

Prologue

The castle looked different from the outside.

It was the first thing the princess thought of when she saw it again. It felt like years since she had laid eyes on it, but in reality, it had only been a few weeks. Now, as she stared at the monstrosity looming high on the hilltop, she felt her breath catch in her throat. Those walls were filled with so many ghosts and memories of the life she'd lost.

But they didn't have to be.

If they could do what they'd set out to, they could change all that. The castle and those who sat upon its throne could be a beacon for the kingdom again. But that meant not running away from what the princess knew she'd find inside that castle, even if every inch of her body wanted her to.

'We should hurry,' Anne said as she slashed at the brambles to make her own path, which would lead them right to the village outside the castle without being seen. 'We haven't much time before the celebration begins.'

The princess quickened her pace, following her friend. She was going home.

It didn't feel like home. It hadn't for a long time, but technically that's what the castle was. Or had been once upon a time.

If she concentrated hard enough, she could picture the castle the way it had been when she was a child. In her mind's eye, the kingdom was beloved and beautiful, with a castle the people took pride in. (After all, they were the ones who had placed every stone to build it.) Overgrown ivy didn't trail across the grey stone walls. Every bush, every tree, every flower was manicured. The aviary was brimming with the songs of birds. Windows gleamed. The lake at the base of the hill glimmered with hope as visitors frequently came from other shores. The gates to the castle were almost always open, and it wasn't uncommon for parties to spring up at a moment's notice.

But now things were different. The windows appeared dark and the curtains were always drawn up tight, giving the castle an abandoned appearance. The waters surrounding the castle looked like glass, for no ship dared

cross into their kingdom's borders. The gates, rusted and leaning, were locked. The grounds were, except for a few faithful guards, deserted. Her kingdom's renaissance was long gone.

When King Georg and Queen Katherine had sat upon the throne, they had looked benevolently upon their province. The land's soil had been rich enough for farming, and held a thriving diamond mine beneath the earth. The pair celebrated the province's growth by throwing frequent festivals in the castle's courtyard, where subjects from every walk of life were welcome. When she closed her eyes, she could see herself being swung through the air as a fiddle played and people danced. But the memory quickly vanished, replaced by the sound of Anne splintering more tree branches.

For too long, she had spent her days and nights inside that fortress wishing someone would break her free. She'd lived without love in that castle for so long, with little laughter or company to bolster her spirits. Maybe that was why, despite the castle's splendour, it had always felt tainted and tarnished. The princess had accepted her fate in an effort to make the best of things, but she refused to do so any longer.

It wasn't till she was outside those walls that she'd realised the truth: the only one who could truly break her

free was herself. That's why she was back. To claim what was truly hers. Not just the castle, but the province and its throne. Not just for her own happiness, but also for that of her people.

Now was the time to strike. It was why she had travelled so far, risked so much and found strength within herself that she hadn't known she possessed. Queen Ingrid's popularity had never been strong, but in the last few years, the kingdom had gone from indifference to downright terror. She couldn't allow her people to suffer this way any longer. It was time.

'There!' Anne had slashed through the last of the branches and sunlight was now shining through the shadows. 'We've reached the road. It's just a little bit further down, and then we can slip through the castle gates near the butcher's shop unseen. The queen has demanded everyone be at the celebration, so there should be crowds near the gates today.'

She hugged the brown cloak Anne had made her tightly. It was quickly becoming one of her most prized possessions. Not only did it keep her warm, but the jacquard pattern reminded her of a travelling coat her mother used to wear. It felt like her mother was with her somehow, or at the very least, making sure she found the right companions to keep at her side. She was grateful for Anne's friendship and all

the subjects she'd met who had helped her. Their kindness wouldn't be forgotten.

She turned to Anne. 'Won't that make it harder for us to get through?'

Anne took her hands. 'Don't worry, my friend. You will have an easier journey than Prince Henrich and I had this morning. These crowds are the perfect cover for you to slip inside.'

'Have you heard from Henri at all?' the princess asked hopefully.

Anne shook her head. 'I'm sure he's safe. If he wasn't, we would have heard something.' Anne pulled her along. 'It's *you* I worry about. Once you cross the gates, everyone will recognise you. We need to get you indoors before you're noticed. We must move quickly and get you to your love. He's waiting for you.'

Your love. The words caused a small smile to play on her lips. She and Henri had been through a lot in the last week, and more before that. Her steps quickened.

As Anne predicted, the road to the village was deserted that morning. They didn't pass a single carriage on their hike in. No-one was travelling on foot at the moment, either, though she saw plenty of footprints in the dirt. She'd expected the village entrance to be guarded, but there was no-one manning the post when she and Anne walked

through the open gates. A declaration had been nailed to a wrought iron post. She read it quickly as she passed:

*Queen Ingrid demands all loyal village subjects
join her for a celebration in the castle courtyard
today at noon. In preparation for this momentous
occasion, all village establishments will be closed.
Those not at the celebration will be noted.*

She shuddered. Anne was right about the celebration being mandatory, but it was an odd request. It wasn't that she was surprised by Queen Ingrid's insistence, but there hadn't been anything close to merriment or official festivities in the kingdom for years. The people were so frightened by their queen that they avoided doing anything to make themselves noticeable. Instead, they spent their days with their heads down, living in the shadows. Being drawn out for a rare celebration—if that's what it really was—had to be unnerving. What was the queen playing at?

They were both silent as they made their way onto the dusty village road that led up to the castle. The princess had spent some time in these streets—albeit limited time—but she was still surprised by how quiet things were. The small wood homes with thatched straw roofs that lined the road were closed up tight. The monastery's bell tolled

solemnly to mark the time as noon, but there was no-one around to hear it. Evidently the people had heeded Queen Ingrid's warning. She sighed heavily and Anne looked at her.

'You don't have to do this alone. You know that, right?' Anne's voice was gentle. 'Let me come with you and Prince Henrich and fight!'

'No.' She shook her head. 'I appreciate all you've done for us, but this part of the journey I must take alone.'

Anne stared at her as if she wanted to say more, but they were interrupted by shouting. A man came running towards them, his face filled with terror.

'The queen is a witch!' he shouted. 'Steer clear of the town square—run! Hide! Or Queen Ingrid will curse you, too.'

The princess was so startled she couldn't comprehend what the man was saying. Anne looked equally frightened. What had the queen done to her people now? She started running towards the town square to see what was going on.

Anne went after her. 'Wait! You heard the man. This could be a trap!'

If the queen suspected she was near, so be it. Her gut told her something was seriously wrong. She needed to know what had happened.

As she approached the castle, she could see what looked

like the entire village gathered in front of it. Heads bobbed up and down as villagers gawked at whatever was behind the closed gates. Clearly this was no celebration. She watched villagers anxiously jockey for position, trying to get a better look. Some screamed and cried while others lifted children onto their shoulders to get a better look. Anne and the princess struggled to get a better view.

'Don't look,' she heard one mother say to a young boy. 'We must go now! Before one of us is next.'

'Does anyone know who it is?' asked another.

'Looks like royal blood if you ask me.'

The princess pushed her way through the crowd, trying to make her way to the front. Anne clung to her arm, not wanting to lose her.

'Excuse me,' she kept saying. 'May I please pass?'

But the townsfolk continued to goggle, talking and staring as if they didn't see her.

'It's witchcraft, I tell you!'

'A warning!' said another. 'She is not to be crossed!'

'Is he sleeping or is he dead?'

'He hasn't stirred. He must be dead.'

He? She pushed harder, going against all the manners she'd been taught so long ago to reach the front of the gate and see what the others were so upset about. As soon as she did, she wished she hadn't.

'No!' she cried, pulling her hand from Anne's and grasping the bars in front of her.

It was Henrich. Her Henri. Lying in what appeared to be a glass coffin on display on a raised platform. His eyes were closed and he was dressed in the finest of garments. His face looked almost peaceful. Clasped in his hands was a single white rose. It was a message for her, that much was clear. Was he dead? She needed to know.

'Wait,' Anne said as her friend pushed on the gates, slipping inside so fast the guards couldn't stop her. 'Wait!'

But she kept going, the cloak falling from her shoulders as she ran.

'It's the princess!' someone shouted, but she didn't stop. She didn't care who saw her. She rushed up the platform steps and leaned over the coffin, lifting the glass lid. 'Henri! Henri!' she cried, but his eyes remained closed. She clasped his hands. They were still warm. She leaned her head on Henri's chest. There was shouting and commotion behind her. Screams and cries rose up from the crowd.

'It's her!'

'She's come back for us!'

'Princess, save us!'

She blocked out their yelling and listened for the most important sound in the world: a heartbeat. But before she had the chance to register one, she was ripped off the

platform and spun around. She instantly recognised the large, burly man holding her.

The man smiled, his gold tooth gleaming. 'Take the traitor to Queen Ingrid. She's been expecting the princess.'

She held her head high as he marched her past Anne and the crowd and whispered in her ear.

'Welcome home, Snow White.'

Snow

Ten years earlier

Flakes fell softly, covering the already frozen castle grounds. When she stuck out her tongue, she could feel the flakes land on it. The little droplets of frozen water had the same name she did: Snow.

Was she named for the snow or was the snow named for her? That's what she wondered. She was a princess, so the weather *could* have been named after her.

Then again, snow had been around a lot longer than she had. She was only seven.

'What's that smell?' her mother called out, pulling Snow from her thoughts.

Snow flattened herself to the castle garden's wall so she wouldn't be seen and tried to stay quiet.