Whatever she'd seen earlier on the floor of the casino had been a very good act.

Or was it?

"Are you sure you don't want to stay here and wait for your girlfriend to wake up?" she asked sarcastically.

John gave her a humorless grin. "Not particularly."

"Then we're escaping. John I'd like you to meet Nesbig Starr, he's our guide out of here."

John extended his hand. Starr approached him looking quite impressed. "Well aren't you a tall drink of water," he said, and then nodded down at the unconscious Veronica. "So she wasn't your girlfriend?" John shook his head. "So that means that you're available?"

John snatched his hand back. "Okay, let's be on our way, shall we?"

"Marvelous," Starr said, beaming happily. "Follow me."

He led them to the back of the stage. The scenery looked a lot like what they'd walked through after leaving the tavern earlier that day. There was a small hut built into the stage that served as part of whatever skit Starr was supposed to have taken part in. Starr opened the door to the hut.

"This way," he said and disappeared inside.

"Is he joking?" John said. "Where did you find this guy?"

"He's going to be the next big thing," Max said. "So I wouldn't joke if I were you."

"Yeah, he's the next big thing, all right," John replied. "The next big thing I'm going to punch."

"Come out of there, Starr," Lucy called after him. "No time for games. When this chick wakes up she's going to kill me. I need to get out of here."

Starr didn't reply.

"I've had just about enough of this," John said, and entered the hut.

Lucy and Max waited. He didn't reemerge. Lucy looked at Max who shrugged his shoulders.

They waited another minute and then went through the door themselves, Max first.

And emerged outside the Inn from one of the little huts that had been swaying in the rain storm earlier.

"Cool," Lucy said.

It had stopped raining, the stars were out, brightly shining and twinkling.

Including the Starr they'd picked up. In the interim, he'd used the time they'd waited for the others to join them to flirt with John.

"Thanks for the exit," Lucy said to Starr. "You really came through."

"Now to the City," Starr said excitedly. "Off we go."

"Which way, Max?" Lucy asked.

"We should continue to follow this road," he said. "And eventually we should see the City ahead of us. It is as simple as that."

"Let's go."

They walked along the road, waiting every now and then for Starr to catch up. He was having a hard time keeping his suitcase upright along the bumpy road.

Lucy began to feel her weariness catching up to her with every step she took. And it didn't help too much that they'd had to abandon their comfortable clothes and were now stuck in the evening wear that included very awkward high heels for her to walk in.

"Is anyone else dead tired?" she asked. "I was actually looking forward to a good night's sleep in that great suite."

"I'm exhausted," Oliver said.

"Yeah, I guess traveling on my shoulder the whole trip really takes it out of you."

"I'm *mentally* drained," he replied.

"I'm tired, too," John said.

"Yeah, I guess you used up a lot of energy making out with Veronica."

He stopped in his tracks. "I was only doing it to save your ungrateful skin," he said. "Do you think I enjoyed it?"

"Well...yeah I do," Lucy said.

"Somebody sounds a little *jealous*," Starr said.

"Shut up," Lucy hissed. "Nobody asked you."

John grinned and caught up to Lucy who'd picked up her speed. "Jealous? Is that right? Is somebody jealous? I think I kind of like that."

Lucy's cheeks flushed. She was glad it was dark out. Was she jealous? Why was she overreacting? John had basically proven that he'd only done what he'd done to save her. If he hadn't distracted Veronica, Lucy might be in the questionable custody of the Inn's security guards. And then he'd saved her ass again when he'd fed Veronica the boosenberries.

Instead, she chose not to answer. She continued walking along ahead of the others with her arms crossed in front of her.

They walked another hour in silence. Lucy had no idea what time it could be, but the moon (*only one moon*, she thought, *at least that was a good sign*), was high and full in the sky.

"We should stop, get off the road, and try to catch a bit of sleep," John suggested. "What about right here?"

Behind a large cluster of trees was a rather convenient pile of straw. It looked about as comfortable as anything Lucy had ever seen in her life and she gratefully accepted the invitation to stop walking.

"After the day I've had, that looks almost as good as the suite," she said, and was the first to climb up on top of the

pile. She arranged it around herself like a little nest.

"I do not require sleep," Max said. "But I shall shut down to preserve my battery. If you would be so kind as to restart me when you are ready to continue?"

"How do we do that?" John asked.

"My restart switch is located in my big toe. Just squeeze it and I will reawaken."

"I'm not touching your feet, buddy," John said with disgust.

"I'll do it," Lucy said, rolling her eyes. "Now let's all gets some shut-eye."

Max's eyes rolled with binary code, and then faded out. He was temporarily deactivated.

"Is there anywhere that I can use to cleanse my face?" Starr asked. "Perhaps a small, fresh water pond?"

Lucy sat up and looked at him. "I don't happen to have a map of the area amenities on me. Do you think you can skip it tonight?"

Starr looked aghast. "Skip my skin care routine? Well, I suppose it may be safer to stay together." He unzipped his suitcase and took out a bottle of water. "This will have to do."

After Starr spent at least fifteen minutes cleansing and moisturizing, he lay down and promptly started to snore.

"Oh brother," Lucy said, listening to the noise. "That's just great."

Oliver was also snoring, much quieter, on top of Lucy's purse by her feet.

"What?" John asked, propping himself up on his elbow.

"Does everybody snore? Do you snore?"

He grinned at her. "You'll have you let me know."

"I wasn't jealous by the way."

He shrugged. "If you say so."

"Seriously. I don't even know you. What reason do I have

to be jealous?"

"You found me in the field, naked and helpless, and immediately fell head over heels in love with me. It happens."

"Yeah, in your dreams, John-boy." Lucy lay back with her hands behind her head. She looked up at the stars. "What did you and Veronica discuss between playing tonsil hockey anyhow? She acted like she'd known you for a long time."

John cleared his throat nervously. "I think she did know me, not that I remember. I have a funny feeling I was one of her Enforcers. From what I gather, it's like the Army of Veronica. Her bodyguards. The guys who do her dirty work. I was one of them, and I think that DeForge was also one of them. For all I know, he may still be."

This surprised Lucy, but not as much as she might have thought it would. "Do you think that's why she was on the elevator alone coming up to DeForge's floor? Do you think she was showing up for a little noogie?"

"Noogie?" John asked. "What's that?"

"Basically what you guys were doing on the floor of the casino, only horizontal."

He thought about this then looked at her before bursting out laughing.

"Shh," Lucy said, reaching over to put a hand over his mouth. "You'll wake the others."

John took her hand in his and held it to his lips. His gaze burned into hers.

"Are you sure you weren't a little jealous?" he asked, his breath warm against her fingers.

She felt all weak and funny suddenly. Maybe it was all the hay she was laying in. Maybe it was having a little alone time with the most gorgeous guy she'd ever seen. She bit her lower lip.

"Maybe a little," she admitted, and immediately regretted it. She hated wearing her emotions on her sleeve. It was too easy to get hurt that way.

"Don't worry," John said, moving a little closer to her. "The whole time I was with her I was only thinking about you."

"That is such a guy thing to say --"

He kissed her then, cutting off whatever else she was going to say.

Starr snorted in his sleep, murmuring something about "lights, camera, action" and rolled over noisily.

Lucy pulled away from John and looked at him shyly. "We'd better get some sleep."

"Yeah," he said. "Sleep well, Lucy."

And Lucy fell asleep.

Or more precisely, Lucy fell asleep after a long time of looking up at the bright stars in the sky and the moon shining down on her flushed cheeks.

Chapter Nine

Lucy was shaken awake as the hay they were sleeping on seemed to go over a big bump in the road.

"What the hell?" she exclaimed.

John darted up to a sitting position and looked around.

"What's going on? Why are we moving?"

The hay was definitely moving, off the road, and along a rough trail through the forest.

Oliver rubbed his eyes and sleepily crawled up on Lucy's shoulder. "Good morning, Lucy."

Starr awoke a little slower. He peeled off the eye mask he wore, then yawned, not seeming too perturbed by the fact they were moving.

John shakily got to his feet and looked around the stack of hay in the direction they were moving.

He sat back down. "We are on a cart being pulled by two horses."

"A hay cart?" Starr asked, stating the obvious.

"Yes. A hay cart."

"Where are we going?" Lucy asked.

John shrugged and then pointed in the direction of the cart. "That way."

"This isn't good," Lucy said. "Who knows how long we've been moving. Why didn't we realize we were sleeping on a hay cart, anyhow?"

"It was pretty dark," Oliver offered.

"Somebody wake up Max," Lucy said.

"I said I'm not touching his feet," John said.

"Geez. Fine, I'll do it myself."

Lucy shuffled down to Max's end of the cart and looked at his feet. "Did he say which big toe it was?"

"No, but I'm sure it's his left or his right."

Lucy made a face at John, then remembered their kiss from the night before and looked away. She grabbed Max's right big toe and squeezed it.

Nothing happened.

She grabbed his left big toe and squeezed it.

Again, no dice.

"Don't tell me I'm going to have to take his shoes off,"

Lucy said. "Because that's just gross. I don't care if he's made of plastic or not."

But, take off his shoes she did. And when that didn't work, she also took off his socks. She squeezed his toes so tightly that if he'd been human they may have exploded from the pressure. But nothing worked.

Max was broken.

"What are we going to do now?" she asked nervously.

"Leave him behind," Starr suggested. "He'll only slow us down."

"That's not an option," Lucy said, frowning. "He's coming along. We wouldn't have made it this far without him."

"I doubt that he'll be as comfortable to carry on your shoulder as your little mouse friend there."

"I won't have to carry him. We'll figure something out."

The cart came to an abrupt stop. Lucy was knocked off her feet and landed in John's arms.

"I guess we've arrived," she said. "What are the odds we're in the city?"

"I don't think so," John said. "Max said that we had to stay on the road. Wherever we are it's out of our way. We have to get Max back on his feet so we can continue on."

"Right. Everybody hide. Somebody's coming over here."

The farmer who'd been driving the cart approached, though he didn't bother to glance in the back, which, as far as he must have been concerned, only contained hay. Once he'd moved away, Lucy emerged from her hiding spot and shook her head to free it from loose pieces of hay.

"We need to figure out where we are," she said. The cart was parked at the edge of a tiny town that reminded her of one of those old western movies that might have a shoot out in the middle of main street at high noon. "And how to get back on track. We need to put Max somewhere safe until we figure out how to wake him up."

It took the help of Lucy, John and Starr to drag Max off the cart. Lucy had a feeling that Starr wasn't helping out all that much and instead just "acting" like he was. They dragged him behind a large bush and covered him up with leaves.

"Sorry Max," Lucy said, after they'd finished. "We'll be back for you. I promise."

They made their way into the town. It was dusty and dry and dirty. A tumbleweed rolled by.

"Where's Clint Eastwood when you need him?" Lucy asked. "Did he usually play a good guy in those movies, or a bad guy?"

"Movies?" Starr asked breathlessly. "I'm going to be a movie star, you know."

"Yes, of course you are. Your name will be in lights, Starr," Lucy said with a straight face. "Your face on every poster..." She stopped walking at the front of one of the buildings.

"What in the hell is that?"

She pointed.

Taped up to the inside of a glass window was a wanted poster with a drawing of Lucy on it. It read: *Wanted, dead or alive (preferably dead). Lucy. Murderer and thief. Big honking reward offered. Contact Veronica at 555-BABE.*

"I'm going to be sick," Lucy said. "That doesn't look anything like me."

"Look, there's more posters over there," Starr pointed. "I'm soooo jealous."

"Obviously news travels fast," said John.

"Veronica." Lucy spat, balling her hand into a fist. "I really hate that chick."

"I think the feeling's mutual," John replied.

"Well, we can't very well stay here. It's obviously not safe."

"I wonder who put them up?" John said.

"Probably some of her Enforcers. When they're not servicing her in other ways, that is."

He shot her a look with that comment. "So what's the plan, commander?"

Lucy frowned in thought and adjusted the front of her black evening gown. Her feet ached. All she really wanted to do was to sit down in a nice little diner and have an omelet and a big cup of highly-caffeinated coffee. It didn't look like that was in their immediate future from where she was standing.

"I can't think of anything but go back to the cart and drive it out of here."

"But where? We have no idea where we are."

She shook her head. "I know that. But it's not like we can ask anybody. We'll just drive *somewhere*. Maybe we'll find

the road without too much of a problem."

"But we just *got* here." Starr sounded disappointed. "I was hoping to hand out a few pictures of myself. For publicity purposes."

"Maybe the next town. I promise."

"Why'd you have to go and murder somebody, anyhow? And what did you steal?"

Lucy felt an early morning headache developing. Talking to Starr was like talking to a blue, heavily made-up brick wall.

"The killing thing was an accident. Really. I don't just go around killing people. And I was given this..." she held out her wrist for him to see the bracelet."

"Oh, that's lovely."

"I know. Veronica seems to really want it back. Believe me, if it wasn't stuck on my wrist I'd take great pleasure in throwing it at her. So what do you two make of my plan?"

"Hey! Don't forget about me," Oliver said from her shoulder.

"Oh, sorry. You're so small, I sometimes forget you're there."

"I think it's a good plan," he said.

"I don't think it's a good plan." John had his arms crossed. "But it's the only one we have."

"And you Starr? What do you think?"

Starr shrugged, he'd been inspecting his fingernails. "Whatever."

"Great," Lucy sighed. "Seems to be unanimous. Let's get the hell out of here."

They turned to go back to the cart and hadn't taken more than a few steps when they heard the inarguable click of a gun from behind them.

"What was that?" Lucy breathed. She slowly turned around.

There was a very large shotgun pointed at them, held by a very large bald man with a very large star on his suede vest.

"You Lucy?" he asked.

"*No hablo Anglaise*," she said.

"Don't give me that. Whatever that was. You're the outlaw Lucy."

"Outlaw?"

"Your picture's plastered from one end to the other of this town. I'm surprised you had the guts to show your face here."

"There's been some kind of a mistake," John took a step forward.

The man shot at the ground in front of him and he jumped back.

"I don't need no lip from one of her sidekicks. Make another move and I'll aim just a little higher next time. Now, raise your arms. No funny business now."

There didn't seem to be any arguing with this man.

According to Lucy's vast knowledge of western movies (which wasn't all that vast at all), the way the man was dressed, the gun, and the star on his vest clearly labeled him as the town's sheriff.

The sheriff, who didn't choose to introduce himself, led them into a building at the dead centre of the dusty town. Lucy was pretty sure it was the jailhouse, due to the jail cells inside of it.

He opened one and shoved Lucy unceremoniously inside. She almost fell.

"Now I ain't got no beef with the rest of y'all," the sheriff said to John and Starr. "I won't hold it against you that you were seen with the likes of her. Be on your way and I'll look the other way. Just this one time."

"Marvelous," Starr said. "See you around."

He left the jailhouse without a backward glance.

Lucy was amazed. Of all the nerve! That little blue bugger.
"And what about you?" the sheriff said, tipping his gun towards John.

"I appreciate the offer," he said. "But I think I'll have to decline."

Almost faster than the eye, he snatched the gun out of the sheriff's hands, and pointed it at him instead. "Now if you'd be so kind to let her out of that cell, we'll all be on our way."

Lucy shook her head. He was amazing.

And he looked really hot holding that gun.

"Is that so?" said the sheriff.

"Yeah, I'm afraid it --" John's expression went blank and he fell forward onto the floor. Behind him stood a slightly shorter version of the sheriff.

"Trouble, sir?"

"Not anymore, Deputy," the sheriff said. "If you'll help me throw this trash in the clink I'd appreciate it."

"Anything to help."

John landed next to Lucy and she looked at his unconscious form. She patted the back of his head where he'd taken the hit.

"Can't stop getting knocked out, can you?" she murmured.
"But I appreciate the attempt."

He groaned and rolled over.

"So now what?" Lucy asked the sheriff. "What are you going to do with us?"

"A wanted fugitive and her posse?"

"Excuse me?" Lucy blushed. "That's very rude."

"I said *posse*."

"Oh. Then, nevermind."

"I was going to call Veronica. You know, collect the reward. A few extra gibneys will keep the wolves away from the doors of our fair town of Wayward Falls. But, now I must

admit to having second thoughts."

"Really? Anything I can do to convince you to release me. Anything at all --"

"I am a happily married man, harlot."

Lucy shook her head. "I didn't mean *that*."

The sheriff frowned. "But you said *anything*."

Lucy tried not to vomit at the thought. "Then what are your second thoughts, if I may ask?"

The sheriff nodded and slapped his deputy on the back.

"The poster did say dead or alive. Wayward Falls hasn't had ourselves a good hanging in ages."

"A...a hanging?" Lucy sputtered. "What are you talking about?"

"Obviously you're as guilty as the day is long. I just figured we'd make a little occasion out of this situation. After it's all said and done we'll be sure to deliver you to Veronica. I'm sure she'll be pleased to get you either way."

"The poster did say *preferably* dead," the deputy added, a little drool pooling at the side of his mouth. "That means she *prefers* her to be dead."

"That's right, junior," the sheriff said. "Now why don't you go get everything ready. Put the word out that there's gonna be a hanging today at noon."

The deputy skipped out of the jailhouse and the sheriff clinked his keys while he attached them to his belt, winked at Lucy, and left the building. With the door closed, all light was cut off except a beam of light coming through a small front window that hit directly on Lucy's face.

"I'm going to die," she said despondently.

"Join the club," a voice said from behind her in the shadows.

She turned around and stood up quickly, John's head falling off her lap with a thud. "Who said that? Who's here?"

"Nobody but us turkeys."

"Seriously, who are you?"

An object came into the beam of light from the window. It was short, plump and covered in feathers. Its beak moved.

"Us turkeys I said. What are you, deaf?"

"Oh," Lucy said. "No, not deaf. I just haven't met any turkeys lately. Of the talking variety anyhow."

"Mmm."

"Why are you...you turkeys," she said as she saw the other one moving closer, "doing in jail, anyhow."

"We were involved in a protest. I guess they called it civil disobedience."

"Really?"

"What, you think turkeys have no rights? That's what *they* think," the first turkey nodded out the window. "Think we're just for one thing and one thing only. And a few of us refuse to stand for it anymore. It just ruffles my feathers to no end."

"I'm Lucy," Lucy said. "This is John. Do you guys have names?"

"Why? You think just because we're turkeys we don't have any names, any identities? Typical just typical."

"No, I...I don't think that."

"The name is Tom. This is my life partner Tina."

"Tom and Tina Turkey," Lucy said, stifling an automatic urge to laugh.

"That funny to you or something?"

"No. No, not at all. And you were protesting because you're sick of being eaten at Thanksgiving?"

Tom gobbled with indignation. "Excuse me, young lady, I have no idea what you're talking about. It's the vote. We have yet to be given the right to vote as full-fledged citizens of this town."

"Sorry, it's just that from where I come from --"

"I don't think I want to know about from where you come from," Tina said huffily. "It sounds like a very barbaric place. Eating turkeys for Thanksgiving. Ooo, Tom honey, it gives me chills down my wings."

"Sorry," Lucy said again, wishing she'd never gotten into the conversation to begin with.

The turkeys ignored her apology and decided to also ignore her as they slunk back into the shadows and spoke only to each other in whispers and clucks.

John groaned and rolled over. He propped himself up on one elbow and rubbed his head carefully. "Um, ouch?" he said. "Why do people keep hitting me?"

Lucy shrugged. "I appreciate the attempt."

"Remind me the next time I try to take a gun away from someone not to do it with my back to an open door."

"Yeah, I'd remind you, but I'm afraid, according to the sheriff, I'm going to be pushing up daisies really soon. They're going to hang me." Lucy couldn't believe she was saying it so calmly. "At noon. In front of an audience."

"What?"

"Apparently the town's aching for some entertainment. And since Starr's taken off, I guess their entertainment will be me swinging from a rope." She laughed, slightly hysterically.

"Why are you laughing? It's not funny." He stood up on shaky legs and grabbed the iron bars of the jail cell. "We have to get out of here. Look, there's some keys on the desk over there. What if Oliver goes and brings them back to us. We can let ourselves out."

Lucy nodded, feeling stupid she didn't think of it herself. "Brilliant idea. Okay, Oliver, go to it."

Oliver didn't answer.

"Oliver?" Lucy felt around on her shoulder. Then she searched her hair which had developed itself into one big

tangle. "Where'd you go? Oliver!"

"When was the last time you saw him?" John asked, getting down on his hands and knees to search under the cot in the corner of the cell. The turkeys looked at him warily. He noticed them for the first time but didn't seem too shocked by the two.

"Oh, hello," he said. "Have you see a little mouse? About yay high --" he held his hand three inches off the ground.

"Dressed in a miniature tuxedo like the one I'm wearing?"

"Afraid not," said Tina. "Why? Are you going to eat him?"

"Eat him?" John asked, confused.

"Yes," Tom said, and nodded his beak at Lucy. "She would."

"Just ignore them," Lucy said. "Oliver's not here. I don't remember the last time I saw him. Out on the street I guess. I hope he didn't fall off and hurt himself. This is terrible."

"Yeah," John agreed and sat down on the cot. "Because that was my only plan."

"I'm sure we can think of something else."

Three hours went by and they were still scratching their heads.

The sheriff returned, slamming the door behind him. He stood in front of the cell and rubbed his hands together with glee.

"All set, outlaw," he said. "We're ready for you."

"Listen, sheriff," Lucy said, forcing a flirtatious smile to her lips. "I'm sure there's something we can work out. There's no need to go on with the hanging. It's so barbaric, don't you think?"

"Not particularly."

"Um... don't you think Veronica would rather kill me herself? She's funny that way. Sure she put on the poster "dead or alive," but come on. The woman likes to do things

herself. She's a do-er."

The sheriff's forehead wrinkled in thought. "That is true. Maybe she meant that we could kill you in self-defense. Like, if you tried to kill us first."

"Right," Lucy pointed at him. "That's right. Now why don't you make your call, or however you contact her..."

"We send the turkeys as messengers."

"Huh?"

"The turkeys. That's their job."

"Ha!" Tom snorted. "All we're good for. Taking stupid messages from town to town. What does he think we are? Pigeons?"

"Shut up you two. I'll deal with you later," the sheriff snarled, and the turkeys promptly shut up.

"So," Lucy continued, trying to act like nothing had just happened. "Send your message. Veronica will come and get me. And you'll be very well compensated, I'm sure."

Not that she wanted Veronica to come and 'get her,' but that was all she had to work with. The longer she wasn't dead, the longer she'd have to come up with a better plan to escape.

The sheriff nodded his head slowly. Lucy breathed a tiny sigh of relief that she'd convinced him.

The nod slowly turned into a shake. "No, no that just won't do."

"Why not?"

"We've just spent time and effort setting things up outside. There are people waiting. Children are looking forward to this. No, the hanging will go on."

But, Lucy protested, her voice turning shrill with panic, "But what about Veronica?"

He thought for a moment. "We'll take you down and pretend that it was self defense."

"Self defense by hanging?"

"We'll put a scarf around your neck. Okay, no more talk, outlaw. Let's go."

Junior had arrived behind the sheriff and he held his gun pointed directly at John as the sheriff opened the cell door. He grabbed a very defeated feeling Lucy by the upper arm and steered her out.

"Wait," John said, his hands were held up above his head to show he wasn't going to try anything that would get him shot. "Can you give us just a moment?"

"Last request is for the condemned."

"Yes," Lucy said. "Just a minute."

The sheriff let go of her arm and Lucy turned to John. None of it felt real. She wasn't crying at her impending execution because she was numb. It just couldn't really be happening, could it?

John grabbed her hands in his and looked into her eyes. His eyes glimmered.

"I hate this," he said.

"That makes two of us."

"I can't lose you. I only just found you."

He pulled her hands to his chest and kissed her softly. A tear splashed onto her cheek. It was his.

"I totally agree," she murmured when their lips parted.

"Therefore you're going to have to think of something really quick."

The sheriff's hand clamped down on her arm again.

"Time's up," he barked.

Lucy's arm tensed. "That was, like, thirty seconds. Not a minute, buddy."

"Doesn't matter. Let's go."

Junior slammed the iron bars back in place. Lucy looked at John one last time before the sheriff spun her around and pushed her out the front door.

Chapter Ten

The dusty street was lined with townspeople. They watched in awe as she was led to the platform at the centre of Wayward Falls.

Lucy didn't see the people. All she saw was the noose waving in the slight breeze, waiting to get intimate with her neck.

She swallowed hard. *Think brain, think*, she told herself. But there was no great scheme, no great plan that miraculously came to her that would save her this time.

The sheriff pushed her up the few stairs and they stood elevated above the growing crowd. The sun streamed down on them and Lucy felt a trickle of sweat go down her spine.

At least she was going to die wearing Versace.

The sheriff surveyed the crowd. "This is the execution of the dangerous outlaw Lucy. She will be hanged from the neck until she's dead for the crimes of murder and thievery. We are pleased that the town of Wayward Falls was able to catch and punish this criminal and give her a just punishment. May Veronica have mercy on her soul."

The crowd was deadly silent, but one child up front shouted: "Kill the bitch now!" then was quickly hushed by his mother.

The sheriff gave a nod, and Junior slipped the noose around Lucy's neck.

"Do you have any last words?" asked the sheriff.

Lucy stopped her knees from shaking and looked at the sheriff. Any last words? *How about don't kill me?* she thought. However, she figured those particular words wouldn't help her at all. The crazy bastard had his heart set on this like it was a surprise Christmas gift.

Instead she looked out at the crowd. "Yeah, I have some last words," she shouted. "It was only a cat! I killed a cat! And it was an accident! You're all crazy! I want to talk to a lawyer --"

Junior shoved a balled up piece of cloth in her mouth to shut her up. Where the piece of cloth had been before entering her mouth she did not even want to fathom.

The sheriff nodded at junior, whose hand went to a switch at the side of the podium.

"Wait!" a man shouted from the crowd. He pushed his way through.

"What is it Reverend?" the sheriff asked calmly, though his patience looked to be wearing thin.

"Did she say it was a cat she killed?"

"Yyyy assiddedent!" Lucy added, shouting through the cloth.

"The cat...was it King Robert? One in the same?" the Reverend's eyes were very wide. "Everyone! This is the warrior savior Lucy! She has saved all the land from the evil King."

"Shhh," the sheriff grabbed the shirt of the Reverend. "You mustn't say that out loud."

"You know as well as I the horrible things that man was responsible for. Finally someone with bravery and courage above all comes here and defeats him and this is the treatment she gets?" The Reverend turned around to the crowd. "Is this how we repay our savior?"

Lucy felt the noose pulled away from her neck and she looked around. It was Junior who had a big goofy grin on his face. "You're totally the coolest."

She spat out the cloth. "Super."

The sheriff turned to Lucy with a sheepish expression on his face.

"Sorry we almost executed you," he said, lowering his head in shame.

Lucy shrugged. What were you supposed to say in reply to that? That it's okay? Well, it wasn't okay, but she wasn't going to test how far her savior status would get her.

"Does this mean me and my friends are free to leave?"

There was a loud howling sound that came from the woods just at that moment. So loud that it shook the ground the townspeople stood on. They scattered in all directions for the relative safety of their homes and stores.

"What is the holy hell was that?" Lucy asked, clutching at her chest.

The sheriff and the Reverend looked at each other. Junior was cowering under the podium.

"Do you really think...?" the sheriff asked the Reverend.

"I do indeed," he replied. "It is quite obvious that Lucy has been sent to us for a reason. She shall save Wayward Falls."

"I'm going to do what?" Lucy said.

"The sound you just heard," said the Reverend gravely, "Is the curse of Wayward Falls. A great beast that prowls the woods and devours anyone and anything that crosses its path. For five long years it has plagued our land. The townspeople

fear for their lives when they tend to their crops, the turkeys are seldom able to complete their message delivery without being slaughtered by the beast. We have been at a loss of what to do."

"But Veronica..." the sheriff protested.

"Yes, yes, Veronica," the Reverend nodded. "She has told us that she would take care of it, but it has been five years and nothing has been done. We simply cannot wait any longer. Now that you're here --"

"Yes," the sheriff nodded vigorously. "Now that you're here, you can slay the beast as you did the king."

Lucy let the information wash over her and she stood there with her arms crossed in front of her for a good minute. Finally, incredulously, she said:

"You want me to slay the beast."

"That is correct," the sheriff made a stabbing motion in the air. "Kill it dead."

Lucy nodded. "And this beast is very dangerous."

"Oh, very dangerous indeed. Only the finest warrior would ever have a chance at being successful."

Lucy looked around nervously. "Should we really be standing out here? It sounded really close."

"Oh, the beast never comes into the town. It stays on the outskirts. For now. We have no idea what the future may bring. That is why you must slay it."

Lucy bit her bottom lip. "And what if I decline your request?"

The sheriff looked appalled. "A warrior who would decline a town in need?"

"You just tried to kill me."

"But we didn't go through with it," the sheriff reasoned. He thought for a moment. "If you were to decline our request, we would have no option but to turn you over to Veronica."

To receive the reward money might be enough to hire another lesser warrior than yourself to take care of the beast."

A little light bulb went off in Lucy's head. "Would I be able to take my friends with me to... assist in the slaying?"

"Of course. Any help you require."

Lucy nodded. "Then I accept."

The Reverend and the sheriff high-fived each other. "Yes! I knew you would be brave enough, kind warrior Lucy."

"When do you want me to go?"

She had it all planned. She could take her friends and high tail it the hell out of Wayward Falls. She didn't have to kill any beast. They'd be on their way, free, off to the City like nothing had happened.

"In the morning would be fine," said the Reverend. "In the meantime, I have to say, Sheriff, do you not think a celebration is in order to see our warrior off in style?"

"I agree." The sheriff nodded. "Junior, plan a celebration for tonight to honor Lucy, would you?"

Junior popped out from under the podium nodding his head and, with a nod, immediately headed off to the far side of town.

"Now can we release my friend from jail?" Lucy said.

"The one who tried to assault me?"

"That's him."

The sheriff looked as though he might say no, but quickly seemed to change his mind and Lucy followed him back to the prison.

There John sat, on the floor of the jail cell looking extremely depressed. At the sound of the door, he looked up and saw Lucy and a big smile spread across his handsome features.

"So my plan worked?" he said. "I thought if I just sat here like a useless loser you'd be okay."

"Well I'm here aren't I?" Lucy grinned at him.

Tom and Tina Turkey had come out of their corner and were consoling John. They patted his shoulders with their flightless wings. As John stood up, Lucy noticed he now wore a "Free the Turkeys" pin on the lapel of his dusty tuxedo.

The sheriff unlocked the jail and let John out. He came directly to Lucy and picked her up in a big hug, lifting her feet off the ground.

"Maybe you are a miracle worker," he said.

"Apparently I'm a warrior. And savior. Who said anything about miracles?" Lucy's grin widened.

They heard a squeak from down on the floor. Oliver was panting hard, running towards them.

"Oliver!" Lucy squealed. "I wondered where you'd gone to."

Oliver didn't have enough energy to answer, but collapsed to the floor, lifting a hair pin up above his head.

"Here," he managed. "You...can pick...the lock. I...ran back to...the cart to...get it."

Lucy glanced around at the others. "I really do appreciate it Oliver, but did you happen to notice that I'm no longer locked up?"

Oliver sat on his knees, his little chest going up and down with the effort of breathing. He looked around at everyone.

"Well, hell."

"Come here you little runt." Lucy gently picked him up and perched him on her shoulder and turned to leave.

"Hey," Tom said, as the sheriff swung the barred door shut. "What about us?"

Sheriff Adams glanced at Lucy. "What do you want me to do with these birds?"

"Free them," Lucy decided. "They can come to the

celebration."

The turkeys walked with pride out of the cell.

"The question is, does anybody around here have any cranberry sauce?" Lucy asked, only half joking.

The sheriff's wife arrived at the jailhouse moments later with a big smile on her face. The sheriff introduced her as Mrs. Adams. She steered Lucy out of the building and towards a waiting hotel room across the street above a saloon. The sheriff steered John in the opposite direction.

"I've prepared a bath for you," Mrs. Adams said. "Take all the time you need. You've had a hard day."

"Yes, I really have," Lucy agreed. "It's not everyday that I almost die."

Mrs. Adams sighed unhappily. "So sorry about that. My husband always does jump to rash decisions."

"Water under the bridge," Lucy said.

"I'll have fresh clothes sent up, too."

Lucy waited until the woman left and she tossed Oliver onto the big bed. He lay down and stretched out.

"This is the life," he sighed happily. There was a tray of fruit beside him and he grabbed a grape which was as big as his head.

"I'm having a bath," Lucy announced. "Don't you dare peek."

She peeled off the designer gown that had seen better days. It was now ripped and dirty and didn't smell too great. She eased herself into the bathtub with a happy little sigh.

She closed her eyes and enjoyed the short moment of peace, and was awakened by a small splash. Her eyes popped open. Oliver was doing the back stroke next to her.

"Why you little bugger," Lucy said. "I told you not to peek."

"Don't worry sister, you're not my type. It's not like I'm

John."

Lucy's cheeks warmed. "What are you talking about?"

"Oh I wonder. You're in loooove with him."

"Am not."

"Are too."

Lucy gritted her teeth and slunk deeper into the warm water. Was it true? Was she in loooove with John?

And what good would it do if she was?

As soon as they got to the City and found the Man she'd be headed home. And John wasn't from her home. Besides, he had amnesia. If he got his memory back he'd probably remember that he's married, or he's gay, or something.

It was hopeless to even consider her own feelings at a time like this. Besides, she's only known him for less than a day. How could she possibly fall in love in that amount of time?

"Am not," she said firmly, and with the tip of her finger, pushed Oliver underwater.

She was flying high above the streets below. Far below, past the trees she saw the oak tree that had barred her way on the road, the one she'd passed through and entered into this weird world.

From where she was floating, the tree was off to the side of the road. Her Toyota was curled around it, smashed beyond all recognition. The roads were wet and slippery from the rainstorm.

She frowned at the sight. Past the rain and the twisted metal she saw an arm, hanging out of the broken driver's side window. Was that? No, it couldn't be...

The scene before her eyes changed. There were red lights, flashing and whirling, loud sirens flooding her ears. Someone

holding her hand. Blue eyes, concerned, staring down at her.

Again, the scene changed. Tubes, surgical and sterile. A high bed, machines beeping and moving. People moving in and out. The smell of flowers and disinfectant...

Lucy woke suddenly, the water splashing around her. It had cooled considerably. She glanced around, feeling panicked, but not remembering why. Oliver lay on the bed, fast asleep. He now wore fresh and clean clothes. There were more Lucy-sized clothes next to him

She didn't particularly like the idea that someone had entered the room while she was in the tub, naked as a jaybird, and unconscious to the world.

She quickly emerged from the tub, dried off on an available towel and put the clothes on. There was a loose fitting blouse (which was good since it didn't come with a bra), and a long, burgundy swooshy skirt.

"Wake up sleepy head," she said, poking Oliver gently. He woke, stretched and rubbed his eyes.

"How long was I asleep?" he asked.

"About the same amount of time that I was. Looks like it's nearly dark outside."

There was a knock at the door and Mrs. Adams poked her head in. "Are you ready?"

"Yeah," Lucy replied. "All ready. I'm sorry I fell asleep."

"You looked like you needed it, dear. Besides you'll need your energy tonight. The town has a special award to give you for your bravery."

An award, huh? Lucy wondered what it could be.

Mrs. Adams led them down the stairs to the saloon, now set up with streamers and a great big crowd of smiling

townspeople who cheered when they saw Lucy.

"Here she comes, and isn't she lovely?" a voice sang from the small stage to the left of the bar. It was Starr, holding a microphone and waving toward her like Vanna White.

"Come and join me on stage. It's my dear and very close personal friend, the Warrior Savior, Lucy."

The crowd cheered louder and chanted, "Lucy, Lucy, Lucy." There were no stairs up to the stage, but she felt strong hands behind her lifting her up till she stood next to Starr.

"Hey there," Starr said to her, holding his blue hand over the microphone so they could speak in relative privacy.

Lucy held the frozen smile on her face, and spoke through her teeth. "You abandoned me and John at the jailhouse. How could you do that?"

"All part of my plan."

"Sure," Lucy said. "Your plan of chickening out."

Starr scowled at her, but then his smile reappeared. He surveyed the crowd.

"Lucy the Brave has graciously volunteered to slay the beast of the woods and save the people of Wayward Falls."

The crowd shouted its approval.

"Do you have anything you want to say to your adoring public?" Starr asked, leaning the microphone towards her.

"Yes I do," she snatched it out of his hand. "Starr and I go way back. He's always been one of my loyal sidekicks and just told me that he wouldn't dream of letting me slay the beast without him. He is coming with me!"

"Wait...no I didn't --" Starr snatched at the microphone but Lucy held it away from him.

The crowd began chanting, "Starr, Starr, Starr," and Starr liked the attention so much that he nodded his head and bowed deeply before them.

"Yes," he said. "Anything for my fans. Now, let the celebrations begin."

The band, comprised of two banjo players and a honky tonk piano started up. The floor cleared and the townspeople began to dance.

Lucy spotted John over by the bar. She made her way through the crowd towards him. He looked at her with amusement.

"Slay the beast?" he asked.

"Just play along, would you?"

He handed her a mug of beer.

"I hope Max is still okay," she murmured after a long sip of the cold drink. "I've been wracking my brain trying to figure out what we did wrong."

John shook his head. "He'll be okay."

"I hope so."

Three little girls who didn't come much higher than Lucy's waist, tentatively approached her with a plate of food. She took it gratefully. Her stomach had been growling ever since she woke up in the tub.

"You're our hero," the oldest of the girls said.

Lucy swallowed hard. She felt the slightest twinge of guilt at deceiving these people, but what was she supposed to do? She was no warrior.

The girls curtsied and moved away, swallowed by the crowd.

"Do you know that Starr's been here all day?" John said. "Rehearsing. I guess he might be recovering from his stage fright after all."

"Bully for him."

"Looks like he's going to sing another song? You missed that earlier."

"Thank God."

"He's actually pretty good."

Starr was back on the stage with the Sheriff.

"Excuse me everyone," the sheriff spoke into the microphone, "Could I have your attention please?"

The crowd quieted down.

"First of all," the sheriff said, "I'd like to put forth my most humble apologies for trying to kill Lucy earlier this afternoon. It was wrong of me and I take full responsibility for that decision."

The crowd turned towards Lucy to get her reaction. She nodded, trying to appear courteous to his apology when all she really wanted to do was tell him to take his apology and shove it.

"This celebration tonight is in honor of her, Lucy, warrior savior of this land, who is soon to save Wayward Falls from the beast of the woods."

The crowd applauded gratefully at this announcement.

"We would like to present to you, Lucy, warrior savior, a token of our humble appreciation. An offering, if you will."

An offering? Lucy glanced at John.

"Yes, tonight I offer you my first born son."

Say what? Lucy's eyebrows shot up. His first born what?

There had to be some mistake. Lucy didn't want anything like that. She turned to John to see what he was thinking, but she was pulled away from him and quickly pushed and prodded up to the stage and next to the Sheriff and Starr. Starr greeted her with a big hug.

"Listen," she began. "I really don't want anything like this."

"I insist." The sheriff's face glowed with pride. "Please bring out young Percy."

The last thing she wanted to do was look after a baby. There had to be some way to decline and not get on anybody's bad side.

The crowd in front of the stage parted, and a young man came up to the stage and jumped up next to Lucy in one quick move. He was about six feet of solid muscle, lean waist, tight hips. His bare arms showed beneath a suede vest and a long line of muscled chest led right down to the top of his tight, black leather pants. His dark hair was long, to his shoulders and he had piercing emerald green eyes framed with thick black lashes.

In other words: totally freaking hot.

He got down on his knees in front of Lucy, took her hand in his and kissed it gently. "It is my honor to serve you until the day I die."

"I hope my son will meet your requirements," the sheriff said gravely.

"Uh," Lucy managed. "He seems to be quite fine. Thank you very much."

She came to her senses enough to look out through the crowd and to the bar. John had just downed his beer in one gulp and didn't look too pleased with the situation. Then her view of him was blocked by other townspeople.

"I mean --" Lucy said. "-- *No*. I can't except...this...this very generous gift. I'm so sorry."

"But --" the sheriff said.

"No." Lucy waved her hand and tried to look as if this was a very difficult decision. Which it was. "The fact that I'm able to help such a wonderful town is thanks enough."

The sheriff put a hand on his son's back and Percy stood up.

"As you wish."

"I do. And really, thank you again."

"Okay." Starr took over the microphone. "Everyone back on the dance floor. By the way, I am currently single if anyone's interested."

"The least I can do," Percy leaned over to whisper in Lucy's

ear. "Is to help our savior down from the stage?"

"I suppose that would be okay," she said, her toes tingling from the sound of his husky voice.

He put a hand on either side of her waist, and muscles flexing, lifted her off and down to the floor.

She stifled a girlish giggle and turned away, slamming right into John's chest.

He looked from her to Percy, his eyebrow raised curiously.

She gave him a face. "What?"

"Nothing. Do you return all your presents?"

"Only the living, breathing variety. Unless it's a puppy. That I'd keep."

They walked to a quiet corner, away from curious ears.

"So," John said. "What's the plan?"

Lucy glanced around to make sure no one was listening.

"Simple," she said. "When they send us off to kill this beast, we're just going to escape. And we're not looking back."

"Doesn't sound like the plan of a warrior."

"That's probably because I'm *not* a warrior."

John was silent for a moment. "It's too bad. Leaving these people fighting off whatever that thing is in the woods."

"And believe me, if I felt that I could do anything except for being eaten alive, I'd be the first one out there. But, it's not going to happen. If they knew I couldn't take care of it they'd have me on the first bus to Veronica-land." She paused. "Then again, you'd probably like that, wouldn't you?"

John shook his head. "You're never going to let that go are you. That's a very annoying habit of yours."

"You want annoying habits? How about...um...not remembering anything but still seeming to know everything. Huh? That's annoying."

John frowned. "Are you trying to say I'm lying about

having amnesia?"

"No," Lucy snapped. What was she trying to say?

He glowered at her. "Just forget it then. Why don't you go play with your present? It might do us good to spend a little time apart."

"Fine." She stormed off, but she didn't feel angry. She didn't know how they'd just gotten into an argument about absolutely nothing.

"I'm on your side," Oliver commented. She kept forgetting he was eavesdropping on every conversation she had. "He's a dumb ass."

"No he's not," she said and then sighed. "It's my fault."

"You can't help the fact that you're jealous. He shouldn't have been making out with Veronica. He's a dumb ass."

She thought about that while she ate a bit from the plate the girls had presented her with. It was heaped tall with something that tasted suspiciously like turkey, but probably was wildebeest.

"I think I *was* jealous."

"Duh. You're only just figuring that out now?" Oliver asked.

"I guess I'm a little slow. You think he's still going to come to The City with us?"

"Of course he is. He's crazy about you."

This made Lucy laugh. "He'd have to be crazy to be crazy about me. Okay, Oliver Magee, let's try to enjoy this party a bit. Because tomorrow we're out of here."

Chapter Eleven

Lucy woke up the next morning feeling hung over. Beer was one thing, but someone had started handing out boosenberry shooters at midnight and the rest of the night was one big blur.

She was all alone, which wasn't terribly surprising, although she thought that Oliver had returned to the room with her. Didn't matter, she'd meet up with the rest of her friends shortly.

She washed her face in the available basin of water and combed the tangles out of her hair. She used her finger as a toothbrush, and gargled until the taste of boosenberries was long gone.

She decided to abandon the evening gown and continue wearing the blouse and skirt that Mrs. Adams had given her.

She had no idea what time it was, but when she got out into the sunshine she figured that it was mid morning.

John stood outside the saloon, with his back against the wall and his arms crossed. He looked like he'd been waiting a long time. Lucy felt a little awkward seeing him after their

exchange the previous night.

She decided to face it head on.

"Sorry," she said, her eyes finding the wood slatted verand incredibly interesting.

"Me too," he said. "Let's just forget it happened."

"Fine with me. You seen Oliver?"

"Nope. He's probably with Starr."

The saloon doors swung open and Starr emerged from inside. He wore a red-sequinned cowboy hat and modified clothes from the townspeople that showed off a little more of his blue skin.

"Good morning, fellow warriors," he said.

"Where's Oliver?" Lucy asked.

"Not sure," he replied.

"We need to find him so we can get out of here as soon as possible."

"What about the beast?" Starr asked.

Lucy grabbed the front of his shirt and spoke in a whisper. "We're not killing any stupid beast."

Starr let out a breath that he had obviously been holding for quite a while. "Oh thank goodness. I was totally freaking out."

"We just need to find Oliver, go the long way around the town, pick up Max, and then we're history."

The sheriff emerged from the jailhouse up the street and slowly walked toward them. Lucy forced a smile to her face.

"Good morning, sheriff," she said.

"Mornin'. I've come to bring you some supplies. A couple guns, a few knives. We don't have much, but what we have is yours for the taking."

"I won't be needing any of that."

"Really? Are you sure?"

"Yes, I work weapon-free."

"That's very admirable."

"Maybe we'll take one gun," John said, leaning forward to take a six-shooter from the sheriff. "You just never know."

"That's fine, just fine." The sheriff put the rest of the weapons he'd been carrying down against the wall of the saloon. "Here comes Junior and Percy. I know they wanted to wish you luck before you left. I wonder what that is they have with them?"

Lucy turned around to where the sheriff was staring. Percy, bronzed and beautiful, rode atop a horse that pulled a small cart behind it. In the cart was a skinny, pale Junior, and...

Max.

"Shit," Lucy said under her breath.

John turned to see what had made her face drop.

"Sheriff, look what we found!" Junior called out. "Thought for a moment it was the beast's doing, but he appears to be like a robot or somethin'. It's the darndest thing."

"Bring that over here," the sheriff said.

The cart grew closer and stopped directly in front of the saloon.

"Looks broken to me," Percy said, dismounting the horse and flashing Lucy a killer smile. "But Junior insisted we bring it into town."

"Lucy?" The sheriff touched her arm. "You look as if you've seen a ghost. Are you alright?"

While Lucy was trying to decide if she was alright or not, Mrs. Adams ran out front.

"Will you look at this, didn't notice it until right now when I was doing the clean up from the party," she said, obvious amusement filling her voice. "It's your little mouse friend. How he got into that bottle of booseberry wine, I'll never know. Looks like he finished it off."

Mrs. Adams thrust a tall, empty bottle in front of Lucy's

face. Sure enough, there was Oliver, snoring away at the bottom.

"I'll take care of him while you're away," the old woman said cheerily. "Did my husband give you the weapons yet?"

"Yes, I tried, dear, but she says she works without weapons. Amazing, is what she is. Killing the beast with her bare hands."

Lucy absently reached up and rubbed her temples. A very bad headache had just landed. How was she supposed to hightail it out of town when both Max and Oliver were stuck there?

She exchanged looks with John, who nodded firmly, and Starr, who shook his head so vigorously she thought it might fall off.

"Okay, I guess we're off to slay the beast," she said. "Wish us luck."

"Of course we wish you luck," the sheriff said. "Not that you'll need it."

With a brief, firm nod of her head, Lucy began walking slowly out of town. She didn't bother to check if John and Starr were coming with her. She assumed they weren't. Not that she'd blame them. What in the hell was she doing?

She should have come up with a plan B. Just in case. Had she actually thought she'd be able to just walk right out of town like nothing had happened?

Now, unless she went off and slayed the beast or whatever was making all that noise in the woods, the town would take out their disappointment on Oliver.

A mouse.

A mouse with a wonderful personality whom she now considered one of her very best friends.

She was definitely going crazy.

Scratch that. *Gone* crazy. Been there, done that, bought the

T-shirt.

As she walked through the small town people gathered at their windows to cheer her on. She tried to look perky but failed. She probably looked like someone who'd just made a horribly bad judgment call.

"I'm relying on you having another plan up your sleeve," John said, surprising her. She was positive he would have washed his hands of her by now.

She turned to glance at him. Starr was a few paces back, shuffling his shiny cowboy boots through the dirt.

The sight of the two of them backing her up warmed her heart. They were all stupid enough to die together.

As a team.

"I'm open to suggestions," she said.

"I assume you don't want to leave town without the others," he said.

"That wouldn't be very nice of us, would it?"

"Who cares about the others?" Starr said, his voice whiney. "I'm too pretty to die."

"We're not going to die." Lucy thought hard while she walked. The woods were only a couple hundred yards ahead of them. "Okay, here's the plan. We go, check it out. Maybe this beast isn't anything more than a tree creaking, or a herd of wild goats, or something. We go, we pretend we slayed it and we come back."

"But what if it makes a noise like it did earlier?"

"That was the only noise I heard it make. It probably doesn't come anywhere near the town normally. I say it's worth the risk. We come back, say the job is done and be on our way. With Max and Oliver."

Starr thought about that and then nodded his head vigorously. "That's excellent. My acting skills will come in handy when we get back to town. Leave it to me, I'll tell

them a valiant tale of how brave we all were."

"What do you think, John?"

He shrugged. "I guess it sounds plausible."

"Then that's what we'll do. I guess we should go into the woods a little bit, just in case we're being followed. Then we'll hide out for a couple of hours and head on back to town."

She didn't like to admit it, considering her first plan had been to just leave town without a backwards glance, but she began to feel guilty about this idea. The townspeople would be so happy and grateful that she'd allegedly slain the beast that had caused them so much suffering. And then, they'd find out that it had all just been one big fat lie.

But there was nothing she could do about it.

It wasn't her fault that everyone believed she was some great warrior. But that was all just a big fat misunderstanding. She wouldn't feel guilty. She'd just put it out of her mind.

The woods were thick with foliage. The ground heavy with moss and mud and flowers. They had to step gingerly for fear of falling and twisting their ankle on the maze of roots.

It was actually quite pretty. It reminded Lucy of the hikes she'd take with her parents on Sunday afternoons when she was a little girl.

Finally she stopped walking. "Okay, I think this is probably far enough."

"Great," Starr sat down on a stump. "Because I'm exhausted."

"We'll just hang out here for a while."

John scratched the back of his neck and looked around the area. "Are you going to remember what direction we came from?"

"Weren't you keeping track of that?" Lucy said, feeling a

sinking feeling in her stomach. "It was...it was." She turned around in a circle. Suddenly every direction she turned in seemed exactly the same. "That way? No, that way. Oh for the love of God."

"We're lost, aren't we." John said. It was a statement, not a question.

"We're lost," Lucy confirmed, and sat down on the large tree stump with Starr.

"No, that's impossible," Starr said, standing up and looking around. "We came from..." he pointed, then his finger wilted. He turned in the opposite direction. "Over... there? No. Wait, this way."

"We're lost," Lucy confirmed. Again.

"How long have we been walking?" Starr plunked himself back down on the stump looking defeated. And a bit shiny.

"Long enough." John looked worried.

"So now what?" Lucy said.

Just then there was a roar that filled the woods. An angry, unwelcoming roar that seemed to come from every direction. The ground shook.

Lucy leapt up off the stump.

"Now we walk," John said, picking a direction and going with it. "Really fast."

And they did, walk, really fast, through the forest although after a few minutes it seemed like a bad choice. It was getting darker and darker the further in they got, the trees getting thicker and thicker, blocking out what little sunlight there was at the edges of the forest. Lucy clung to John's side, and Starr clung to her side. Lucy was hoping that John would be strong enough for the three of them. After all, he was the one with the biggest muscles.

"Look," Starr pointed at the muddy ground after a few minutes. "That looks like a path, doesn't it?"

Lucy blinked down at the ground. It did look like what may have at one point in the past thousand years or so have been a path. A few inches of ground that wasn't covered in foliage snaking its way through the forest ahead.

They took it as a sign and began to follow it.

The beast let loose with another roar that shook the ground and made their knees knock together in fear. And then there came another sound. A buzzing, whooshing noise that went on and on.

"What's that?" Lucy hissed.

"Beast junior?" Starr offered.

"Try not to think about it." John squeezed Lucy's arm. She looked at him and, despite the fact that Starr was two feet away, they shared a moment. His gaze burned into hers. If she was going to die, far, far away from her real home in a strange, bizarre land, she was happy to have met him.

John continued, "It looks like it might get a little brighter up there, that's a pretty good sign."

"Yeah, the light at the end of the tunnel," Lucy said. "Wait, that doesn't sound very good."

"It's always darkest before..." Starr began.

"The dawn?" Lucy said.

"No, it's always darkest before it's pitch black." He laughed nervously at this. "I used that in my act."

"Super," she said. "Maybe you can save the show and dance for --"

Lucy's foot slipped on the ground and she felt herself falling, the ground slipping and breaking away under her feet. She lost her grip on the two men and suddenly was scrambling against ground that was disappearing beneath her. Falling then, through the air, screams filling her ears that could only belong to herself. Falling, falling, and then --
Plop.

Ass-first she plunged into water. She bobbed to the top, gasping for air and flailing about.

She heard a high pitched squeal and looked up. Starr was hanging on with one manicured hand to the edge of a cliff high above her, next to a waterfall. A sheer wall of forest had blocked their view of it and they'd taken one step too far and fallen from the top into the water below.

John swam over to Lucy. He wiped the water out of his eyes.

"Are you okay?" he asked.

She was still in shock. "Yeah, I think so. Are you?"

"Seem to be."

He grabbed her beneath the surface of the water and pulled her against him, crushing his lips against hers.

"I thought that was it," he said. "I thought we were dead and I'd lost you. I didn't like that very much."

"Hey!" Starr yelled from above them. "Help me!"

Lucy wanted to kiss John again. Whenever she was kissing him it felt as if nothing was wrong in the world.

"Just let go!" John yelled up at him. "You'll be okay!"

"I can't!" Starr sobbed. "I'm scared."

Lucy and John slowly worked their way to the shore.

"What should we do?" Lucy asked.

"Just give it a moment," he said.

And sure enough, a moment later, Starr lost his last grip and plunged into the water below. He kicked and thrashed at the water and after a while made it to shore, dragging himself out to collapse next to them.

"Thanks so much for the help," he said sarcastically after he got his breath back. His hair was slicked to his blue face and his eyeliner had ran down his cheeks.

"You're welcome."

Lucy stifled a laugh and turned to get up from the shore.

Something hard and bony was attached to her skirt and she absently pulled at it.

She shrieked and jumped to her feet. She'd been laying next to a skeleton. The hand had tangled itself in her skirt as she swam to shore.

They looked around. There were skeletons all over the place.

And they were all dead.

"What the hell?" Lucy exclaimed.

John moved around studying the skeletons. "I bet they fell from the top of the waterfall and died."

"That could have been us!" Starr shrieked, pointing at the white bones. "We could have plunged to our deaths!"

"We probably fell from a good spot," John surmised.

"There may be rocks at the bottom of other parts. Fall on a rock from that height and you've got no chance."

"Who are they?" Lucy asked.

"Probably townspeople from Wayward Falls."

"Oh, I get it. Wayward Falls. I guess these are the falls," Starr said.

"Oh, you're very smart."

"What if," Lucy began, "What if the falls are the beast? Maybe that's all it's been all this time. Somebody leaves the town to pick berries or something, falls, dies, never comes back. And the town blames it on this nonexistent beast?"

"But what about the roar we heard?" John asked.

"There could be a million different explanations for that," Lucy moved away from the skeletons and over toward a large, green-trunked tree. She leaned against it and crossed her arms. "It could have been thunder, or a tree falling to the forest floor, or..." she frowned. "Why are you two looking at me like that?"

John and Starr both stared at her, their eyes wide, the color

draining from their faces. John raised his hand, pointing at something behind her. "Lucy, I...I..." was all he was able to say.

"What? What is it?"

The tree she leaned against did feel a bit strange to her. More smooth than rough wood. A little warm considering the cool day it was, but that could just be because she'd just taken an unplanned for swim in the cold water.

Then the green tree moved. Just a little.

Lucy's eyes widened. She stared, wide-eyed, at Starr and John who also gaped back at her.

It felt as though they stayed that way for a very long time.

Slowly, Lucy turned around to take a better look.

The green tree trunk was actually a leg.

She followed the line of the thick enormous leg upwards. It met with an equally green and scaly body, as thick and large as a school bus. A long neck curled around toward her. The head was as big as a piano, a grand piano, with large, narrowed yellow eyes, a long muzzled nose and a mouth open slightly to reveal two rows of razor-sharp teeth, each the length of her forearm. A forked tongue poked out between the teeth and tasted the air only a few feet from her face.

The beast, which Lucy felt she could safely label a "Dragon," stared at her intently.

Chapter Twelve

Then it felt as though everything began to happen in slow motion. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw John lean down and pick up the thigh bone of one of the skeletons. He threw the bone in the opposite direction. Through the quietness, except for the whooshing noise of the waterfalls, the bone landed with a loud 'plunk.'

The Dragon's head whipped toward it and John threw himself at Lucy, grabbing her arm and tearing through the forest. Starr had a handful of John's shirt and they ran faster than she ever thought possible through the forest.

They could hear the beast, behind them, crashing through the forest, flattening trees and bushes and whatever else got in its way.

Lucy wasn't even thinking rationally anymore. She was simply running. She barely felt the leaves whipping against her face, branches slapping her, rocks biting against the soles of the thin shoes Mrs. Adams had provided her with that had been great for the party, but questionable when running away from a Dragon.

As they reached a clearing in the woods they came to a

screeching halt.

A large grey cement wall blocked any further progress. They cast each other worried looks.

There was a snort behind them, heavy breathing, and then a loud roar.

Lucy, John and Starr huddled together and turned around to face the beast, their backs against the wall, pressed up against it as if hoping to be absorbed and possibly pop out on the other side.

That didn't happen.

Lucy squeezed both of their hands tightly in hers.

"Thank you both," she said, deciding that her last words should be something other than 'arghh!' "I've only known you amazing guys for a short time but I consider you both my best friends in the world."

"Thanks Lucy." Starr's eyes brimmed with tears. "I think I'm amazing, too."

John tugged at her hand and she turned to look at him.

"John," she murmured. "I wish I could have met you a long time ago."

He forced a smile. "So you forgive me about Veronica?"

"Don't press your luck."

The beast moved closer to them. It looked at each of them in turn with its horrible yellow eyes. Its breath was hot as the sun and smelled like a forest fire.

It stopped at John, and tilted its large green head. John tried to look brave, but he couldn't fool Lucy who felt John's grip on her hand tighten painfully.

"You --" the beast said to John. "-- Are a sight for sore eyes."

Lucy's heart was pounding so fast she wasn't sure she'd heard him correctly.

"What?" John said.

"I wasn't sure it was really you," said the beast. "I mean, what are the odds, right? My eyesight isn't too good anymore. But up close like this, yes, by the gods, it is you!"

The beast's tail whipped around and John was pulled away from the others. The tail wrapped around him like a large boa constrictor.

"You look pretty good," said the beast. "A little older, of course. Have you been in a fight?"

"It's been a rough couple of days," John admitted, shrugging his shoulders.

"Ten damned long years," the beast mused.

"Right. Yes, ten years," John said. "Ten years since what?"

The beast released John from the hug of its tail. "Why don't you introduce me to your friends?"

"Um, okay." John moved back to the wall. "Uh, this is Lucy. And this is Nesbig Starr. We just call him Starr."

Starr nodded. "Nesbig is a family name."

"Charmed," said the beast.

John gritted his teeth, definitely not put at ease by the beast's odd friendliness. "Are you going to kill us now, or what?"

"Kill you?" repeated the beast, brow raising. "Why would I want to do a silly thing like that?"

Lucy stepped forward, feeling a bit braver. Well, just a tiny bit. "You are the beast of the woods, right?"

"I am offended by that, young lady." The beast turned to John. "Is that what you think, also? I am terribly hurt."

John frowned. "Why were you chasing us, then?"

"Because I wanted to talk to you, of course. Geez, it's almost like you don't remember anything."

Starr stepped forward. "He *doesn't* remember anything. He has amnesia."

The beast's head whipped back to John. "Is that true?"

He nodded grimly.

"Well, that explains everything!"

"So," John said. "You know me?"

The beast laughed at this. "Of course I know you, you crazy bastard! We're brothers!"

"Brothers?" Lucy gasped. "Like, brothers in the global sense like we're all brothers and sisters?"

"No," said the beast. "Brothers in the sense that we had the same father."

"Oh, that kind of brothers."

John shook his head. "I really don't see how that is possible. No offense."

"Since you have amnesia at the moment I'll forgive you that. You don't remember that ten years ago I was cursed."

"What was the curse?" asked Starr, finally moving away from the relative safety of the wall.

The beast rolled his eyes. "I was cursed to be a Dragon."
"Oh."

"Do you think I'd choose to be this way? Not bloody likely. Cursed to be a Dragon and I can't leave these woods. For ten long years. Not a pretty picture."

"Who cursed you?" John asked.

"Let's see. Who in all the land is an evil bitch whose hobby is cursing people? Oh, there's so many to choose from. Who would do something like that? Um...Veronica of course! Geez, you really do have amnesia."

Lucy nodded to herself. They were definitely brothers.

"Why did she curse you?" Lucy asked. "Is there a way to break it?"

"Come," said the beast. "Let's go somewhere better than this. I hate that wall."

"What's on the other side of the wall?" Lucy asked.

"The City, of course."

Lucy turned around and stared at it. The City! On the other side of the wall. They were so close!

The beast, whose name, not-surprisingly, was Draco, led them back into the forest and toward a cave. Outside the cave, John made a small fire and they ate the food that Mrs. Adams had packed for them earlier that day.

They sat by the fire and watched Draco try to make himself comfortable nearby.

"You've met Veronica," Draco asked Lucy.

"Yeah, she's out to kill me."

"Lucy killed Veronica's husband," Starr said.

"It's really not as simple as it sounds," Lucy sighed. "But I guess that's basically it."

"No," said Draco, nodding with his big head towards her arm. "It's the Chain of Change. That's what she wants. Of course, she'll have to kill you to get it."

Lucy's touched the bracelet. "This? Well, she did want it, I know that. But I thought it was just because it was worth big bucks."

"Oh it's worth something, alright," Draco said. "The king never took it off. I don't know what its purpose is, but it's very important and very powerful."

"I can't take it off," Lucy said, after again attempting to pull it from her wrist. "The clasp disappeared after I put it on."

"Yes," said Draco. "That's why she wants to kill you. It can only be passed on the next owner after the previous one is dead."

"That's not very comforting."

"Tell us about this curse...um, brother," John said. "Did I know about it?"

"Yes," Draco nodded. "You set out to break it. That is the last I saw of you. I was afraid that you'd perished."

"I found him a couple of days ago," Lucy said. "In a field."

He'd been beaten up pretty badly."

"And apparently naked as the day he was born," Starr added. "Though, unfortunately, there are no pictures."

"Yes, that sounds about right," Draco said. "His uniform was most likely stripped from him."

"What uniform?" John asked.

"The uniform of an Enforcer. We were both Enforcers for Veronica at one time. You wanted to follow in your big brother's footsteps. Dad was so proud."

"So you worked for Veronica? And then she cursed you?" Lucy said. "What did you do to deserve that?"

Draco's head dropped a bit. "I fell in love."

"And what's the crime in that?"

"You have to understand Veronica," he said sadly. "She considers her Enforcers to also be her own little male harem. She picks and chooses whom she wants to spend time with based on her attraction to them. You rise in the ranks by...getting along with her, if you know what I mean."

Lucy shot John a look. He didn't look at her.

Draco continued, "I enjoyed the power of high ranking status as an Enforcer, and well, Veronica enjoyed me when she felt like it."

"And you fell in love with her?" Lucy asked, finding the idea highly distasteful.

"No," he said quickly and bitterly. "She's a horrible, evil woman. And if you see her without her make up on it's not a pretty sight at all. No, it was one of Veronica's maids. She was young and beautiful and I fell in love with her at first sight. It was very unlike me to feel that way, I'd never been in love before, but I fell. Very hard. We'd try to see each other whenever it was possible, which wasn't as often as we would have liked. You," he looked at John, "Warned me to be careful. I wish I'd listened, but I was a fool in love, I

suppose."

"What happened?"

"Veronica found out about us. My love was ripped from my arms and I never saw her again," his voice quivered as he spoke. "I was taken to these woods, stripped naked, as is a sign of being fired, and she cursed me. And I have remained here ever since."

Lucy felt a tear coming to her eye but she didn't want to cry. She felt something pressing against her arm and she looked down. It was a turkey who'd joined their circle. There were several other turkeys around the campfire.

"I love that story," the turkey said, dabbing its eyes with a tissue. "So romantic."

"Thank you, Toby," Draco said, then noted Lucy's astonished expression. "The turkey's are oppressed in Wayward Falls. They use them as messengers."

"Believe me, we know," John revealed his 'Save the Turkeys' pin he had in his pocket.

"Some have escaped from the village and come here but can't get any further than the wall. They've set up a little village nearby. Turkeytown."

Lucy nodded. "Turkeytown," she murmured to herself. "Mousetown. Sure, why not?"

"And I was going to break the curse?" John asked. "How was I going to do that?"

Draco shook his head. "That was your plan. I don't know for sure. You were under suspicion for a long time, being that we were brothers. I assumed you were trying to work your way into Veronica's good graces to get into her curse room."

"Veronica's good graces, huh?" Lucy said, thinking about the way Veronica kissed John at the casino. Looked like it was working pretty good. A hot line of jealous knifed through her body at the thought.

"Veronica has a curse room?" Starr asked. The turkeys all nodded in unison. They'd probably heard this story many times before.

"Yes, it's where she files them away. The piece of paper she's logged the curse on has to be burned. Then the curse is broken, easy as that. What's not easy is getting into the room. And these days, who knows what she has protecting it."

"I assume I failed," John said. "Maybe she cursed me by giving me amnesia."

"Well, you saw her face to face," Lucy said, trying to keep any jealousy out of her voice. "How did she act? Surprised that you were alive?"

"No," he said, his brow furrowed in thought. "She actually seemed happy to see me."

"I'll just bet," Lucy said, she cleared her throat. "Um, I mean, I'm sure she was happy to see you. Who wouldn't be?"

"Right," he said, with a knowing glance. "I actually would guess that she had no idea that I'd been fired, or whatever they tried to do with me. She acted as though nothing at all had happened."

"Then it must have been someone else," Draco said. "Not that it matters. You're safe now. They didn't turn you into anything big and scary."

Lucy thought about what the townspeople had said about the beast of the woods. "So, you're not responsible for any of the missing people from the village? They have a big hate on for you. They think they've sent us out here to kill you."

"Kill me?" Draco laughed. "That I'd like to see you try. Veronica may have ruined my life, but at least she made me practically indestructible. Probably why she made it so I can't leave the woods to eat her like an hors d'oeuvre. And no, I've never killed any of the people from Wayward Falls. Though I've unfortunately been witness to their hapless plunges from

the cliffs. They should put up a fence or something. And as for the turkeys, as you can see, they're all safe."

"Draco's our hero," nodded Toby the turkey.

"Well that's good to know," Lucy said with a grin. "I guess I won't have to kill you after all."

John laughed. "Some warrior you are."

"I know, it'll be disappointing to all of my fans."

"You have fans?" Starr asked, clearly jealous. "I had no idea."

"Yeah, I'm planning my world tour. I'm going to start it in The City."

"You're going to The City?" Draco asked. "Is that wise?"

"Why wouldn't it be?"

"Last time I was there it was like a war zone. Very unsafe."

Lucy shook her head and grabbed the last cookie from Mrs. Adams basket. "I don't have a choice. I have to go and see The Man. He's supposed to be able to help me go home."

"Where are you from?"

"Just outside of Toronto," she said.

"Where's that?"

"Exactly," Lucy said. "You have no idea, just like I have no idea where this is. There are no talking mice or turkeys where I'm from. Dragons don't even exist."

"Doesn't sound like a very interesting place."

"It's not," Lucy said. "But it's home."

"I think you should stay here and marry my brother," Draco said. "It's quite obvious that you two are meant for each other."

Lucy felt her cheeks flush. "Speaking of your brother," she said, in an attempt to quickly change the subject. "Now that we have someone that actually knows him, what's his real name? I've just been calling him John for lack of anything better. And since your name's Draco, it's probably something

much more interesting."

"Not really." Draco shook his head. "His name actually is John."

"Wow," Starr said, gazing at Lucy. "You must be psychic."

"I swear, brother," John said. "Even though I don't remember a bloody thing, I will find a way to break this curse for you."

"Maybe we can find your girlfriend, too," Lucy said. "What was her name?"

Draco sighed. "Her name was Tina."

Tina. Lucy thought hard. That sounded very familiar. Toby leaned his head against her arm, and started to doze off. She pushed him away.

Tina!

The turkey from the jail.

It wasn't possible, was it? That Veronica's maid had been cursed to be a turkey?

She shook her head with amusement. *Of course* it was possible. Anything seemed to be possible around there. She decided to keep it to herself until she knew for sure. Didn't want to get Draco's hopes up.

"Do you know anything about The Man?" asked Lucy. "He's the one we're supposed to find when we get into The City."

"He's an enigma," said Draco. "Of course I've heard of him, but I've never seen him. I can't think of anyone who has seen him, although it's been a long time since I've seen anyone to ask. As far as I know, he's not even real. Kind of just something people say. A rumor made real."

"He *has* to be real," Lucy said.

"Perhaps he is, I don't know."

They talked for a while longer and then it started to get dark. The stars came out and Lucy looked up at the clear

black sky.

Looks so much like home, she thought.

Stay here and marry my brother, Draco had said.

She glanced over at John, his handsome face lit by the firelight. He seemed lost in thought. She imagined just for a moment not going home at all and instead staying in this world and marrying him, living with him until she was old and gray.

After a moment, she turned onto her side and fell asleep.

When Lucy woke, it was dawn and everyone else was fast asleep next to the fire.

She'd had the weird dream before. Being in the place with the white walls and the machines attached to her. Struggling to breathe, the harsh smell of antiseptic in the air. Wherever it was she was dreaming about, she didn't like it one bit. It felt as if she was falling, hands grabbing and pulling her towards the brightness.

Lucy pushed the thought away and sat up.

She glanced over at the large green hump that was the sleeping Dragon. The turkeys had huddled together for warmth in the night and were beginning to rouse themselves, moving and *gobbling* in the early morning light.

John groaned and rolled over in his sleep, the movement waking him up. He blinked his eyes open and looked at her.

This is what it would be like, she thought. *Waking up next to him. Though, hopefully everyone else wouldn't be sharing a room with us.*

"Morning," he said sleepily.

"Good morning," she said.

"And a bee-ooo-tiful morning it is," said Starr cheerily,

putting an arm around Lucy. "Morning, sunshine."

"Right back at you."

"What's the plan today, warrior woman?" he asked brightly.

"You're in a chipper mood this morning aren't you?"

"Just the way I am," he said. "Yesterday I survived a plunge to my death. Didn't get eaten by a Dragon. Today is full of possibilities."

Lucy scratched the back of her head, stretched her arms out and yawned.

"Today," she said, "We go back to the village. Tell them that the beast is dead --"

"But," John protested. "That's not true."

Lucy shrugged. "They don't need to know that. Draco isn't going to kill anyone and he never has. But the town might not understand that. It's best that they think he's dead. If you could tell Draco to keep his roars down for the next little while that would be super."

"Okay," he said. "I guess that makes sense."

"We go back, get Oliver and Max. Then off to The City. We'll find the Man and everything will be okay."

John nodded. "After that, I'll go to Veronica and try to get into the curse room. I'll break that curse if it's the last thing I do."

"And how are you going to convince Veronica to let you in?" Lucy asked.

"What do you care? After you see The Man you'll be home sweet home." John's voice was surprisingly bitter. "Let's go, shall we?"

Lucy swallowed hard. It was true. If she was planning on going home she really didn't have any say in what John did. And with whom he did it with.

They brushed the dirt off their clothes from sleeping on the ground and said their good-byes to the turkeys. John kicked

some dirt onto the fire to put it out completely and went over to talk to his brother. They spoke intently for a few minutes, every now and then Draco would look over at Lucy, but she couldn't tell what they were talking about. John placed his hand on Draco's snout.

"I won't fail you again, brother," he said.

"You never have. Good luck in your journey."

John and Starr started walking away.

"Just a moment," Draco stopped Lucy as she passed.

Lucy turned to face him.

"Whatever you're running from," he said, his voice grave and low. "Will catch up to you. Wherever you go and whatever you do. It is best to run towards things and face them head on. Not to run away."

"What are you talking about? I'm not running," Lucy said. "I'm walking briskly. See? Watch me walk."

"Good luck, Lucy," Draco said, and with a nod of his head disappeared into his cave.

Chapter Twelve

When Lucy, John, and Starr walked back into the town of Wayward Falls they were greeted with thunderous cheers and applause from the townspeople. Starr waved at everyone and blew kisses towards them. He was in his element.

The Sheriff was waiting for them outside of the jailhouse. His wife, gorgeous son, and Deputy Junior stood at his side. He greeted her with a wide smile.

Lucy stopped walking. Starr and John stood on either side of her. She stepped forward. "It is done," she said solemnly.

The people of Wayward Falls cheered louder, lifting Lucy up and carrying her around the town like their hero chanting, "Lucy! Lucy! Lucy!"

Finally they brought her back and placed her down gently in front of the Sheriff. He hugged her tightly and stepped back. There were tears in his eyes.

"I knew you wouldn't fail us," he said.

"Darling," his wife said, her voice sounded like a warning.

The Sheriff looked away and then back at Lucy. "Okay, well I wasn't *positive* you could do it but I had my fingers

crossed. How did you do it? We are all just so amazed and impressed."

"Well, I --" Lucy began.

Starr stepped in front of her, leapt onto the porch of the jailhouse next to the Sheriff.

"It was *amazing*," Starr said, addressing the entire crowd.

"Lucy is a great warrior but she never would have been able to complete the slaying of the beast of the woods without help from myself and John over there."

"Tell us! Please do go on." The Sheriff's eyes aglow with interest.

Starr's eyes gleamed. "We found the lair of the beast just this morning after searching all day and all night. It was asleep in its cave and we tiptoed inside and surrounded it. Well, it woke with a start and raised its mighty fire-breathing head in anger.

"Lucy poked it in the eye, which only served to anger it more. It burst forth from the cave with only one thought, and that thought was to tear us apart, one by one.

"Lucy jumped upon the beast's back and rode it like a wild stallion, her grip around its mighty neck fierce and strong. She was slowly choking it, but it...it backed its massive hindquarter up against the cave knocking Lucy from its back. She was thrown to the ground unconscious."

The crowd gasped at Starr's story. Lucy raised an amused eyebrow and glanced at John.

"My word!" the sheriff exclaimed. "What happened then?"

Starr smiled. He really did love to be in the spotlight. Lucy was happy to see, if nothing else, that his stage fright had been cleared up now that he had friends supporting him and his blatant -- yet entertaining -- lies.

"At that moment, John looked toward me, concern for his girlfriend etched into his ruggedly handsome features --"

"Girlfriend?" John asked.

"Shhh, you're making me lose focus. Yes, he looked at me and I looked at him. You could say we shared a moment. I knew then that the lives of Lucy and John, my two oldest and dearest friends in the world were in my hands. I clapped my hands to draw the beast's attention away from the unconscious Lucy...and then...and then..."

"Yes?" Lucy prompted. "Do tell us what you did then, Starr."

"And then I began to sing."

"Sing?"

"Yes, I began to sing. I sang an old song I learned in my village as a child. About a Dragon who's name was Puff. I figured that since this beast was a Dragon it might just work. The Dragon lived by the sea in a land called Honah Lee. As I sang, the Dragon became lulled by my dulcet tones, almost as if hypnotized. Its head loped back and forth to the melody. Just as I was coming to the end, Lucy woke, leapt to her nimble feet and with a stick she picked up from the ground, stuck the beast in its heart. And it died. Although I feel that it died in peace listening to my music."

"Nimble feet?" Lucy said. "I mean, yes, that's right. I killed the beast with a stick, a trick I picked up a long time ago when I was in warrior training."

"That is the most incredible story I've ever heard in my life," the Sheriff said, shaking his head.

"All I did in that story was look at you?" John asked, clearly annoyed.

Starr nodded. "That was enough."

"How can Wayward Falls ever repay you?" the Sheriff said. "Are you sure you don't want my son Percy?"

Percy stepped forward, muscles flexing.

"Um, really, no. Thank you. If you could just point us in

the right direction to The City," Lucy said. "And we'll be on our way with Oliver and Max. Oh, that's the robot you brought into town yesterday."

"Oh, the robot, that's right. He's been quite a help to my wife. Got our dishwasher working again. It's been broken for over a month."

Lucy blinked. "Max is okay? He's awake and fixing dishwashers?"

"Yes, yes. He's inside right now fiddling with the karaoke machine. He's truly a marvel."

"That he is," Lucy smiled. "How on earth did you fix him?"

"Junior did it, don't ask me. I don't know anything about these high tech devices."

Lucy looked at Junior.

"Just pushed on his big toe, is all," he said.

"See?" Starr said to Lucy. "You must have been doing it wrong."

Lucy sighed. How hard was it to press a big toe? Obviously too hard for her. It didn't matter, if Max was okay, they were out of there.

Oliver scrambled out between the many sets of feet.

"Lucy!" he shrieked.

With a big smile, she leaned over to pick him up. "Have you been okay here?"

"They made me play with their hamster," he said with a frown. "Let's get the hell out of here."

"No argument from me," she said.

Mrs. Adams packed another picnic basket full of goodies for their journey to the city. Despite seeing the wall in the woods, they were told it was a half day's walk from Wayward Falls.

Max rejoined them after he'd fixed all the electronic devices he could.

"Greetings!" he said. "Our journey finally continues."

"Yes," Lucy said to him. "Sorry about the big toe mix up."

He shook his head. "Sometimes it takes a few tries. No matter, I am now fully charged."

Lucy saw the turkeys from the jail and walked over towards them.

"Tina?" she asked, crouching down so she was at their level.

"Who wants to know?" Tina asked. "Oh it's you. The turkey eater."

"What would you say if I said the name 'Draco' to you?"

Tina froze. "What? How do you know Draco?"

Tom looked at her. "Who's Draco?"

Lucy stood up and nodded. "Don't worry Tina. I'll make sure the two of you are together again. I promise it won't be much longer."

Tina burst into tears.

Tom looked confused. For a turkey. "Who the hell is Draco?"

Lucy patted Tina's wing, and stood up and rejoined her friends. "Let's get out of here," she said.

Past the cart and the bushes they'd unsuccessfully hidden Max behind, then through a small patch of forest, they reconnected with the road. After clearing Wayward Falls the road was paved with a vaguely shiny quality to it. Not the rocky, dirty road they were used to.

After a short time, the trees thinned ahead of them and over the next ridge, they could see the outline of the city. Tall buildings rising to the skies. The road headed directly toward it. It looked to be another five miles away.

"Finally!" Lucy said, seeing the city finally after all of what had happened made it all worthwhile. It really did exist. She was starting to believe it was all just a figment of somebody's

imagination.

"Yes, finally you can see The Man and go home like you've been dying to do," John said. "Don't want to keep you here a moment longer."

"Uh oh," Starr said. "Lovers squabble."

"Lover's what?" Max asked.

"You've been out for a while. Just play along would you?"

Lucy sighed, stopped walking, and turned to John. "It's not like that."

"Doesn't matter." John hadn't stopped walking. "Let's get you home. That's all that matters."

Lucy watched him continue to walk toward the city.

Then she heard the squeal of tires and turned around. A large black Hummer had blocked the road behind her and five men in military uniforms jumped out of the vehicle. They were armed and they surrounded Lucy.

She held up her hands. "What's going on?"

"By order of Veronica, you're under arrest," one soldier said.

Enforcers, Lucy thought.

Two Enforcers grabbed her firmly by her arms so she couldn't get away.

"Let her go!" John yelled, running back to her side.

"Oh look," the Enforcer said. "If it isn't John. I thought we'd taken care of you."

"Well, you failed," John said. "Whoever you are."

"I'd keep walking if I were you. You're a civilian now. You've lost your rank. You've got no say in this."

John took a step closer. "Take your hands off her *now*."

The Enforcer next to him cold cocked him with the butt of his gun. John fell to his knees and then down to the ground, unconscious.

"You," Enforcer #1 addressed Starr. "You're the one who

called in the tip, right?"

Starr tried to look coy, but probably figured it was hopeless. "Sorry, Lucy," he said.

"Sorry?" she sputtered. "You turned me in? Why? And how?"

He pulled a sequined cell phone out of his pocket. "With this. And, Veronica promised to make me a big star in The City if I cooperated. What could I do?"

Max turned to Starr. "You really did that?"

Starr nodded. "Yes."

Max punched him in his nose.

"Oh!" Starr wailed. He covered his face with his hands but the blood gushed freely. "You broke my nose! How could you? It cost me a fortune."

"Don't worry, Lucy," Max said. "It will be alright."

"I hope so," she said, and the Enforcers pushed her into the car and drove away.

Lucy didn't see much on the drive since she was flanked by two enforcers, each the size of two regular men.

How could this have happened? How could Starr have sold her out like that? She thought that they were friends! She closed her eyes. So close to The City and now this. Now she was being taken, helpless, to Veronica without her friends by her side. She was all alone.

She felt a something squirm under the collar of her blouse. It was Oliver. She didn't say anything, she didn't want the Enforcers to realize that he was with her. They might plunk him off her shoulder and toss him out the window.

Not that a little mouse could do much to help her, but it was nice to know she wasn't completely alone. A very small comfort.

From the small sliver of window she could see out from, they were approaching a large set of gates which opened

automatically for them. They drove through onto a long winding driveway up to a gigantic mansion.

Veronica's house.

Lucy was dragged out of the car, and led into the mansion, up a winding flight of stairs and pushed into a room, the door closed behind her and locked with an echoing click.

It appeared to be a guest room, decorated in burgundy and cream shades. A large bed to the left, a very small window right in front of her. Too small for her to climb out of.

"Well Oliver," she whispered, just in case anyone might be eavesdropping. "I think we're screwed."

She removed the mouse from her shoulder and placed him down gently on the top of a mahogany chest of drawers.

He stood there, fuming, tapping his little foot. "That Starr! I never trusted him. If I see him again I'm going to tear him apart."

She smiled slightly at this since the image of Oliver beating up Starr was amusing. "Not if I get to him first."

"Why would Veronica go to the trouble of bringing you here if she wants to kill you?" Oliver asked. "I mean, I'm glad it didn't happen, but why didn't she just get her Enforcers to do it for her?"

Lucy chewed her bottom lip, and played with the tight bracelet around her wrist. "She wants this. It's apparently called the Chain of Change and it's important for some reason."

"Oh!" Oliver nodded. "So take it off and just give it to her. Let's get out of here."

"Apparently, it's not that easy. I have to be dead before it'll come off my wrist."

She explained to him what she'd learned from Draco.

"Well, that sucks," he said after she was finished with the story.

"You can say that again. If I'd known that I wouldn't have put the damn thing on in the first place. That Bertha chick. Bright idea. Who the hell was she anyhow?"

"Patron saint of mice," he said. "She's cool."

"If you say so."

"Okay, we just have to figure a way of how to escape from here before --"

They heard a key rattling in the lock.

"Hide," Lucy commanded, and turned her back to block the chest of drawers. She faced the door and tried to breathe normally. It wouldn't be a good plan to hyperventilate and pass out in her current situation.

The door swung inward and two Enforcers came in and stood on either side of the doorway. Veronica entered the room behind them.

She looked stunning, as usual. Like a Hollywood starlet who was spending the day at home with a bunch of photographers from *Architectural Digest*. Her long red hair was full of body and flowed down behind her shoulders. Her flashing green eyes matched the emerald green of her fur-trimmed silk robe and she wore high-heeled slippers in a matching shade. Her pale skin was as smooth and perfect as alabaster and her lips as red as poppies.

"Lucy," she gushed, walking over to embrace her tightly. "So good to see you again."

Lucy was so tense she was surprised that the hug hadn't snapped her in half. Her eyes were wide and surprised when Veronica pulled away, but not before lightly kissing her on either cheek. "You look wonderful."

"Um...thanks?"

"Sorry about the whole scene out on the road, but these big lugs don't really know how to do anything without major drama."

Veronica didn't appear to have murder on her mind at the moment. Lucy had been prepared for a fuming, bitchy Veronica, but this warm and friendly version was throwing her for a loop.

"What's going on?" Lucy ventured.

"Well --" Veronica dropped down on the bed "-- I just wanted to say sorry for the way I've treated you up till now. I've been going through a terrible divorce, you see. It's been very trying. He was a real jerk."

"King Robert?"

"Yes, good old Bobby. Frankly, I'm glad he's dead!"

Lucy swallowed. "I didn't mean to hurt him. It was a horrible accident."

Veronica laughed. "Hurt him? You flattened him like a banana peel."

"Like I said, an accident."

"Doesn't matter now. What's done is done."

Lucy put a hand on her hip and tried to look relaxed. "I'm so glad you're okay with it."

"More than okay, I should reward you. That's why I brought you here. I figure you should enjoy yourself for a little while."

"A little while?"

"Yes, this room is fantastic. There's a Jacuzzi in the bathroom. I'll have a masseuse sent up -- Sven -- you'll adore him, the hands of an angel. Do you like lobster? I'm thinking I'll have the chef send up a little surf and turf for your dinner."

Lucy blinked. "That's very generous of you."

"Yes, and then have a good night sleep. This is a water bed. If you would like Sven to stay, that can certainly be arranged. Then, bright and early tomorrow I'll have to kill you to get my chain back."

It all sounded pretty good until that last bit.

"Kill me?" Lucy gulped.

Veronica rolled her eyes. "Well, yes silly, what did you think? But there's no reason for this to be an unpleasant experience. So enjoy yourself and I'll be seeing you first thing tomorrow. Okay? Take care."

Veronica turned around and left the room, followed by her Enforcers.

The door clicked locked.

"Kill me?" Lucy gulped again to the empty room.

She ran to the window. Maybe it wasn't as small as she'd originally thought it was. She could squeeze out of it couldn't she?

She peered outside. She was at least a hundred feet from the ground. In the distance she could see the outline of The City.

"Okay Oliver," she said. "I'm open to any and all suggestions you might have."

Oliver stepped out from behind a box of Kleenex. He didn't say anything but he looked very sad.

She nodded at him. "I guess that's it, then. It's all over. I may as well just accept it."

She walked over to the bed and threw herself on it. Maybe Veronica would make it fast and painless.

She raised her hand above her head and stared at the bracelet. Then turned over and put her head under a pillow and tried to go to sleep.

Chapter Thirteen

Lucy woke with a start. *Stupid dream*, she thought immediately, rubbing her eyes. It was dark in the room, and outside of the window it was dark outside.

There was a tray of food next to the bed, someone must have come in while she was sleeping to deliver it. She lifted the lid. It looked extremely edible, but she didn't think her nervous stomach would be able to accept any food at the moment. *Her last meal*. She felt like she was on death row.

Oliver was pacing back and forth on the windowsill. He turned to her when she sat up.

"I think I have a plan," he said. "We're going to unravel the pillow cases. With that string, you will lower me down from this window to the ground. I will then run to find John and Max and we'll come back to rescue you."

Lucy replaced the lid on the food. "That's the best you've got?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Forget it. I'm not risking your life too," she said with a sigh. "Face it, it's hopeless."

"No! Don't say that."

She collapsed backward onto the bed again, feeling morbidly depressed. She stared at the bracelet. "It's all because of this stupid thing. If I could just get it off..."

She tugged at it, trying to slip it off her hand. Pulled and yanked at it until her wrist was red and raw. It was like wearing handcuffs that would never come off. Not until it slipped from her dead wrist.

"Ahhh!" she screamed, finally giving up. Tears of frustration ran down her cheeks. "It's impossible."

"What is it, anyhow? Why's it so important?"

"I honestly don't know." Lucy rubbed her sore wrist. "It's called the Chain of Change and other than that I've got no idea. Other than the fact that Veronica wants it. Her husband had it, wore it around his cat neck like a collar."

"Yeah, that cat," Oliver said. "I hated him. He loved to kill my friends. I'm glad you killed him."

"Frankly, so am I, and I didn't even know the guy," she said. "Why was he a cat, anyhow? I always thought he must have been some kind of shapeshifter. Like a werewolf or something. But now I'm not so sure."

Oliver shrugged his little shoulders. "I don't know. Sometimes he was a king and sometimes he was a cat."

She twisted the bracelet on her wrist absently. "Wish I had that ability right now. I think I'd like to be a mouse just like you so we could slip under the door and escape."

Oliver started to grow before her eyes. She opened her mouth with surprise but didn't have a chance to say anything before he'd grown to the size of a person, sitting on the bed right next to her. He looked pretty surprised too.

"Wow, Oliver how did you just do that?"

His mouth worked up and down like he'd forgotten how to talk. Then he shook his head, his eyes wide. "How did I do

that? How did you do that?"

"Do what?" she asked.

He raised his little furry finger and pointed directly at her. "That!"

She frowned and looked down at herself.

She'd been wrong. Oliver hadn't grown as large as her.

She'd shrunk down as small as him.

She raised her hand up in front of her face. It was furry with little pads on her palms and little claws instead of fingernails. She reached up and touched her face.

Furry.

"Oh my God, I'm a mouse," she gasped, reaching around to her butt to find a tail. "How the hell did that happen?"

Oliver's eyes were as large as saucers. "It was the Chain of Change! The Chain! It must be able to change you into something else."

"Like the cat!" she said. "King Robert must have used it to turn into the cat whenever he wanted!"

"Yes!"

Lucy looked down at her furry wrist. "Where is it? Where did it go?"

Oliver pointed to her front. The chain was now around her waist as a shiny belt. The skirt and blouse she'd had on before had shrunk with her.

"What do I do now?" Lucy managed.

There was a knock at the door. Oliver grabbed her wrist and they slid off the bed to hide behind one of its legs.

"Hallo?" a voice with a thick Swedish accent said from the other side of the door. "Dis ees Sven. I've come to give you your massage?"

Lucy and Oliver waited.

"Hallooo?" Sven said again. "I will come in now."

There was the sound of the key in the door and it opened

slowly. Lucy could only see Sven's muscled calves as he entered the room.

"Hallo? Where are you hiding? Come out, I will give massage now."

"Come on!" Oliver grabbed Lucy's arm.

They made a break for the open door.

Sven must have seen them because he screamed, a high pitched sound that sounded odd coming from his muscled and bronzed, barely clad body.

"Mousie!" he pointed. "Eek! There's a mousie. No, two mousies."

He grabbed a vase from a table and threw it at Oliver and Lucy, missing them by inches. The vase crashed against the wall behind them. They scurried through the door and into the hallway.

"Which way?" Lucy gasped.

Oliver looked. "This way!" He grabbed her arm and pulled her to the right and along the wall. They ran until they heard Sven yelling behind them, speaking now in another language, Lucy took a wild guess at Swedish, he gibbered away until an Enforcer came running.

Oliver pulled Lucy under the crack of a door at the end of the hallway. "We'll hide here till it's safe."

"When will that be... Christmas?"

"Shh."

Lucy looked up, then flattened her back against the wall as she realized that they'd just picked Veronica's bedroom to hide in.

They could see the side of her head as she brushed her long red hair in front of a mirrored vanity. She hummed a little tune that sounded vaguely like 'Puff the Magic Dragon.' She was alone in the room, at least as far as Lucy could tell, and she hadn't noticed her two, small, rodent visitors.

If Veronica knew what the Chain of Change could do, then she hadn't realized that Lucy would figure it out or she'd be dead already. And the funny thing is, it was just a fluke that Lucy had wished to be a mouse. She sure hoped that it worked in reverse as easily as it had worked to begin with.

Oliver tugged on her sleeve. He motioned over to the bed, he wanted to hide underneath it. She nodded.

As she made her way across the room something strange caught her eye. It was the mirrored vanity. She hadn't been able to see the reflection from where they'd been by the door but she could see it now.

The reflection wasn't of Veronica at all but of an old, ugly hag.

Lucy gasped, and then clamped her hand over her mouth. Veronica stirred, stopped brushing her hair and turned around. It was her perfect alabaster skin that came into view. Different from the reflection.

There was a sharp knock on the door.

"Yes?" Veronica said.

"Your Eminence, there is a problem."

"Enter."

The door opened and Lucy was surprised to see Jordan DeForge poke his bull-like head into Veronica's room.

"It's the prisoner. She's escaped."

Veronica calmly placed her ivory-handled brush down on the vanity, and she stood up, casually brushing any wrinkles from her robe.

"She won't get far," she said calmly. "But I'd like you to personally oversee the search."

"I believe they have it under control --"

"I'D LIKE YOU TO PERSONALLY OVERSEE THE SEARCH!" Veronica's voice turned high and shrill.

"Very well, your eminence."

"And stop calling me that," she snapped "It makes me sound fat."

"Yes, yes, um...ma'am." DeForge bowed his head and left the room with Veronica closely on his heels.

Lucy turned to Oliver. "Hey, I've escaped."

"Congratulations."

"And I'm a mouse."

"Noticed that. You're actually kind of cute."

"Don't get any funny ideas. This is a temporary situation only."

"How hard can it be for us to sneak out of here, not that you're not so large and awkward. This is perfect. Did you know the Chain could do that?"

"Nope. Just a sec though, I want to check something out," Lucy scrambled up the lace that dangled off the vanity. "I saw Veronica looking in this mirror and it didn't look like her at all."

"What do you mean?" Oliver made his way up the lace to stand next to her.

"It didn't show her exact reflection. It showed an ugly old witch."

"Weird."

"Yeah. I just wanted to have a look."

Lucy took a few steps so she could see herself. Yikes. She hadn't been prepared to see the reflection of a blonde mouse wearing a loose fitting blouse, a peasant skirt and a shiny belt. It was unnerving. But, she supposed, it was a true reflection.

The longer she stared at herself, she noticed the reflection begin to waver. It shimmered and morphed into something else, something strange and more unnerving than seeing her mouse-self.

It showed Lucy's reflection. Only her eyes were closed.

Face pale and bruised. There were tubes connected to her nose. The white of the room behind her was glaring. It was the same thing as in her recurring dream. It was Lucy, but she was in a hospital room, hooked up to machines.

"What does that mean?" Oliver asked, staring at the reflection in awe.

Lucy turned away.

She wanted to brush it off, just say that it meant nothing, just one of Veronica's tricks. But she knew in her heart what it meant. She'd known on some level all along.

That was where she was. In the hospital bed. Unconscious. But this is where her mind was. In this weird land she was journeying through. With talking mice, Old West towns, and cursed Dragons.

But it wasn't real. None of it.

She swallowed hard. She felt ready to crumble, let it all just wash over her. *It wasn't real.* It was the dream of a woman who'd been in a terrible car accident and was hanging on to her life by a thread.

That must have been what the mirror was. A reflection of what truly was. Reality. Veronica's true face. And Lucy's true state.

"Hey!" Oliver pinched her to snap her out of her daze.

"Ow." She rubbed her arm.

Should I feel pain if I'm dreaming?

She felt things here. It was all weird and crazy but it was vivid and clear and everything was happening to her in sequence, not like in dreams when one thing morphs into the next.

Maybe it was a dream and she was hooked up to life support in the hospital on the other side of the mirror.

Or maybe this was something more than that, she thought suddenly. *Something bigger.*

And what if Veronica caught and killed her for the bracelet? Would she wake up in 'the real world' or would she really be dead?

Dream or no dream, she was escaping from Veronica's mansion. She'd follow this through to the end and see what happened. From where she stood there simply weren't any other choices.

"Okay Oliver," she finally said. "Let's get out of here. Find the others. Right now."

"Geez, who's gotten bossy in the past five minutes?"

They scaled the side of the lace and ran out of the room. There were several Enforcers in the hallway, pacing up and down, but since they weren't on the look-out for mice Lucy and Oliver were able to dart between their big black boots and make their way to the elevator.

It opened. Veronica got out accompanied with DeForge. Lucy and Oliver hopped on, avoiding the gap.

The elevator headed down without them pressing any buttons. Lucy hoped it was going to the main floor so they could just run out of the front door. Then once they'd made it to some sort of cover, she would try to figure out how the bracelet worked if she wanted to be her old self again. From there, they'd make their way back to the road and try to find John and Max.

The elevator opened. They poked their heads out to see if the coast was clear. The front door was wide open only ten yards away.

"Watch out!" Oliver cried, and body-checked Lucy. She hadn't been looking and almost got squashed by an large black boot.

She watched the man attached to the attempted murdering boot head the other way down the hall. He didn't look like an Enforcer, he was older and more stooped over. He carried a

scroll in his hand with strange writing on it. Lucy's brow wrinkled as she thought back to what Draco had told her the night before about Veronica's curses being kept in a 'Curse Room.'

She'd bet her last gibney that the old man's scroll was a curse and he was going to tuck it away in the vault.

"Follow him," she whispered fiercely to Oliver.

"But..." He pointed at the open door.

"In a minute," she said. "Just follow him. I'll explain later."

They scurried down the hall, trying to keep up to the old man. He moved through the house as though he knew it like the back of his hand. Through maze-like hallways and down a flight of stairs, they finally came to a large wooden door. He pulled a big golden key out of his pocket and slid it into the lock. He pushed the door open.

It was a small room. About half the size of the bedroom Lucy had been locked in earlier. The walls were lined with in-boxes that each contained a rolled piece of parchment. The old man looked up at the boxes, as if he was counting, or figuring something out in his head. Then he glanced at the scroll he held, rolled it up and slid it into a slot. He turned and left the room, leaving Lucy and Oliver alone.

"This must be it," Lucy breathed, looking at all the scrolls.

"Must be what?"

"The Curse Room."

"The what where?"

"The room where Veronica keeps her curses. Like the one that turned Draco into a Dragon."

"John's brother, right?"

"Right. I have to find that curse. Once I destroy it, he'll be back to normal."

"Now?" Oliver looked nervously around the empty room.

"No time like the present." Lucy inspected the slots a little

closer. There had to be several hundred curses in there. How was she going to find Draco and Tina's?

"Oh, they're alphabetized," Lucy said. "That's very efficient. And helpful, too."

She looked through the letters until she saw "D" way up high on a shelf. There was no way she'd be able to reach it in her current diminutive state.

She grabbed either side of her shiny belt. "I wish to be back to my normal human self," she said firmly.

She felt herself morph, it wasn't an unpleasant feeling, just really strange, and then she looked down at Oliver standing so small and tiny on the ground. She reached over to pick him up.

"That's pretty easy," she said. "Do I look normal?"

He appraised her briefly. "I liked you better the other way, but I guess you'd probably call this normal. Wait, was your nose there before?"

Lucy clasped her hand to her face. Her nose was in its proper position. Oliver giggled.

"Very funny. Now let's get this show on the road."

She was right next to the T's, so she unrolled the first one there and read it aloud:

"Tessa of the Glen, shall now become a hen."

"Nope, it's not that one." She slipped it back in the slot, and then, on second thought, pulled it back out and ripped it to shreds.

"Any damage I can do to Veronica's perfect little curse room is a point for me," she said. "Tessa will thank me, whoever she is."

She worked her way through a couple more T's and then found Tina's.

She held it in her hand for a moment and then tore it slowly, she wasn't sure if it was doing anything since there

was no poof or any magical feeling. Just the feeling of tearing brittle paper.

Lucy was about to turn and start on the D's, when she noticed beside the T's were the U's and then the V's.

There was only one V.

She reached for the scroll and slowly unraveled it. There was a noise behind her, the opposite side of the room to the door.

"You probably could have escaped, you know."

Lucy turned to witness Veronica pushing a chest of drawers back into position on a hidden hole in the wall. It was a back way into the curse room.

Veronica continued, "But you had to get all nosy."

"I guess I watched too much *Murder She Wrote* as a kid."

"I don't know what that is, but it sounds pretty stupid."

Veronica walked over to Lucy. Her arms were crossed and her face was a bit red. She'd probably been running all over the mansion looking for her.

"Why don't you just let me go and we'll forget this whole thing ever happened," Lucy suggested

"Are you dreaming?"

Lucy shrugged. "It's a definite possibility."

"You've obviously figured out how the chain works, haven't you? That's how you escaped? Go ahead, try it again right now. You'll only find out you can use its power for one round trip each day."

"Nah, I'll pass," Lucy said. "But thanks for the suggestion."

"Then let's not make this harder than it has to be." Veronica pulled a curved dagger from her belt. She moved it around so it glinted in the candlelight in the room. "I guess I'll be killing you now."

Lucy refused to let a shadow of fear cross her face. She held Veronica's stare and then noticed as Veronica's gaze

flickered down to the empty slot of the scroll Lucy held in her hand.

"Are you looking at this?" Lucy wiggled the rolled paper. "Interesting reading, I must say."

Veronica's face blanched.

"Yes." Lucy unrolled the scroll and glanced at it. "A very quick and poorly written little ditty about someone named Veronica and her little bitty curse. Self inflicted, I might add. I never knew that curses could work to someone's benefit."

Veronica's mouth worked but no sound came out. The dagger lowered to her side. "Return that to me."

"Little Dorian Gray deal, looks to me," Lucy said. "The people trapped at that casino keep you young, huh? Their energy? But you have to spend a little time in front of that mirror of yours everyday. I guess that must be the bad part. Seeing what a disgusting husk of dried up flesh you've become."

"Damn you," Veronica breathed. Her green eyes bit into Lucy.

"Well, at least there's a nice buffet there, that's all I can say."

"It doesn't harm them."

"Doesn't harm them? The people trapped there for years on end? How long has this been going on...one year, ten years...maybe a hundred or more? All so you can stay young and beautiful forever? That's sad."

"I don't need a lecture right now."

"No, what you need to do...or rather, what you're *going* to do, is let me and Oliver walk out that front door and you will tell your Enforcers not to lay a finger on either of us."

"Who's Oliver?" Veronica said.

Where was Oliver was the more important question. Lucy didn't feel him on her shoulder. He must have slipped off

when she'd gone for the V section.

She looked around the room slowly and then looked at Veronica. Her perfect face now wore a smug grin. What could have happened to put that grin on there?

Lucy looked down at Veronica's knife. It was back in the holder on her belt. She still wore the green fur-trimmed robe, waist synched to its Scarlett O'Hara width, a long expanse of bare thigh and leg showed, ending with her emerald green high-heeled slippers.

Oliver was pinned beneath one.

Chapter Fourteen

"Is this him?" Veronica asked innocently. "You should introduce us."

"Oliver!" Lucy cried. "Are you okay?"

"Gahh!" Oliver cried back. With the slightest pressure, Veronica could easily kill him.

"Here's how this is going to work," Veronica said. "You're going to hand over that scroll, nice and easy, and then I'll release your little friend here."

"Don't hurt him."

"My husband would have loved this." Veronica looked down at Oliver. "He did so love visiting your village, little mouse."

"Gah!"

"Your ex-husband," Lucy spat. "And all he did was kill them. He was a killer."

"Look who's talking."

Lucy gritted her teeth. Was there really a choice? Hand over the scroll or Oliver was mouse meat. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

"Okay..." she said finally. She extended the scroll to Veronica and then snatched it back. "How do I know you won't hurt Oliver anyway?"

"You don't. You'll just have to take my word for it."

Lucy handed the scroll out again and this time Veronica was the one who snatched it away. She clutched it to her chest.

"Thank you."

Then she kicked Oliver against the side of the room. He landed with a tiny "thunk." Lucy ran to his side. He was very unconscious. She looked up at Veronica, her eyes narrow.

"You're going to pay for that," Lucy managed, her eyes full of tears. "If he dies --"

"Yes, if he dies there's one less rodent in the word. Boo hoo."

Veronica spun around and opened up the wooden door.

"Guards!" she called.

Two Enforcers came running.

Veronica breezed past them, her eyes only on her rolled up curse. "Kill her," she commanded. "And make it painful."

"But," Lucy said, taking her eyes off Oliver for a moment. "But...I thought..."

"You thought what? Yes, I was going to do it myself, but I'm sick to death of the sight of you. Whether I kill you or my guards do it makes no difference. Kill her, and bring the Chain of Change to me in my chambers."

And with that, Veronica swished her red hair and walked away.

The guards took a step into the room and Lucy pushed herself back against the wall, cradling Oliver in the palm of her hand. She was at a loss. There was nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. There was no way she was going to fight her way out of this one. She didn't think she even had the

strength to try. This was it. It was over. Her little adventure in this strange land had come to this.

Her mind flickered to the image of herself in the hospital bed. What was real? If that was the real world would it make her death here any less painful? She really didn't want to find out.

One of the guards closed the wooden door. They didn't appear to be carrying any weapons. How were they going to kill her? With their bare hands?

"Look," Lucy said. Hey, it was worth a shot to try to reason with them. She wasn't going to die without making one last ditch attempt to save herself. Self preservation was the name of the game. "I know you guys are loyal to Veronica. But, what she's doing is *wrong*. I don't deserve to die. I have money, I can get money, we can work something out."

The Enforcers just looked at her, their faces shadowed under their hooded cloaks.

One stepped forward and removed his cloak. He raised an eyebrow and grinned at her.

"How much money are we talking about?" John asked

Max removed his cloak too. "I am offended that Lucy thinks we would be that easily bribed."

Lucy was so happy that she almost collapsed. She sprang to her feet and grabbed each of her friends in a huge bear hug. And to top it off she burst into tears.

"I've never been so happy to see anyone before in my entire life," she gushed. "But, how? How did you get here?"

John and Max exchanged a look.

"You go ahead," John said.

"Really?" Max replied. "It's a great story."

"No, I insist."

Lucy waited.

"Well," Max began. "Long story short, when John got

whacked on the head he got part of his memory back."

"Really? That's great!"

"Yeah, great," John said. "I'm reliving my years working as an Enforcer. Nothing I'm proud of, that's for sure."

"Yes, but that is how he knew where to find you, or, Veronica's compound, anyhow. We got here, scaled the fence, and knocked out the first two guards we came across, that's how we got these uniforms," Max finished proudly.

Lucy nodded. "Sounds just like *Mission: Impossible*."

"No, it was possible. Difficult, but not impossible."

Lucy felt Oliver move a little in her palm. She looked down at him. "Veronica hurt Oliver. I don't know if he's going to be okay."

"Let me see him," Max said, and Lucy gently handed the little mouse over. Max placed another hand on top of Oliver and his eyes rolled binary code. "He is hurt, but it's not critical. He'll wake up shortly. We will need to be extra careful with him."

Lucy took him back. "We shouldn't stay here, Veronica will be waiting to hear how my execution went, and she'll be banging down the door soon. So, what's the plan to get out of here?"

"Didn't really get that far," John said sheepishly. "We were actually surprised we found you so fast."

"There's a couple dozen guards out there..." Lucy said.

"And two in their underwear." John looked down at the uniform he was wearing.

"That's no good. They'll know there's intruders. They probably know already."

And then, as if Lucy's words had doomed them, an alarm sounded. The clomping sound of heavy boots on marble tiles sounded outside the Curse Room. There was a sharp knock on the door.

"Open up. Who's in there?" a commanding voice said. It sounded like DeForge.

Max rushed to the door to hold it shut just as a heavy thud sounded against it. Whoever was outside wanted in. And quickly. Max braced himself against the door to hold back whoever was on the other side.

There was nowhere to hide in the room. Just the slots on the walls and a few heavy bookcases.

The bookcase! Lucy ran over to it.

"Veronica entered the room from over here," she said.

"There must be a secret passageway behind it."

John ran to her side and together they pushed the bookcase out of the way. It slid slowly like it was on a track. Behind it was a dark tunnel.

"Where does it lead?" John asked.

"I don't know," Lucy said. "That's why it's a 'secret' passageway. Come on. We don't have much to lose."

"Okay. Max, come on."

Lucy remembered something else. She grabbed John's shirt. "John, the curse...your brother's curse. You need to grab it." she pointed, "It's over there in the D section."

He followed her finger and ran to the boxes.

"D...David...Desdemona...DeForge...hmmm, that's interesting. "

"Hurry!" Lucy urged.

The pounding at the door was getting louder and harder and Max was starting to lose the battle.

"Yes, hurry," he seconded.

"Okay, I'm trying! Dmitri...Donald...Draco. Got it!" He grabbed the parchment and shoved it down the front of his shirt, then he ran back to Lucy. They stared at Max.

"Come on Max, what are you waiting for?"

Max looked back at them, each pound of the door pushing

him violently forward. "No, I have to stay. Go, you two. It is okay."

"No, it's not. Come on!" Lucy yelled.

"Leave me," Max said, raising his chin to look brave. "I'll hold them off as long as I can."

Lucy looked at John with a good dose of panic in her eyes.

John frowned, then he yelled to Max.

"But what about revenge against your creator?" he said.

"Are you okay that he abandoned you and left you underground for ten years?"

Max's head tilted to the side. "Oh yeah. I almost forgot about that."

He was at their side between pounds on the door, they were through into the passageway, and Max slid the bookcase back in place just as they heard the heavy wooden door splinter behind them.

There was no light in the tunnel. It felt cold and damp.

They hurried into the darkness.

"This is ridiculous," John said. "We have no idea where we're going."

They could hear the Enforcers rooting through the Curse Room. It was only a short amount of time before they found the bookcase and the entranceway behind it.

"Wait," Max said. "I think I can assist here."

Lucy heard a rattle and then two beams of light appeared. They were coming from Max's eyes.

"I had forgotten that there is an emergency light source inside my cranium meant to be used in emergency situation," he explained. "I would assume it will do for this instance as well."

"I'll say," Lucy said, finding the idea of a person with white beams of light emanating from their eye sockets a little creepy to say the least. But, it did do the trick. Wherever Max

looked was spotlighted. There wasn't all that much to see other than lightly slimy brick walls, a dirt floor, and a tunnel that reached straight ahead as far as the light showed.

"I know Veronica used this tunnel when she was looking for me," Lucy said. "So it must lead to other parts of the house."

There was a crashing sound back in the direction of the Curse Room and some incoherent shouting. Then Lucy heard a high pitched shrill scream. Veronica just found out that she'd escaped. Again. The thought made her smile, but only for a second. They had to get out of there.

"Come on." Lucy pushed Max in front of them. "Lead the way."

They rushed forward into the tunnel. It seemed to go on forever and the further in they got the colder the tunnel became.

"Did I thank you guys for coming back for us?" Lucy said while they walked quickly. "You're the best."

"We couldn't just leave you," John said. "Not after what Starr did. I can't believe I trusted that guy."

"Yeah," Max said, turning his head slightly so that light flashed on the wall, "If I see that guy again I'm going to tear him limb from limb."

"Are you really surprised?" Lucy said. "He's an opportunist. Anything to become a big star, right?"

"He's a big jerk," Oliver murmured. He'd started to wake up. Lucy still had him gently cradled in her hand.

"Oliver!" A big smile snapped to her face. "I was worried about you."

"Yeah," he said. "What exactly happened? I remember a big shoe. And then nothing. And now here we are moving quickly in the dark."

"Don't worry about it. Well, maybe worry a bit. We're

running away from Veronica and her men. If they catch us we'll all be killed."

"Oh," Oliver said. "And ouch. I think my tail's broken."

"I'm surprised that's all that's broken the way Veronica kicked you."

"She kicked me? She is super evil."

"The evilest."

Max was picking up speed, Lucy was about to ask him to slow down but she suddenly heard voices behind them, getting steadily closer.

"Hey," Lucy said to John. "You're very quiet."

She could see just the outline of his face as he turned to look at her. "Being here, even in this tunnel, I'm starting to remember things."

"Really? Like what?"

"I remember working here. The things she made me do. How I was only doing them so I could help my brother."

"Maybe you can remember something about this tunnel," Lucy said. "Like where the exit is?"

John was quiet for a moment. "Yes, I think I...I think I do remember. Just a second." He frowned in thought. "Yes, the tunnel it leads right to...right to the city! The tunnel was Veronica's secret way into the city since her ex-husband banned her from going there."

"Are you serious? You can remember that?"

He turned to her with a smile on his face. "Yeah, I remember!"

"That is so perfect," Lucy said. Finally something was going their way. If they just kept walking, the tunnel would take them directly where they wanted to go.

She crashed right into Max's back. He'd stopped walking. The voices behind them sounded like they were getting even closer.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"I'm afraid John is mistaken," his bright eyes glanced at her.

"Mistaken about what?"

"Perhaps this tunnel did lead to the city at one time." His voice was calm and steady, but of course, Max's voice was always calm and steady. He turned back around and flashed his eyes on what stood in front of them.

A solid brick wall.

"It appears that someone decided that this tunnel should no longer lead to the city," he said.

Lucy stared at the wall with disbelief. No. This was not happening. Just when she thought she'd finally escaped. When things were finally going right for them. And now this.

She turned and met John's eyes. He looked guilty.

"I remember it going to the city," he said simply. "I'm sorry."

She turned around and watched a tiny light in the distance grow closer and closer until the Enforcers arrived. They clicked their boots together and turned to the side to let Veronica through.

Veronica wasn't playing any games this time. Her eyes flashed with anger and her face was flushed. She looked ready to kill.

"You thought you could escape from me?" Veronica managed, breathing hard from the effort of catching up to them. "You thought that I'd allow that to happen?"

Lucy shrugged and briefly thought about a witty comeback, but gave up. "Bite me," she said instead.

A smile touched Veronica's ruby lips. "John, John, John. Of all my Enforcers, you were my favorite. The fact that you betrayed me when I was ready to give you everything saddens me deeply."

John shrugged. "Bite me."

"I will make you sorry, mark my words."

"Were you the one who tried to kill him?" Lucy asked.

"Left him in the cornfield?"

Veronica tore her gaze from John and narrowed her eyes on Lucy. "No. Why would I do that? I enjoyed John. I don't try to destroy the things I enjoy. At least not until I grow weary of them. I believe that was the work of an underling who desired his position. And shut up."

"And you," Veronica moved towards Max. "You aren't real, are you?"

"He's real," Lucy snapped.

"Shut up, shut up, shut up!" Veronica screeched. "Shut up before I have someone cut out your tongue."

Lucy shut up.

Max's eyes flashed towards her. "I am an artificial life form, yes, but I consider myself to be real."

"Perhaps I will keep you around," Veronica said. "Wait a moment, I know you. You were the program I had designed."

"That is correct. Ten years ago."

"Right," Veronica sighed. "I believe I found you to be substandard then. By the looks of things, not much has changed. Perhaps I'll have you made into a nice ash tray or perhaps a flower vase."

Max was silent. The light in his eyes dimmed slightly at her words.

Veronica spotted Oliver curled up in Lucy's hand.

"Well, what do you know?" She smiled cruelly. "It lives. I guess I didn't kick it hard enough."

Oliver's eyes narrowed. "Kiss my mouse ass, bitch."

Her eyebrows shot up. "Do you kiss your mother with that mouth? No, I suppose you don't. My husband probably killed her and had her as a light snack."

Lucy felt Oliver struggle to get to his feet. She clamped her other hand down to stop him from doing anything crazy.

"Did you put your curse away somewhere safe?" Lucy asked.

Veronica twitched at that. "Yes, of course. Somewhere no one will ever lay a hand on it again."

"Good," Lucy said. "I'm sure whoever's it was will be happy to hear that."

She slid a rolled piece of parchment out from the front of her blouse and wiggled it in the air.

"Whatever do I have here?" she mused aloud. "Perhaps you should have read the other curse just to make sure I'd given you back the right one."

Veronica took a step forward. "That's impossible. You gave it back to me. You..."

"I gave you back a curse, yes," Lucy smiled. "But it wasn't actually yours. *This* is yours."

"Give that to me right now."

"I don't think so."

"One word from me and you will all be dead in a heartbeat."

"My heart doesn't beat," Max said.

"You know what I mean," Veronica snapped.

Lucy unrolled the curse. "But not before I tear this to shreds. And I'm thinking by your reaction you can't do repeaters on these curses. Once it's destroyed, it's all over. Am I right?"

Veronica just glared at her with clenched teeth.

Lucy smiled. "I thought so. Why don't you all just get out of our way and --"

Before Lucy's very eyes, the curse was snatched right out of her hands. But it wasn't by Veronica.

She turned around.

The wall has disappeared behind them and Jordan DeForge held the curse tightly in his large fist.

A smug smile appear on Veronica's face. She raised an eyebrow.

"Good job DeForge," she said. "Remind me to promote you."

DeForge was busy reading over the curse. He looked up at Lucy, then over to John.

"You have always been my favorite," Veronica said. "Come, let's go back to the mansion."

DeForge just stood there, solid as the brick wall he replaced. "I don't think so."

Veronica turned back around. "Pardon me?"

"I said," DeForge replied, "I don't think so."

He nodded at John. "You were right about her. All the things you used to tell me. I was such a fool. I thought I was doing the right thing working for her when all the time she was just a...just a...phony."

Veronica crossed her arms. "You are treading on my very last nerve today. I demand that you hand that over right this instant."

"Right," DeForge nodded.

He moved forward and for a brief, sickening moment Lucy thought that that was it. It was all over.

Instead he stood firm. Held the parchment in front of him.

And tore it in half.

Veronica watched the curse destroyed before her own eyes.

"Noooo!" She yelled, but she was already changing, morphing into something else, something different. Smaller, older, drier. Her red hair turned grey and fell out. Her perfect alabaster skin grew ashy and deeply wrinkled. Her hands, beautiful manicured before, became claw-like appendages.

She finally looked her age. Which must have been about a

thousand years old.

Veronica fell to her knees, defeated and sobbing. The Enforcers around her looked at a loss of what to do next. They looked at DeForge.

"Take her back to the mansion," he said. "I'll deal with her there. Oh, and Veronica..." He let the pieces of parchment flutter to the floor. "Consider that my resignation."

Veronica's eyes, still green as emeralds in the dim light of the tunnel, flashed with the rage that had been there before. She opened her mouth to speak, but something small and white dropped down by Lucy's foot.

She peered down at it. "I think you just lost a tooth."

Veronica sneered at them, and the Enforcers gently steered her around and headed back toward the mansion.

"Thank you," Lucy said to DeForge. "If you hadn't been there --"

"You'd all be dead," he finished. "I know. And you're welcome. I owed John one, anyhow."

"You did?" John said.

"Yeah. I won't go into any details with members of the fairer sex here, but let's just say you got me out of a bind once."

Lucy raised an eyebrow. Sounded very interesting.

"Although," DeForge continued. "I could have done without being knocked out and tied up at the casino."

"Oh," John said, nodding. "Sorry about that."

"It's okay," DeForge looked towards Lucy. "She looks like she might be worth it."

John smiled. "Come to think of it, you did win her fair and square in that poker game. Are you sure you don't want her?"

"Hey!" Lucy said.

DeForge smiled back. "She couldn't handle a man like me. Better she's with a soft sack like you." He sighed. "I guess I'd

better be getting back. Veronica's got a lot to answer to. She's been hiding a lot of secrets and they've all finally caught up to her."

John and DeForge shook hands firmly and Lucy gave him a quick hug.

"Just keep heading that way and you'll get to the city before too long," DeForge said as he started walking away. "Good luck."

Lucy waved at him and turned around to John and Max, smiling.

"You had that parchment all the time?" John asked. "Why didn't you just tear it up to begin with?"

Lucy shrugged. "I guess I just wanted to see her face."

"You nearly got us killed. Again."

"But I didn't," she smiled. "We're okay. Well, relatively. Except for Oliver's tail, that is."

"Broken in *two* places," Oliver said, cradling his tail in his arms.

"I don't know how a tail can be broken, but okay if you say so. So the city is right ahead of us. Let's go, I can hardly wait."

"To see The Man," John said.

"Well, yes, I suppose. But it's The City. I haven't eaten in a day. I'm starving. I'm sure there must be somewhere to eat. Do you remember what the city was like? I'm sure you were there before."

John frowned in thought. "It's big, I know that. Lots of people. Tall buildings."

"Sounds exciting," Lucy said dryly. "But it's got to be better than here."

They walked until about ten minutes later they came to a ladder in the middle of the tunnel.

"Should we climb it?" Max asked.

"That's what ladders are meant for," Lucy replied. "But, why don't you go first?"

Max nodded, and began climbing the ladder. Lucy followed, tucking Oliver into her pocket for safekeeping. John brought up the rear, which made Lucy immediately remember that she was wearing a skirt.

Max stopped and she could hear him fiddling with something metallic. There was a heavy sliding sound and then bright sunshine streamed in above them.

Max continued, and Lucy followed, finally pulling herself through a hole in the ceiling.

She looked down. It had been a sewer tunnel, or at least it appeared to be that from where she was now standing. John climbed out after her and blinked at the bright sunshine. Max's eyes returned to normal.

"Welcome to The City," John said, smiling at Lucy.

Chapter Fifteen

Lucy took a moment to take in the surroundings. At long last, she'd finally made it to The City.

And it was quite a sight. As different from outside the city walls as could be. Here was sprawling metropolis. Tall mirrored buildings that reached up to the clouds, moving sidewalks running along the sides of busy streets. Every car that drove along looked like something out of *The Jetsons*. Every inch of space that could be used to jam something urban into, was jammed.

"Wow," Lucy said. "This is incredible."

She heard something muffled, and realized it was Oliver. She pulled him out of her pocket and placed him on her shoulder.

He looked around in awe. "Wow," he said. "I bet I'm the first mouse to ever set foot here."

Lucy looked down to see was a mouse in a business suit driving a tiny red convertible dart past them. She could have sworn he was wearing tiny designer sunglasses. He had a briefcase in his backseat. She decided not to draw Oliver's attention to this.

"So, Max," Lucy said. "Where do we begin? You know where to find The Man, don't you?"

Max nodded. Then he turned and pointed.

Lucy followed his finger up to the top of one of the silver buildings. In letters tall enough to be buildings themselves, it read: "THE MAN."

She nodded. "Well, that helps."

John touched her arm. "Are you sure you want to do this?"

She didn't know what to say. After everything that had happened, even the bad stuff, she actually didn't want to leave. She wanted to stay there with her new friends and with John -- especially with John.

But there simply wasn't any choice. What she'd seen in the mirror was all she could think about. If she was in a hospital bed somewhere, her mind trapped here while her body wasted away there... If she didn't go back her body might die without her. And what happens when a body dies without the mind?

"I have to see him," she said simply. "That's just the way it is."

He turned away. But not before she saw the hurt in his eyes. She didn't know how to explain it to him, it did sound pretty crazy. But what if she was right? Could she tell him that it was possible that he was only a dream? That her unconscious mind had conjured up this wonderful man whom she really didn't want to leave but had to? And when she woke up in the real world, that all of this, all of this land and its people and its problems would just disappear because they never existed in the first place?

No. It was better to say as little as possible.

"Let us go then," Max said, breaking the sudden silence between them.

She nodded. They walked silently toward the building with

the sign on top. Once in front of the main doors, she looked up. The building looked impossibly high.

The glass doors swung open in front of them and they walked inside.

There was a main reception area with a reception desk at the end of it. Everything was grey and steel and super shiny. In the midst of the huge expanse of open floor space, there was a small waiting room with two very uncomfortable looking black leather chairs and a glass coffee table that, oddly enough, held one issue of *InStyle* magazine.

The receptionist held her index finger up when they approached. She was on the phone.

"Yes, he'll call you. I'm sorry but he's very busy. Well, he is *The Man*, you know."

She hung up and looked at them with that annoyed patience that receptionists seem to possess.

"Can I help you?"

"Yes." Lucy stepped forward. "I'd...*we'd* like to see the man please."

"Do you have an appointment?"

"An appointment?" Lucy repeated. "Um...actually no we don't."

"The Man is very busy."

"I'm sure he is, but this is extremely important."

"Isn't it always." The receptionist clicked away on her computer. "Let's see, I think I can fit you in for... what do you say to three years from next Thursday?"

"I'd say that's a little long to wait. Um..." Lucy turned around to get some sort of support from her friends. They'd taken off to sit in the waiting area. John was thumbing through the issue of *InStyle*. "Well, that's just no good at all. Bertha said I should come see him, but she didn't say anything about needing an appointment --"

"Bertha?" the receptionist said. "Did you say that Bertha sent you?"

"That's right."

The receptionist tapped away at her computer terminal. Lucy glanced over and saw that it was labeled *Maximillion 4.0*.

"Yes," the receptionist said. "I can squeeze you in today...but it won't be for two hours, I'm afraid. You can wait here if you wish."

Lucy was surprised that giving the name of the plain woman she'd met in Mousetown just took her to the top of a three year waiting list. "Yes, well, that's fantastic. Thank you. Is there a restaurant or anything nearby? I'd love to have some lunch before my appointment."

The receptionist nodded. "Go out the glass doors and turn to your left. One block down there's a lovely little diner. Reasonably priced, too."

Lucy smiled. "Great. I'll be back in two hours."

She walked over to the waiting area. "I'm in," she said, not looking to see John's reaction to this news. "There's a diner around the corner we can hang out at for a couple of hours."

"Great," John said without much emotion.

They left the building and headed down the street. Lucy couldn't believe it was almost over. Everything that she'd endured was going to end. Of course, she did realize she might be putting all of her eggs in one basket while relying on The Man to somehow have the power to send her back home. It was crazy, but it felt right. It felt real. That's what the craziest thing about this whole experience had been. How real it all had felt.

John stopped walking near the crosswalk.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You are not going to believe who I just saw go into that

building," he said.

"You got me. Elvis? I don't know."

He pointed. "Starr. I swear it was him. He didn't see me."

"You're kidding."

"Let's go kick his ass," Max growled.

"It's not worth it," Lucy said. "He'll get what's coming to him in the end."

"But that's no fun for us," Max replied.

Lucy thought about the time. If they spent a half an hour kicking Starr's scrawny blue ass, that would leave over an hour to get back for her appointment.

"Okay," she said. "But let's make it a quick ass kicking."

"That's the best kind."

They moved towards the building that Starr had disappeared into.

Just before they got there, Max froze in place, looking up.

"What is it?" Lucy asked.

"I fear I must leave you two now," he said. "There is something I must take care of."

Lucy looked up. At the top of a building about half the size of THE MAN's building, there was a sign: 'Maximillion Enterprises. We build it, you use it.'

"Do you think your creator is in there?" John asked.

"I believe so," Max said grimly. "I must leave you now to complete my quest for revenge."

"Well, good luck," Lucy said. She was suddenly worried Max was going to do something crazy. He had said when they'd first met him that he was planning on killing his creator. But she knew him well enough by now, was he really going to go through with it?

Max nodded curtly at them, and moved away, down the street.

"Do you think we'll ever see him again?" Oliver asked

sadly.

"I don't know," she said. "I hope he doesn't do anything he'll regret."

"Speaking of which," John said. "I believe we have an ass kicking to attend to."

"Lead the way."

They entered through the front door of the building. It was the same silvery futuristic color as the tall buildings, but it was short and squat. A woman surrounded by three running and jumping children slipped past them on her way out. One of the children carried a red balloon.

They traveled a short distance down a carpeted hallway, and around a corner.

"Hey," Oliver said. "I think I know what this place is."

Lucy blinked at the scene in front of her. It appeared to be a restaurant of some sort. Filled with laughing and screaming children. Parents sitting nearby looking tired and drawn. Every color of the rainbow was used to decorate the place with streamers and balloons and ten foot tall stuffed teddy bears and other strange animals.

A blonde woman brushed past Lucy. In one hand she carried a large pepperoni pizza and in the other hand a tray that precariously balanced three mugs of a liquid that appeared to be root beer.

"I'll be right with you," she murmured, on her way to a table with four children jumping up and down on top of it.

"What is this place?" Lucy asked Oliver.

He nodded. "This is Will E. Wildebeest's. It's supposed to be the happiest restaurant in The City."

"Will E. Wildebeest?" Lucy repeated.

The blonde reappeared in front of them, her hands now empty, but a oddly root-beer-colored stain now adorning the front of her crisp white shirt.

"Welcome to Will E.'s," she said. "Table for two?"

"Three," Oliver piped up.

"It might be a little bit of a wait. It's a crazy day."

"Tell me about it," Lucy said.

"Just wait here. I'll go clear a table for you. By the way, it's buy one get five free today."

She took off and was swallowed by the crowd of squirming and yelling children.

Lucy and John looked at each other.

"Not what I expected," John said.

"That's an understatement. And the worst thing is, now I feel like pizza."

"Never had it before."

"You'd like it. Everybody likes pizza. Then again, if the pepperoni is any form of wildebeest, I may change my mind."

John looked around. "So where did Starr go, do you think?"

"No idea. Maybe he just wanted some lunch."

"This doesn't seem like his kind of place."

Just then, the lights dimmed and there was a long, drawn out drum roll.

The waitress returned, and beckoned for them to follow her through the crowd. They did and she led them to a small table in the corner.

There were swirling spotlights, trailing their way around the restaurant floor. The drum roll finished and a voice came over the loudspeaker.

"Moms and pops, children of all ages, welcome to Will E. Wildebeest's!"

The kids went crazy, jumping up and down, clutching their greasy pieces of cheese drenched pizza.

"Are you all ready to be entertained?" the voice asked.

The kids unanimously decided that yes, indeed, they

wanted entertainment.

"Are you ready for the beast himself? Mr. Will E. Wildebeest?"

Lucy grabbed John's arm. "You don't think..."

He raised an eyebrow. "Is there really any doubt?"

"Here he is! Will E. Wildebeest!"

The invisible band which Lucy decided was probably just a tape recorder back stage kicked into high volume.

A creature leaped out from behind the stage. He moved in a hula movement while he walked and waved his arms at the crowd.

He wore a large brown fluffy suit. A big stuffed head with white plush tusks. A little piggy tail adorned his rear end.

There really was no doubt. The part of Will E. Wildebeest was currently being played by Nesbig Starr.

He leaped up the three stairs to the stage. The humongous stuffed teddy bears around appeared to stare at him with pity and understanding.

He didn't need to grab a microphone as there was already a small one hooked onto one of his tusks. He waved his hands again.

"Hello kids!"

"HELLO WILL E.!" they screamed back.

Lucy could barely believe her eyes. This is what he'd sold her out for? This was his shot at stardom? This just couldn't be what he'd expected, was it? Something must have gone terribly wrong. Then again, it served him right for trusting Veronica at her word.

"So kids, do you want to hear me sing a song?"

"YEAHHH!!!"

"This song is very dear to me. And I hope it will be as dear to you. It's about a Dragon. Do you all like Dragons?"

"YEAHHH!!!"

"Okay then..."

The music changed its tempo and the Wildebeest took its showbiz stance.

"*Puff the magic Dragon*," sang Starr. "*Lived by the sea. And frolicked on the roly hills in a land called Honalee --*" His voice caught on the last part.

He sniffed.

And tapped his microphone.

"Listen kids, I'll tell you a real story. There was a Dragon named Puff. There really was. And Puff had some good friends. Good friends that liked him and excepted him for what he was. And that's important, kids. To accept people for who they are. Well, this Dragon had a big problem. He was a greedy bastard. A real scum sucking no good asshole."

The kids all looked at each other, their hands clamped over their mouths at hearing Will E. say a naughty word.

"And this scum sucking asshole sold out his friends. At the first opportunity he got. Seemed like a good idea at the time. A great deal, actually. Something that would set him up for life. Everything he'd ever dreamed of. But you know what kids?"

"WHAT, WILL E?"

"Dreams suck. People will stab you in the back as easy as you stab them. Look behind you, everybody's got a knife in their backs. It happens. It's life. Life's a bitch, kids. Say it with me."

"LIFE'S A BITCH, WILL E!!!"

"So, Puff got what was coming to him and now has to use his God given talents pimping himself in a damn pig costume. The moral of the story is...if you're lucky enough to find people who can stand the sight of you for more than an hour, be good to them and don't let them get killed. Don't be like Puff kids...don't do it!"

And that was about the time Starr's microphone cut out.

"Y'all like some root beers here?" The waitress was back, seemingly oblivious to what had just transpired on stage.

Lucy and John were stunned. They watched the restaurant's security firmly escort Starr out of the front door and toss him into the street. They followed closely behind.

Starr lay on his back next to the moving part of the sidewalk, looking dazed and just staring up at the clear blue sky.

Lucy looked down at him.

"Your singing voice leaves a bit to be desired," she said dryly. "But the monologue was quite well done."

His blue eyebrows lifted. The wildebeest head had come off enough that Lucy could see part of his face.

John also looked down at him. "I still think we should kick his ass."

A big smile spread across Starr's features and he leapt to his feet.

"I thought you were dead!" he cried. "And it was all my fault!"

"Yeah," Lucy said. "We got that."

"Let me at him," Oliver said. "Just let me have a piece of him."

"So," John said. "That was your reward? Being the dinner show entertainment for six year olds?"

Starr suddenly found the moving sidewalk extremely interesting as his gaze shifted away from meeting their eyes.

"Actually no. I did get a chance to perform at the big show last night. It was everything I'd ever dreamed of."

"And?"

Starr's shoulders slumped. He took the head completely off and threw it to the side. "My stage fright came back. I was all alone. Nobody was rooting for me. I couldn't do it. It was too

scary."

"But you performed just fine...well...sort of fine, in there," Lucy nodded at the restaurant.

"The costume helps," Starr said. "Besides, that was my first and last performance. I pretty sure I just got fired."

"That would be a safe bet, I think."

Starr blinked. His eyes were glassy with emotion. "I'm glad you're not dead, Lucy."

"So am I."

"So," Starr said. "I guess I'll get out of your way now. I don't want to bother you."

"Okay." John's face showing nothing.

Starr began walking aimlessly away down the sidewalk.

Lucy glanced at John who just shrugged back at her. It was up to her. She was the one who would have been killed.

"Starr," she called after him.

He turned his head with surprise.

Lucy smiled very slightly. "We're going to the diner across the street. Do you want to get something to eat? Hey, that was another rhyme."

Starr skipped back to them with a bright and cheery smile on his blue face. "Yes, please!"

"This doesn't mean that we forgive you, you know."

Starr nodded. "Whatever you say."

They crossed the street.

"Hey," Starr said. "Isn't that Max over there?"

Lucy turned her head. Outside of the building that Max had been headed toward earlier was Max.

Pieces of Max.

Strewn on the sidewalk.

Chapter Sixteen

Lucy ran over to what was left of Maximillion 2.0. He was at the bottom of a number of stairs that led up to the Maximillion Enterprises building. One of his arms had torn off, wires hanging out loosely. His body, still sparking, was thrown to one side. His head lay close to her. Lucy gazed down at him, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"How could this have happened?" she cried.

John crouched down beside her. His face was drawn and pulled, he looked about ready to cry, too. Starr stood a bit back, his hand covering his mouth with disbelief.

"All he wanted to do was see his creator again," Lucy said. "Do you think he did this to Max?"

Max's eyes were open and dark like the screens of a dead computer. Suddenly they flickered, binary code rolling through dimly.

"Lucy?" Max's mouth moved, but didn't quite match the shape of the word.

"Max?" She touched the side of his face. "Oh Max, what

happened?"

"Is everyone here?" he asked.

"Yes, we're all here. Even Starr."

Max smiled slightly. "Did you kick his ass?"

"No," Lucy said. "He's sorry for what he did. We've almost forgiven him."

"Good," Max said. "That's good."

John brushed Max's plastic hair off his plastic forehead.

"What happened, Max? Was it your creator? Did he do this to you?"

"No," Max said, his eyes blinked slowly. "It wasn't him."

"What happened?"

"I...I went into the building. I stormed past the security. I managed to find the office of my creator --" his voice caught, his eyes brightened for a moment and then dimmed.

"And then what?" Lucy urged.

"My creator looked at me...and he...and he started to cry. He told me that had no idea I had survived. He was forcibly removed from the underground laboratory by Veronica's Enforcers and later told that it was destroyed. He said it was like he had lost his son when he lost me."

Lucy wiped a tear away from her cheek.

"Well, that's great, isn't it?" she said. "And then what?"

"He made me promise to return, so I could help him with his research. I...I left his office and came down in the elevator..."

Oliver hopped down off of Lucy's shoulder. He was crying, too. He patted what was left of Max with his little paw.

"I came outside," Max continued with great effort. "I was going to meet you all in the diner, to see our journey through to the end like we had planned. I was feeling very...I was feeling...I suppose, happy."

"But how?" Lucy managed. "How did this happen? Who

did this to you?"

"I do not really know," Max said. "I started down the stairs, and something hit me. I am not really sure what it was. Something hard and bright and fast hit me and the next thing I knew I was tumbling down the stairs in pieces. I must say that I am not feeling quite myself."

"Something hit you," Lucy repeated. She picked his head off the ground and held it against her. She stood up and looked around nervously. "What was it?"

John also stood after picking Oliver up and putting him into his shirt pocket.

They were being watched.

Lucy saw the green eyes first on the other side of the road. They flashed at her like nuclear emeralds, ready to explode and take the whole city down with her.

Veronica. In her new form, stooped and dried, only anger and rage and revenge giving her the strength to function.

"You thought you'd won?" Veronica cackled. "Don't you know that the house always wins?"

She wasn't alone. She was with the old man that Lucy had seen originally go into the Curse Room. He held several pieces of parchment in his arms and a feathered quill. The parchment looked blank, except for one piece that he'd rolled up and stuck in his pocket.

Veronica was cursing them. One by one. And she'd started with Max.

"I decided to go with a simple destruction curse," Veronica said. "Not quite as much fun as other ones that came to mind, but it is irreversible."

Lucy looked down at Max's head in her arms.

"I'm sorry," Max said, his voice box now so destroyed she could barely make out the words.

"Why should you be sorry?" she told him. "You are so

brave and wonderful. We all love you so much."

"Thank you for rescuing me."

His eyes then dimmed to black and the small hum that had accompanied his words went silent.

Lucy swallowed hard and pressed her lips together. She hugged Max tightly against her for a moment and then placed him gently down on the ground in front of her. She looked across the street at Veronica.

"You'll pay for this!" Lucy yelled.

"He would have made a great ash tray," Veronica offered with a smirk. "Actually, I suppose he still could."

Starr moved Lucy aside. Was he really going to have the courage to confront Veronica face to face? Lucy was amazed.

"Well, here they are again," Starr told Veronica. "And that's the last time I'm going to deliver them to you."

Lucy's mouth dropped open. She glanced at John whose expression was unreadable.

"Good job, Starr," Veronica said. "If you weren't such a pansy I'd make you head of my Enforcers."

"Come on over and get them," Starr said.

Lucy couldn't speak. She just stared at Starr with disbelief. He'd sold them out again? How was that possible? Was she that much of a schmuck she wasn't able to see what a liar he was?

Veronica smiled, and pulled her wizard along with her as she began to cross the road, her attention fully fixed on Lucy. Lucy could only imagine the things that were going through her mind. She suddenly looked down at her bracelet. Could she change into a mouse again and scurry away to safety? But where would that leave John? She grabbed his arm. They were in this together. No Chain of Change was going to save the day this time.

Veronica hobbled across the street. She was only a few

steps away from them.

"I think I'll just kill you," she shouted at Lucy, and then to John. "But I think I'll make you a Dragon. Maybe you can keep your brother company for the rest of your miserable lives."

"Just a moment," Starr said.

Veronica stopped walking and looked at him.

"What?" she said.

"No, that should do it," Starr replied.

She didn't even see the bus coming.

It hit her full on, but the wizard jumped free. When the bus passed, all that remained of Veronica was a pile of dust and two shiny green emeralds.

Lucy gawked at Starr.

"See?" he said, shrugging his shoulders. "I said that should do it."

John rushed toward the wizard and grabbed him by the front of his shirt.

The wizard raised his hands up looking very scared. "She made me do it," he whined. "I had no choice!"

Lucy hugged Starr tightly. "You really *are* a great actor!"

He beamed at her. "Well, *duh*."

Lucy heard footsteps behind them, thundering down the flight of stairs. It was a little man with big magnified glasses that covered most of his face. He looked greatly upset.

"What in the worlds happened out here?" he wailed. "My Max! What have you done to my Max?"

He removed his glasses, tucked them into his pocket, and collapsed at the side of Max's head. He looked up at Lucy.

If you took away the plastic elements he was the spitting image of Max.

"He's dead," Lucy said. "Veronica killed him."

Max's creator sniffed, gathered all the parts together, and

looked at them in silence for a few moments.

"I think I might be able to fix him. It'll take a lot of time, a lot of work, but after all that's happened it's the least I can do."

"You really think you can fix him?"

"I think so." He stood up and put his glasses back on. He held out his hand for Lucy. "I'm William Maximillion."

She shook his hand firmly. "Lucy McInnis."

William nodded. "You're the one who rescued him."

"I guess I did. John was there, too. And Oliver, of course."

Oliver poked his head up from John's pocket. "You can really fix him?"

"I think so," William nodded.

"Good," Oliver said. "We'll come back to visit you."

"You'll always be welcome here."

Lucy felt sad. If all went according to plan she wouldn't be able to visit them ever again. And time was running out.

They said their good-byes to William, and after a last look at the many pieces of Max, turned to head toward the diner.

"I'll probably just have a coffee," Lucy said. "There's not much time left."

John stopped her. He handed Oliver to Starr.

"Could you give us a moment alone?" he asked them.

"Sure," Oliver said. "We'll get a table." They disappeared into the diner.

Lucy looked up at John.

"Veronica's gone," she said. "For good."

"Yeah," he said. He looked nervous. "I guess everything is really going to be changing now, for the better, with both her and King Robert gone."

"I'm sure it will."

"Look," John said. He held both of Lucy's arms. "I know you're all gung ho about leaving this place and never looking

back --"

"I never said that --"

"It's just that," John shook his head. "Even with my memory back, there's really only one thing that's crystal clear to me."

Lucy held her breath and looked into his eyes.

"I love you, Lucy," he said and his voice caught on the words. "I've loved you from the first moment I saw you."

She shook her head and looked away, tears pricking her eyes.

"Now, I know you don't feel the same way about me," John continued, a look of hurt spreading across his features.

"Where did you get that idea?" Lucy said.

"It's obvious."

She shook her head. "It's not obvious. It's complicated, and crazy, and doesn't make any sense, but...I love you too, John. So much it hurts."

He looked surprised for a moment, his eyes widening a fraction, and then he pulled her to him and kissed her. Right there in the middle of the street, in the middle of The City. She loved kissing John. Of all the things in this unreal place, it was the one thing that felt completely right to her. And she never wanted the kiss to end.

"You really love me?" John said, after he pulled a little away to look at her.

"Yes," she confirmed, and then sighed. "But --"

"But what?" John said, suddenly fierce. He pulled away completely. "I just don't get you, Lucy. Why can't things just be what they are? Why do you have to complicate it? I love you, you love me. You should stay here and marry me."

Lucy's heart ached. "It's impossible."

"Nothing's impossible."

"No," she said sadly. "Some things really *are* impossible."

"You know what's impossible?" he said, his words now angry and sharp-edged. "*You* are. I really wish now that I'd never met you. You should have left me in that corn field to die."

Tears streamed down her cheeks. "Don't say that."

"Why not? You're all about telling the truth no matter how much it hurts, aren't you?"

"I have to go back."

"Why? Is there another man? Oh, that's it, isn't it? I'm so stupid. Of course there's another man. I'm such a fool."

"No, there's no other guy."

"Then what?" He looked desperate to know what her reasons were for breaking his heart.

"If I don't go back," Lucy said. "I'll probably die."

She finally let it all out. The last thing she remembered before going through the oak tree. What she'd seen in the mirror in Veronica's room. The dreams that had haunted her since she first arrived in this place.

When she'd finished, John looked stunned and pale. He shook his head.

"There has to be another explanation."

"I wish there was. That's why I need to see The Man, he's the only one who might have the answers for me. If it is true, then I have to go home. There's just no other way."

John finally nodded and looked at her sadly. "You're right. You have to go. I just don't want to lose you."

They entered the diner. Starr and Oliver were seated at a table. Starr had a garden salad in front of him and Oliver had tiny slice of boosenberry cheesecake.

"Can you believe that bitch had the nerve to call me a pansy?" Starr said, taking a sip of his Pina Colada. "I only wish two buses could have hit her."

"She got what she deserved," John said, sliding into his

seat.

"So what were you talking about outside?" Oliver asked.

"Just some stuff," Lucy said vaguely.

Out of the corner of her eye, Lucy saw a waitress approach their table.

"Now what can I get for you two?" she asked.

Lucy glanced up at the nametag. She just didn't have enough energy or interest to raise her head further than that. The nametag read: "Bertha."

Bertha?

She looked up. Bertha, patron saint of mice, gazed down at her happily.

"Well hello there," Bertha said. "You finally made it, huh?"

"I thought you said you didn't know where the city was," Lucy said wearily.

"No," Bertha corrected. "I said I couldn't tell you where it was. You had to find it yourself. But it was easy, right?"

"Yeah, it was a real piece of cake."

Bertha jotted down in her order pad. "A piece of cake for Lucy McInnis. And for you, handsome?"

John looked up. "Same, I guess."

"Two pieces of cake. Excellent. I'll be right back." She walked away.

"Did you know she was a waitress here?" Lucy asked Oliver.

He shrugged. "Bertha's everywhere. That's what she does."

Bertha returned quickly with two delicious-looking pieces of chocolate cake. But Lucy had, again, lost her appetite.

So --" Bertha shifted her ample weight over to the other foot. "Did you see The Man yet?"

"No," Lucy replied. "But I do have an appointment. We'll have to make this quick if we want to make it. Maybe we should just get the bill now."

"It's on me," Bertha said.

"Oh, thanks a lot."

"You look a little sad, Lucy. What's wrong? I thought that you'd be thrilled finally getting to The City, getting an appointment with The Man. That's no small undertaking, you know. You even defeated Veronica at her own game."

Lucy felt a little panic in her chest. "She was your sister, wasn't she? Oh God, I feel horrible. Even though she totally deserved it."

"Don't feel bad. We all create our own destinies. That was the end of the destiny she created for herself, that's all."

"She *did* try to kill me."

"Yes. But she didn't succeed. And now you can go home, just like you wanted."

Lucy slouched down in her seat. "But what if I don't want to go home anymore? What if I want to stay here?"

Bertha nodded. "There are always choices. Just like looking at a menu. You can choose the same item, and never have any variety but know that you'll like what's on your plate. Or, you can choose something different every time, while realizing that you might not always enjoy what you get."

"What's that supposed to mean?" John said.

"All it means, handsome, is that as long as you know the consequences, you're the master of your own destiny."

"The consequences," Lucy murmured. "Accepting that I'm going to die."

"Yes," Bertha said. "That is your choice and your choice alone."

"But how long would I have? If I stay here?" Lucy looked at John. "If I made the choice not to go home."

Bertha shook her head. "There's no way to know for sure."

John swallowed and put his fork down firmly next to his cake. "You have to go. There's no way I'd risk your life just

for staying here with me."

"But --"

"But nothing. You have to go home. You know you do."

Lucy brushed a tear away from her cheek. "Yeah, I guess I do."

Oliver stood up on the table. "But you *can't* go! You can't leave me, Lucy. You just can't."

"I'm sorry Oliver. I wish there was another way."

"There is," Oliver said firmly. "I'm going with you."

Lucy managed to smile at that. "I don't think that's possible."

"Just don't forget us," Starr said sadly. "Because we won't forget you."

Lucy looked up at Bertha. "I guess I'll be going home, then."

"Alright," Bertha said.

The diner shimmered behind her. The counter top, and the window with the hot plate that led into the kitchen, the stools at the counter, the tables including the one Lucy and the others were seated at...shimmered and changed. Morphed and moved, faded out and faded in like a transition in a movie.

Lucy blinked. They were now in a silver room, seated at a silver table. John was still next to her looking a bit stunned, and Starr and Oliver were across from them. Their food they'd ordered was still in front of them.

Lucy looked up. The woman still looked like Bertha, but at the same time she also looked like everyone. Shimmers of men and women and children, known and unknown to Lucy were mixed with Bertha friendly face, like a human kaleidoscope.

Bertha smiled and glanced down at her watch. "Right on time for your appointment."

"What?" Lucy blurted. "What just happened?"

"You're here. And you've made your mind up. You're going home."

"You're..." John began. "*You're* The Man?"

"I am indeed," Bertha replied. "And I believe you still have a little something you should clear up first, handsome. I think it's still in your pocket?"

John felt his pocket. Sure enough, there was Draco's curse, safely tucked into his shirt.

Bertha waved her arm. A window appeared that showed a lush forest behind her. There was a beautiful dark-haired woman walking through the thick trees. She was searching for something.

There was a turkey by her side.

She couldn't see what was right around the corner. A large green Dragon was peering at her, deep longing in its eyes.

"It's Tina," Lucy said. "Tina, and that's probably Tom next to her. She was changed back into herself when I tore up her curse."

John pointed at the Dragon. "And that's Draco." He unrolled the curse scroll. "This is for you, brother."

He tore the paper in half.

Nothing happened to the paper itself, but through the window they could see the Dragon shrinking and changing until finally he was a handsome man who looked very surprised as he held his hands out in front of himself. He felt his face, ran his fingers through his hair and smiled. Then he ran out from behind the trees and Tina saw him.

She shrieked with joy and held out her arms. "Draco!"

Draco grabbed her, lifted her up and swung her around. "I never thought I'd see you again! I love you so much."

"I love you too," Tina confirmed.

Tom Turkey looked extremely pissed off.

The window darkened and then disappeared.

John was smiling. "See?" he said. "Some people do get their happy endings."

"Very good," Bertha said. "Now, Lucy are you ready?"

"I think so," she said.

"Then have a bite of your cake, dear." Bertha nodded at the chocolate dessert that sat untouched in front of Lucy.

She looked down at it. Was that the magic ticket home? Eating a magical piece of cake?

"Can I say goodbye to my friends first?" she asked.

"Of course."

Lucy slid out from the table. Starr stood up.

"You," Lucy said to him. "Have been a real pain in the ass."

Starr looked surprised by his words and then ashamed. He lowered his head. "I know. I'm sorry. I don't know what I can do to make it up to you."

Lucy smiled. "I think killing Veronica was good enough. I'm going to miss you, Starr. You're going to be a great actor one day. I just know it."

Starr sniffed. "Singer and dancer, too."

"Right. Sorry."

Lucy hugged him tightly and then turned to Oliver.

"You, little mouse, are wonderful."

"So are you!" Oliver cried.

"You have to promise me that you'll take care of these guys."

"But I'm coming with you!"

"Okay," Lucy smiled. "But just in case you don't. Take care of them."

"I will," Oliver said firmly. "I promise."

"Good."

Lucy finally turned to John. He hadn't stood up. He looked up at her sadly from the table.

"Don't say goodbye," he said. "This isn't goodbye."

She smiled, a tear splashing down her face. "It's not?"

"No. I don't care what it takes. I'll find you again, Lucy McInnis. You haven't gotten rid of me that easily. If it takes a thousand years, I'll find you. There's no force strong enough to stop me."

She nodded. "I'll be counting on it."

He stood up and took her into his arms. "I'll wait for you," he murmured into her hair. "I'll wait for you for as long as it takes."

They kissed then, for the last time. Finally, reluctantly, they parted.

Lucy looked at Bertha and nodded. Bertha looked at her with kind eyes.

Then Lucy sat back down at the table and with a final glance at her friends, she took a forkful of chocolate cake, put it in her mouth, chewed slowly, and then swallowed.

And waited.

Nothing happened.

Lucy looked over at Bertha. "Did something go wrong? Shouldn't the magic cake have sent me home?"

"No, silly," Bertha said. "It's just cake. I thought it would make you feel better. I just baked it. It's the Chain of Change that will send you home, of course. Magic cake? You're funny."

"Oh." She looked down at her bracelet. "How does it work?"

"Same as when you wanted to be a mouse."

"How did you know about that?" Oliver asked.

Bertha looked down at the little mouse. "I know pretty much everything."

"Cool."

Lucy twisted the bracelet on her wrist, fingering the strange sparkling jewels. "I just looked at it then. I really wished I

could be a mouse. It was the only way I could get out of that room. Now, I guess I really wish I could go home. Is that all there is to it?"

She looked up but there was no one there. She was in the silver room all alone. A big lump formed in her throat. She sat there and ate the chocolate cake and waited to wake up.

Chapter Seventeen

It was the incessant beeping noise that woke her up. She opened her eyes slowly and looked over to her side, though it hurt to move her head.

The beeping noise was coming from a tall ventilator machine to the right of the hospital bed.

She blinked painfully. The brightness of the white room hurt her eyes.

"Oh my God!" a voice cried out. "She's waking up! Lucy, Lucy, you're going to be all right!"

She turned her head in the direction of the voice and saw someone jumping up and down beside her bed. He was accompanied by another blurry shape.

"Good," the second voice said. "I was just about to leave."

Lucy tried to focus. Slowly the face leaning over her got clearer and clearer.

"What the hell?" she said, her voice not much more than a rasp.

"She's back," the face said. "and it sounds just like her."

She blinked. The widely smiling face slowly became clearer. She couldn't believe her eyes. He looked so much

like Starr.

But he wasn't. He wasn't Starr. It was her roommate Nestor.

"Nes," she managed. "What happened?"

"You were in a car accident, honey," he said. "You shouldn't have been driving during that rainstorm. How many times do I have to tell you? You're lucky you're still alive."

She swallowed. "How long have I been out?"

Another face came into view. This face looked very much like Max. But it wasn't. Lucy frowned. It wasn't Max. Of course not. It was Peter Marshall, her friend, the computer techie from work who always had a huge crush on her. How weird that they looked just like Starr and Max.

Why hadn't she noticed that before?

"You're been out for exactly," Peter consulted his watch.

"Four days, eight hours and thirty two minutes. We're glad to have you back. Any longer and you probably would have sustained irreversible brain damage."

"Don't tell her that, stupid," Nestor hissed.

"It's true," Peter said. "Beside, it doesn't matter, she's awake now."

"I'm awake," Lucy repeated.

It worked. She was finally back in the real world. She should be happy but she just couldn't bring a smile to her face.

She decided that she must have experienced a hyper-realistic dream coma patients have. Their minds escaping and building new worlds to live in while their bodies repaired themselves. The knowledge didn't make it any easier. She looked at Nestor and Maxwell, and the fact that they looked almost exactly like Starr and Max... That was the evidence right there, wasn't it?

The door creaked open. "Has our patient *finally* woken up?" the nurse asked. Lucy turned her head and almost

choked on her tongue. The nurse looked exactly like Veronica. With the unpleasant sneer on the gorgeous alabaster face and everything.

"Yes," Nestor said, without looking towards the door.

"We're so happy."

"Good," the nurse said. "We need the bed."

She turned around and closed the door.

"What a bitch," Nestor said. "Honestly, I don't think that woman has an ounce of humanity in her."

"Agreed," Peter said. "Well, we should probably clear out for a while. The doctors will be in here soon to check on you, Lucy."

"We'll be back, though," Nestor said with a wink. "Don't you worry your pretty little head."

Lucy licked her dry lips and turned her head. There was a huge vase of gerbera daisies next to her bed.

"Thanks for the flowers, guys," she said. "They're my favorites."

Peter cleared his throat. "See?" he hissed at Nestor. "I told you we should have sprung for flowers."

"I'm broke," Nestor protested. "But I have an audition next week and after I get the part on that soap opera I'll be rich."

"Yeah, yeah, we've heard that before," Peter turned back to Lucy. "Actually, those aren't from us. Sorry."

"Who are they from?"

Peter walked over to the flowers and pulled out the card that was taped to the vase. "Just some guy who keeps lurking around here."

"He's not just *some guy*," Nestor said. "He's the one who pulled you out of the car after you hit the tree. If it wasn't for him you'd probably be dead. Oh, by the way, the Toyota's toast."

"What guy?" Lucy said. "He pulled me out of my car?"

"Yeah. He saw you crash and helped out. You were out like a light of course. Ever since then he's been visiting you every day." Peter said. "Kind of creepy if you ask me."

"Creepy?" Nestor repeated. "He's a total dreamboat. And I think he's got the hots for you, Lucy. He's here *literally* every day just sitting in this chair watching you. Must like his women unconscious."

"See?" Peter said. "Isn't that creepy?"

"But he's gorgeous," Nestor justified. "Anyhow, the flowers are from him."

"Can you show me the card?" Lucy asked. She wondered who her hero was.

Peter opened the small gift card up and held it in front of Lucy's eyes.

It read: "I'll wait for you."

She read the four words over and over again until Peter snatched the card away.

I'll wait for you.

A handsome guy who pulled her out of her car wreckage. Who visits her daily. Who left her flowers with a note attached with the last words that John had said to her.

"Why did you have to show her that?" Nestor said. "You've made her cry. Don't worry Lucy, we'll keep him away if you don't want to see him."

"No, it's not that," Lucy said. "I do want to see him, it's just..."

She couldn't form her thoughts into words. She didn't know what to think. What was real and what wasn't? Was it possible that John had found her? Did Bertha help him? Or maybe it was just a guy that looked like John like these guys looked like Max and Starr. Maybe she caught a glimpse of him when he pulled her out of the burning car before she'd passed out.

There was really no way to know for sure. All she could do was wait, and hope.

She felt a little rustle coming from under the white bed sheets. A small bump moved alongside her, making its way to the edge of the sheets.

Oliver poked his head out.

"Hey Lucy," he said. "Wow, what a trip, huh? I think I passed out for a little while there." He jumped up and down on the bed. "This looks comfy. So what are we going to do now?"

Nestor and Peter looked at each other with disbelief.

"Did that mouse just talk?" Peter asked.

"Yes," Lucy said, a wide smile spreading across her face.

"He did."

She leaned back into her pillow.

"What we're going to do, Oliver," she said. "Is simply wait and see what happens next."

"Cool," said Oliver.

t h e e n d

Dear Supercool Reader (yes, you!),

Thanks for downloading YELLOW BRICK ROADKILL. I wrote this for Nanowrimo 2003 (National Novel Writing Month) and had a lot of fun with it.

My only pre-writing plan for YBR was this: make it a fun “ode” to the *Wizard of Oz* with a modern woman in the lead. It was actually the first full length piece of fiction I finished writing and, while I don’t claim that it is amazingly publishable fiction, it helped me work on my comedic voice and summon up enough confidence to write the book that closely followed it, BITTEN & SMITTEN.

I hope you enjoyed it (or at least parts of it). ;-)

Fantastically,
Michelle Rowen

October 19, 2006

***Michelle Rowen is the author of the comedic
paranormal romances BITTEN & SMITTEN,
ANGEL WITH ATTITUDE and the forthcoming
FANGED & FABULOUS.
Visit her website at www.michellerowen.com.***

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