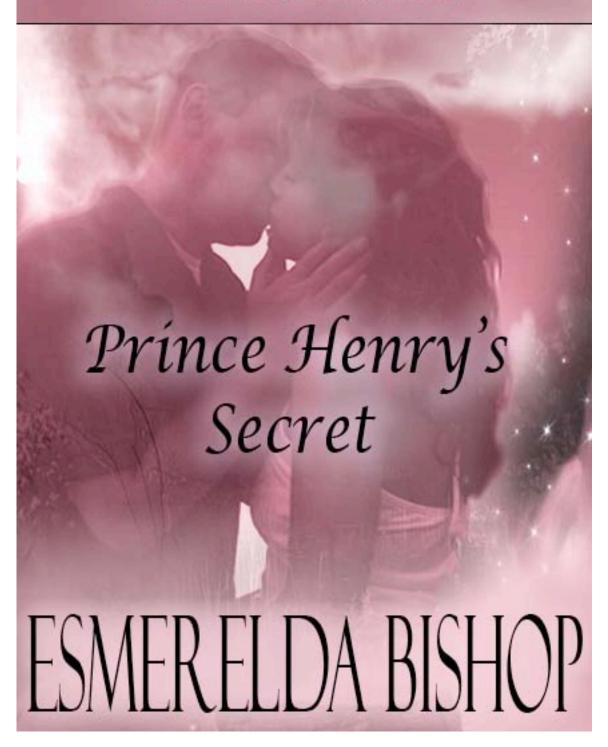


B FREYA'S BOWER PRESENTS

Micro Reads



by

Esmerelda Bishop



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To Mr. Dobino.
To My Babies:
Live life like a fairy tale and never settle for anything less than happily-ever-after.

From his bedchamber window, Prince Henry watched the fair princess walk along the water's edge. Longing tightened his chest.

Princess Madeline.

His Princess Madeline.

A mere sennight ago she'd arrived in the kingdom—the guest of the king and queen. He knew his parents' agenda: for him to fall in love. They had succeeded in that. Princess Madeline had stolen his heart the moment she had graced her first smile upon him.

He'd been in hiding ever since.

Unable to view the future that was outside his grasp, Henry turned away from the window. He understood his parents' pressure, understood that he would one day be king. That one day, he would have to produce an heir. The latter was impossible. No one knew his secret, a dark, deadly secret that he'd carried deep within him for the last five years. One moment of arrogance had cost him his life.

In hindsight, he deserved the punishment, but until meeting Princess Madeline, he had not completely understood the repercussions. He peered through the window. Hair, the color of wheat, cascaded around her tiny waist, the wind gently whipping the blonde strands into the air. Her cerulean gown was made of the finest silk and caressed her body in ways his hands wished to do. She was a vision, a siren who stirred his most primitive instincts. As each day passed, he found it increasingly difficult to stay away. Today being the hardest.

She bent down and trailed her fingers in the sand, leaving winding grooves in the wet earth. His longing intensified. What would it hurt to speak with her?

He could not act on his feelings, but that did not mean a conversation was out of the question. If he stayed aware of his actions, kept an iron-handed control over his emotions, he could get to know the beautiful maiden.

The notion of speaking to the princess lifted the heaviness from his heart.

His decision made, he hurried from the room and down the spiral stone staircase. He burst from the castle; warm, salty air greeted him, and he rushed across the lush green lawn. Yet, the closer he came to the sound of crashing waves, the more nerves churned his stomach.

What was he doing? This was thoughtless.

He whirled around and made it no further than two steps before she called to him.

"Prince Henry!"

To hear his name from her lips, spoken in the most angelic voice he'd ever heard, was like a bittersweet kiss. A kiss he could never have. He took a deep breath before facing her. "Princess Madeline. I dare say you look lovely today."

A pretty pink tinged her cheeks, and she ducked her head. "Why, thank you, Your Highness."

He stepped closer. "Henry, please call me Henry." He was desperate to hear her say his name again.

"Henry," she whispered.

He fought to keep his eyes open, when all he wanted to do was close them and groan in pleasure. Believing he could keep control of his emotions was a fool's notion. "I hate to leave you here, but I just remembered I have important business to attend to."

Disappointment darkened her hypnotic green eyes, and his will almost snapped.

"I understand. I must admit it has been rather lonesome since my arrival. When I saw you, I hoped to spend the day with you."

How could he deny her when she looked so vulnerable? So alone? If he couldn't keep himself in check for a couple of hours, what kind of king would he make anyway? "I sincerely apologize for my lack of hospitality. My duties can wait. You, however, cannot."

She smiled then, the breath-catching, full smile that had stolen his heart. His chest tightened painfully. Oh, he was doomed to failure. He offered his arm. Princess Madeline slipped her small, delicate fingers into the crook of his elbow and peered up at him with happiness alight on her face. Henry inhaled deeply, fighting the urge to lean down and kiss those upturned lips. To do so would be fatal.

"Princess, what shall we do today?"
"Let us see where the day takes us."

* * * *

Madeline glanced up at the handsome prince. His dark hair, the color of the deepest coffee, hung lazily across his brow. His jaw was strong, firm. The jaw of a king. Finally, she had gotten the future king of Flatasmire alone. The man had made it increasingly difficult to befriend. Other than a few glimpses, the only time she had been in the same room with him had been the day she arrived. His ghostly attendance made her believe he avoided her.

But she had a mission. She was invited here for one reason and one reason only. Marry the prince. Not only did her parents pressure her for the match, but his parents, as well.

At first, she feared he was an ogre. For what parents brought a woman—an unchaperoned woman, much less—to their kingdom in hopes of luring their son to the altar? To her happy surprise, he was far from the putrid troll she had envisioned in her nightmares. Instead, upon their introductions, she had felt drawn to him and spent the last few days trying in vain to gain his attention.

She wanted to spend time with him, not because she'd been told it was her duty as princess, but because she yearned for his company, yearned for his smiles to be directed upon her, yearned to hear the deep timbre of his voice cocoon her as it had the first time he had called her Princess Madeline. She wanted *him*.

And she would have him.

"Tell me, Henry, why have you yet to take a wife?"

The way his expression froze made her wish to take back her blunt words. His response increased that wish.

"I have yet to find the perfect princess."

Disappointment flared hot in her belly. A foolish part of her had hoped he had felt the immediate draw she had. Alas, that did not seem the case. "I see. Will you ever marry?"

He looked at her, long and hard, then glanced away. "No, Princess Madeline, I shall never marry."

She bit the inside of her lip. Another woman did not possess his heart. Hope still existed. "Please excuse my curiosity, but you are to be king. You will have to wed one day."

Henry stopped and gazed down at her. She searched his eyes and made a shocking discovery. Longing. For her? To marry? Perhaps both?

"I'm aware of my duties, Princess. My parents never fail to remind me."

Bitterness laced each word, and Madeline's heart ached for the man before her. She would not pressure him further. Time alone would be her ally. "For the day, let us forget our duties to our kingdoms and be only Henry and Madeline."

A bright smile broke across his face, a beautiful smile that erased the haunted gleam behind his eyes. Her heart stuttered.

"I would like that...Madeline."

Hesitance crept into his voice when he said her name, as if the gesture was too intimate. Perhaps it was. But there was no time for formality. She had a mission, and in it, she would succeed. "I found the most charming cottage on one of my morning walks. Would you care to see it?"

"The day is yours, milady. I am nothing but your faithful companion."

If only he knew how much she wanted those words to be true. Would he run screaming to his bedchamber? She believed so. "Come then, let me show you."

On impulse, she slipped her hand from his elbow and entwined her fingers with his. The grin on his face slipped as he stared at their joined hands.

She swallowed but willed the courage to proceed. "We are Henry and Madeline today. Remember?"

His gaze jerked to hers, intent, shattered. "I remember."

What was this man hiding? She planned to find out. Madeline backed up, pulling him with her. "Then let us enjoy our day."

Perhaps he needed to learn to relax. A little mischief would help with that. She released his hand. "Chase me, Henry."

She turned and bolted toward the woods.

"Princess!"

"Madeline," she yelled over her shoulder.

His footsteps sounded behind her. Giggling, she weaved between the tall trees. Branches snapped under her feet, flocks of birds took flight into the blue sky. Still she ran. He was closer now. He panted heavily as he chased her. Laughter bubbled in her throat. "Do you not exercise much?"

"Why, you little imp." Humor belied his harsh tone.

Strong arms wrapped around her waist and yanked her backwards. She squealed as her back made contact with his chest. Against her cheek, his breath warmed her skin. "I've caught you. Now what shall I do with you?"

Madeline turned in his embrace and draped her arms around his neck. "Anything you desire."

* * * *

Henry stared at the enticing lure of her mouth. The full lips, the bottom slightly fuller, beckoned him to close the distance. Against his will, he lowered his head, wanting to taste the heaven she offered. As her eyelids closed, his senses returned. He straightened and unhooked her arms from around his neck.

Hurt flashed in her eyes. His gut clenched. Yearning to spill his secret gripped him. But how would that help? If anything it would only make matters worse.

He should have never gone to the seashore. Again, the hurt of another rested solely on his shoulders, and he cursed himself for his idiocy.

"A cottage, Madeline? You said there was one?"

"Yes, of course." She blinked, looking away. "Follow me."

This time, she didn't take his hand. A sense of loss choked him, but he shoved it aside. It had to be this way. Death would be the result of any other outcome. He refused to have another death weighing on his conscience. Especially Madeline's.

He walked at a safe pace behind her. Or at least he thought. The soft sway of her hips held him mesmerized. The sound of her swishing skirt roared in his ears. Awareness of her, and only her, consumed him, and he fisted his hands.

He had no one to blame for his situation but himself. In truth, it was unfair he would suffer a lifetime of sorrow for one youthful moment of arrogance. Yet he was, and there was not a thing he could do to change it.

Or was there?

The old witch had never revealed a way to break the curse. Surely one existed. He replayed the chanted words that shattered his world—if not then, now—in his head.

His conceit caused a death. Have him suffer 'til his last breath.

Oh, my mother, please hear this. Make his lips a molten kiss.

He'd laughed at the crone, mocking her and her magic. She'd merely smiled and left him with these words:

You do not appreciate the meaning of this curse. But one day, when your heart longs for another, you will. And you shall never have her.

He hadn't believed the woman. He'd learned quickly how wrong he was. One sip from a tumbler melted clear glass. Napkins caught fire against his mouth. A grotesque scar—white and ridged—deformed the back of his hand from testing the true power of the curse.

Five years it had been since he'd kissed his mother on the cheek, or felt the softness of a woman's lips beneath his. A dreadful feeling.

But nothing compared to the ache he had now. An ache so deep and ripping he swore his very soul was being tortured from the need to kiss Madeline.

She faced him, and his heart stuttered at the sadness he glimpsed.

"It's just past this knoll," she said then turned away.

"Madeline?"

"Yes?"

Why had he called her name? It was better they not speak. But he could not do it. Could not have her ignore him. "Please walk beside me."

Fool!

She whirled around. "Truly?"

"Truly."

She came to his side, a bright smile on her face. The darkness that was his life lightened, and he returned the gesture. Only to have it slip as she gazed upon him with adoration.

This was unfair.

To her.

To him.

To his people.

He had to put a stop to this now. Running his finger along her cheek, he relished the feel of her skin. "I can give you nothing more than friendship. Please accept only that."

She blinked and jerked from his touch. The same way she would jerk from the burn of his kiss. Reality came crashing down.

"But...."

Vehemently, he shook his head. "No buts. It can never be any more."

Tears rimmed her beautiful green eyes, illuminating them in their brilliance. "Take me back to the castle."

And so he did, hating himself for what he had done, but knowing there was no other way.

* * * *

Madeline sat alone at the dining room table. The silence of the room stifled her, and she wished for home. It would seem her mission had failed. How would she face her parents—his parents—and tell them he wanted nothing more than friendship?

Friendship?

How daft did she look? That was a kind way of telling her 'thank you, but no thank you' and it hurt. Immensely.

What was wrong with her? She conceded she wasn't the most beautiful woman in all the land, but she was far from a hag. Madeline cut into the cooked goose and placed it into her mouth, not tasting the succulent bird. Realizing she did not have an appetite, she dropped her fork to the plate with a clatter.

"You should never let a good bird go to waste."

Her head snapped up. Henry leaned against the doorway, arms crossed over his chest, all expression hidden behind a wall of impassiveness.

"Why are you here?"

He entered the room. Each step calculated, intimidating. "We must talk."

Madeline stood, brushing out her skirts, mostly to occupy her hands. Her fingers craved to run through his dark locks. He moved closer. She stilled, flutters attacking her stomach. Why did he move like that? As if hunting, about to pounce? He came to her side. She remained motionless, his intense stare reaching into her soul.

"I made a mistake this afternoon," he said.

Giddiness made her lightheaded. Oh, please let this mean what she thought. "A mistake?"

"I said I could only offer you friendship."

"Yes," she whispered, barely able to hear his words over the sound of her pulse in her ears. This was it. He would declare his undying love, and they would wed, living their happily ever after. Her heart swelled.

"I lied."

"Yes?" she urged, certain she would explode from the anticipation of this moment.

"I cannot be that either."

She froze. Wait? What? She watched him closely, looking for any sign of deceit. All she saw was determination clenching his jaw. God, he meant it. "I beg your pardon?"

"You must leave the castle tonight."

"Henry...." She paused at the pain in his eyes. Oh, he performed a spectacular act of indifference, but the use of his name gave her the glimmer she sought, the emotion she would grab hold of and never let go.

Hope.

"Henry...."

There it was again. Just the barest hint of pain as he slowly blinked. Madeline fought a smile. She refused to show her triumph. This man lied. And it gave her all the courage to see her mission complete.

"I am sorry to inform you that my departure tonight is impossible. For that matter, anytime in the foreseeable future."

The composed expression slipped from his face, and he stared at her. "Excuse me?"

This time she did smile. "Prince Henry, I am here to be your wife and I will settle for nothing less."

* * * *

Henry pressed against the door of his bedchamber. He had fled from the dining room upon Madeline's blunt declaration. How had it gone so wrong? The plan had been simple enough. Hurt her and leave her. But the little imp had turned the tables on him, and now everything was worse than before.

She did not realize how much he wanted to embrace her words, to take her for his very own. To love her. He wished he could explain that he did this for her own good, that he struggled with her here, put her in danger just by being in her presence. He believed himself a strong man, but he became the weakest of fools when around her. Those lips, so enticing, so intoxicating, were tumbling his defenses no matter how many times he reminded himself the outcome of one kiss.

One kiss.

Death.

He shuddered. Perhaps it was time to face the old witch. Set a wrong to a right. It had been five years. Yes, it was what he must do. Before he lost his nerve, he snuck out of the castle and into the forest. The eerie quiet of the woods unsettled him, but he trudged on, knowing this was the only way to a different future. When he came upon the cottage, he hesitated.

The decrepit shack appeared deserted. Darkness filled the two front windows. He saw no movement from within the room. Panic seized him. What if the woman had left and he was destined to live life alone?

He stood before the door, terrified to knock. He lifted his hand, but before he could make contact with the wood the door opened. The witch's blackened smile caused him to shiver.

"I wondered when you would come." She moved aside.

Henry faltered on the threshold then shook himself and stepped inside.

"You have met your heart's desire." The sneer she sent him gave Henry no illusion time had healed her hatred.

"I have."

"Good. Your punishment finally begins."

Shocked, he stared at the woman. "Finally? Do you have any idea what I have been through? I can't kiss my mother on the cheek. I take my meals in my bedchamber. I'm isolated from everyone in worry of who I may harm."

"Yet, it has taken meeting your true love to seek me out?"

The truth of those words hit him hard. Yes, the years had been burdensome. But he'd acclimated to his sentence, believing he deserved far worse. But now.... He decided on another angle. "I have duties to this kingdom. Without an heir the kingdom will crumble."

"Don't pull that duty poppycock on me, boy. It's all for her."

Henry closed his eyes. "I love her."

"Honesty, finally." Venom laced her tone.

"Please. I have paid my dues. Lift the curse." He had no shame. He would beg. Plead. Anything to be with Madeline.

"Never. Your actions cost me my son."

He deflated at the reminder. All fight left him, replaced with the immense guilt he carried every day of his life. "I regret my choices of that day. I will *always* regret."

He did, and not because of the curse. Henry sighed and sat down on a stool, his legs suddenly heavy. She'd had every right to cast the spell on him. He'd deserved it. If there was ever a moment he could take back, it would be that day. The day he refused to help a hurt young man because he was a mere peasant. His superiority had resulted in the man's death. Shame of the memory heaved his stomach.

"I cannot say my son's death has been in vain. Was it remorse, boy?"

He didn't answer her. She already knew his response. He'd spent every waking minute trying to make up for that one moment. Fighting to pass laws for the poor, taking care of his people the way he should have that day.

That day.

The end of his life. A life he willingly gave up for his misdeeds. Until now.

No, now, he wanted his life back. He was a better person. He would be a better king, a man who would never again turn his back on the less fortunate.

"Your actions will never replace my son. The curse stays until you take your last breath."

He saw the truth in her eyes. What more could he say? He wouldn't press his torture, for hers was far greater. The ultimate sacrifice. He stood and bowed. "I bid you farewell, milady."

He turned and left, accepting—for the final time—the future.

* * * *

Madeline skulked outside Henry's bedchamber. He had eluded her for two days. No more. Today, they would finally face each other. A pricey gem bought her the information she needed. The prince had confined himself to his room. She debated on waiting him out, but the man was proving to be the most stubborn creature she had ever encountered.

Madeline marched up to his door and knocked.

"Who's there?"

"Jones, milord." She did her best impression of his steward's deep, stern voice and prayed it worked.

The latch clicked. She waited a moment to give him time to move away. It would do her no good for him to be standing right there when she entered. She doubted she would get a glimpse of his room before being ushered right back out. When she heard his footsteps retreat, she went in.

Henry's eyes widened. "You!"

She slammed the door, throwing the lock into place. "Yes, me. It has become quite tedious waiting you out."

"I want you to leave," he demanded and pointed to the door.

"You will have to forcibly remove me."

He took a threatening step forward. She feared he would make good on her bluff. But feet from her, he stopped and sighed. With resignation on his face, he sat on the edge of the bed. "Madeline, why do you force this?"

She rushed forward and knelt at his side, taking his hand. "You feel what is between us. I know you do. I can see it in the way you look at me. Why do you fight it?"

He gazed down at her. For the first time, he did not hide his emotions. Love shone bright in his eyes as he caressed her cheek. She pressed against his fingers, seeking the warmth of his touch.

"I should have told you the truth from the start. I should have told my parents. Then we would have never met. And you would be free."

Her heart clenched at the thought of never meeting him. "I don't regret meeting you."

A sad smile played at his lips. "Don't be too certain of that. I stand by what I said, we can never be."

"But why?" she cried in frustration.

"I am cursed, Madeline."

She laughed at that. "What foolishness do you speak?"

He extracted his hand from hers and walked across the room. He lifted a tumbler to his lips. The glass popped, and a smoldering odor filled the room. He took the goblet from his mouth and raised it into the air.

Madeline's hand flew to her throat as she jumped to her feet, mesmerized by the half moon now grooved into the perfect circle that was the lip of the cup. "Magic."

"Curse."

"But that cannot be."

"It is and has been for five years."

Her gaze flew from the tumbler to his eyes. "Dear God, what did you do?"

And he told her. By the end of his tale, tears burned her eyes. The poor son. Poor Henry. She felt his guilt, his shame, and wanted to go to him and hold him. Yet, she knew he would not allow it.

"Do you see how this cannot be?"

Sadly, she did, but had no words to express such a thought. Not when her heart felt as if it was being torn from her body.

"I could never love you the way you deserve to be loved. I could never kiss our children, our grandchildren. We would live a half life."

At that, the tears spilled from her eyes and scorched down her cheeks. She sat on the edge of the bed and wept. His hand rubbed her back, but his touch only intensified the pain. How she wanted his touch, his kisses. All of him. She looked up. "There has to be a way."

Sorrow grooved deep lines around his mouth. A mouth, that on contact, would burn away her flesh.

"I went to the witch. She refuses to release me."

She understood the woman's decision. To lose a child. She couldn't even imagine. "Where do we go from here?"

"We say goodbye."

* * * *

Henry watched the last of Princess Madeline's bags load into the carriage from his window. She stood beside his parents—who both had forlorn expressions on their faces. He'd confessed his sins to them the night before, and they finally understood his predicament. Everything would change now. His secret was no longer private. Bearing the curse alone had been bad enough, but to have his family know was even worse. He'd let them down. Let his kingdom down.

He turned from the window and made his way downstairs. He would not allow Madeline to leave without a final goodbye. As more punishment from the decisions, he wanted to remember the sadness he had put upon her face.

When he stepped outside, she looked up, and their eyes met. Henry felt like he'd been cleaved in two by a sword. They were saying goodbye. He would never see her again, and the reality of it was physically excruciating. He strode to her side and took her hands. "I will miss you."

She placed her hand on his cheek. In fear that one simple movement would graze his lips against her soft skin, he remained motionless. Never would he mar such perfection with his transgressions.

"And I vou."

They stared at each other. The urge to kiss her again gripped him. He released her hands and stepped back. "Safe travels, Princess."

She blinked away the tears shining in her eyes and looked away. Fisting his hands, he threw his head back and gazed at the cloudless blue sky. A lovely day for such a heartbreaking event.

Shouts sounded. Henry snapped to attention, his gaze searching for the source of the commotion. A movement to his left caught his attention. A horse whinnied, bucking against the reins that led him. The animal reared up and pawed the air. The footman dropped the bridle, and the horse took off in a wild run. People scattered, screaming to escape the path of the hostile animal. Henry stepped forward, his breath frozen in his chest. A servant's small child sat playing in the dirt, unaware of the distressed animal heading straight for him.

"No!" he shouted. Without thought, Henry ran over and threw himself on top of the child.

The horse reared, his front legs high in the air. Henry covered his head as the hooves came crashing down upon him. Agony ripped through his torso, and he yelled.

"Henry!" Madeline's frantic calls were the last he heard before blackness overcame him.

* * * *

"Ma...d...ln." He thrashed about.

Shushing eased his struggles. "I'm right here."

Her soothing voice was like Heaven, and he opened his eyes. The golden halo of her hair fell around her face.

"Have I died?"

She chuckled. "Sorry to disappoint you, but no."

Then he looked closer. No, he supposed he hadn't died and a Madeline angel guided him to Heaven's gate. No angel would have those black smudges under her eyes and deep lines of fatigue around her mouth. Concern gripped him. "Are you all right?"

"I am now. You scared me, Henry. I thought I'd lost you."

"How long have I been out?"

"A day."

The dryness of his mouth agreed with that timeframe. "No wonder I am thirsty."

Madeline poured him a glass of water then lifted his head. Pain shot through his temples, and he groaned.

"Easy now," she breathed.

The cool water poured down his throat, and he thankfully drank it. When he finished the small portion of liquid, he lay back against the pillows. His eyes closed. A strangled sound came from Madeline, and his eyes popped open.

"What is it?"

She stared at the chalice, her hand pressed to her mouth. Frowning, he tried to see what held her so fascinated. "What?"

Madeline twisted the glass around, inspecting each inch.

"What?"

Behind her hand, she sobbed. "Henry, look!"

He did, but still did not see what made her cry. "Madeline, you will have to enlighten me on what has you upset."

"It did not melt."

Against the pain, he sat straight up in bed, gaping at the goblet. He was so used to the destruction of his lips, that he no longer paid heed to the ruined state of the object. He took the glass from her. A perfect circle looked back at him. He stared in disbelief.

Was it possible?

He hesitantly placed his lips on the back of his hand. No searing flesh. He kissed his other hand. Nothing. Then he looked at Madeline. She gazed back at him, love pouring off her. She offered her hand. He trembled all over and took hold of her offering. Jubilation mixed with fear. What if he burned her? What if he was healed?

Tentatively, he kissed the tips of her fingers. He gasped at the feel of her skin against his lips. When she did not scream in pain, he placed a kiss on the top of her hand. She laughed, a hiccupping cry. He kissed his way up her arm, along her shoulder, up her neck 'til he came to her lips. Then he paused. He stared deep into her eyes, making sure there was no hesitation. He saw only love.

"Kiss me, Henry."

The first touch of her lips sent fire flaming through him. Not an agonizing pain, rather a sweet burn that he would treasure for the rest of his days. He deepened the kiss and drew her closer. He was kissing her—the woman he loved.

He pulled back. "I love you."

A bright smile broke over her face. "And I love you."

"Be my queen."

"Only if you will be my king."

They laughed and fell into each other's arms. The curse was broken, and Henry swore he'd never turn his back on anyone again.

Excerpt from

The Goblin, the Witch, and the Single Girl

by

Canice Brown-Porter

A Freya's Bower Paranormal Novella

"What's the matter? What is it, Caitlin?"

"An animal! Oh my God, there's an animal in the house! Didn't you see it?" She knew she sounded like a wild animal herself, but she was scared and didn't care. "It was dark and furry and it ran out of here."

"It was probably a mouse, honey."

"It was too big to be a mouse. I won't get any sleep tonight at all, Wesley."

"Didn't you say the movers mentioned squirrels or raccoons in the attic earlier today?"

"Yes, but I didn't expect them to come downstairs. The attic door is supposed to be closed," she stammered. Her body shook with fright, her heart hammering in her chest.

"Honey, I'm sure whatever it was, you just scared the hell out of it with that blood-curdling scream," he said, chuckling. "We'll call animal control tomorrow. Okay?"

Caitlin nodded. Wesley slipped a protective arm around her shoulders and pulled her close once again. She was shaking so much she didn't know how much longer she could remain standing. Her legs wobbled, and she fought to lock her knees to avoid falling.

"Yo...You'll nee...need to check our bedroom before I can go in there, Wes. I...I won't be able to sleep. I swear it."

"I'll check it, honey. Come on. Let's go lock the doors and turn out the lights down here. You need to get some rest."

Caitlin allowed Wesley to lead her out of the living room through the downstairs while he locked the doors and turned off the lights. She calmed down with each room he checked and ensured they were empty.

They ascended the stairway to the second floor. She clung to his arm as they made their way to the bedroom door. Wesley stopped outside the closed door, his hands rubbing up and down along her arms. A smile teased his mouth, and Caitlin attempted to smile in return.

"The door has been shut since I came down earlier, but I'll check it out anyway. Do you want to wait here?"

"No," she said. Her fingers dug into his arm like a vise. "I don't want to be left out here alone."

"I'll go in ahead of you, but I'm sure our room is safe."

Caitlin held on to his arm as he turned and grasped the doorknob. Wesley pushed it open with caution and flipped the light switch. The room was immediately bathed in a soft bright glow. She followed behind him and stood quietly. He checked under the bed, tables, and chairs, and then walked to the bathroom and flipped the light switch.

"The room is all clear, Cait," he called out before he re-entered the bedroom and came back into her view. "Shut the door, honey. Let's go to bed and we'll take care of the critters tomorrow."

* * *

Niles crept towards the bedroom door where he'd seen the two of them disappear. *Critters, indeed!* He placed his fingers around the knob and twisted. The door had been locked. *Damn!* How the hell was he supposed to stop them from having sex now? She was destined to be his. He'd just have to come up with a plan to keep them apart after tonight.

Niles shrugged and crept away at a snail's pace to the stairway and climbed them. A sense of defeat overcame him, and he felt as if the weight of the world rested on his shoulders. He made his way back to the attic, pulling the door shut behind him. He heaved himself up on the box and stood at the window, his gaze intent on the darkness beyond. The same window he'd first caught a glimpse of the beauty that was now the owner of his home.

Fate had brought Faelyn's childhood friend to him. We could be so happy here. He sighed, his eyes focusing on the moon above. We would make this our home and have children with your beauty and my powers. Half human and half fae. Yes. Lovely children.

His thoughts turned to Faelyn once again. He missed her and their mother. He had learned at an early age that life wasn't always fair. Not even in the Realm of Morfay. Caitlin had seen him only once as a child. He had been sent to bring his sister home. It was that action that had placed her in harm's way. If he had just left her there a bit longer with her mortal friend, she would be alive today. Niles shook his head as his emotion choked him.

His vision dropped to the driveway below, his heart heavy with sorrow. Would he ever find happiness? Would he ever return to his former faerie being? *I was so naïve to think Vinzella would never follow through on her threat. The powerful prince of Morfay, and I allowed a lowly witch to transform me. And I even laughed at her when she cast the spell.*

And then to return home only to be forced to leave the Realm because even the Fae had not believed him to be who he had claimed. And, he couldn't blame them. My powers had been stronger than those of other faeries. How could anyone believe a witch had done this to me? Even I have trouble with the concept. He certainly held no resemblance to the king's eldest son. Once tall and straight, a noble, and much respected heir to the kingdom, Niles had been exiled.

The man's car sat in the driveway next to the Cait's car. He didn't want to disable the vehicle. When the man finally reached his wit's end, Niles wanted to make sure he could leave without delay.

He lowered himself to a sitting position on the box, his feet dangled just above the floor. He didn't like the role of a goblin. They were ornery and worrisome. Faeries held little resemblance to the creature he had been transformed into by Vinzella. But he found the urges to behave like a goblin were difficult, if not almost impossible, to ignore.

He slipped from the container, his feet making a soft thud on the hardwood flooring. He made his way over to the old trunk. Perhaps a good night's sleep would make him feel better.

All Hallow's Eve was tomorrow, and he hoped to introduce himself to the young lady of the house that evening. It would create the perfect guise, but that Wesley fellow had to be gone!

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