

Prologue

Only the pale glow of the moon lit her way toward the cottage on the outskirts of the village. Snug against the forest's edge, its windows were dark and the surrounding nature seemed to have quieted in anticipation of the woman's arrival. With careful moves, she dismounted the horse, mindful not to disturb the sleeping bundle tied to her chest, or the drowsy boy slumped in the front of the saddle. The boy rubbed his eyes and yawned as she lowered him to the ground but didn't protest when she took hold of his small hand. Towards the cottage they went, his little legs stumbling along the path.

Praying the dark night would hide her tearful eyes, she wiped a stray tear from her cheek and told him to sit down. Plopping onto the front step, the boy fought against sleep and watched his mother undo the straps holding the sleeping baby against her chest. She couldn't stop the next tear as she lowered the infant into the boy's arms.

"My darling boy," she whispered, her voice teetering on the verge of cracking. "I have to go back, but you two will be safe here. Dada and I will come for you soon."

The boy looked at her, wide-eyed and with a trembling chin, and she felt her heart crack. His brows furrowed slightly as he reached for his mother's face. "Bleeding," he said.

She brought her hand to her cheek and felt the wet trail of blood. With a gentle sweep of her fingers, the skin mended under her touch.

"There, all better," she reassured him, summoning a smile that cost her everything. Examining her fingers, she absently wiped the smear of shimmering golden blood on her skirt.

"Stay here," she whispered, her voice barely audible over the gentle breeze. Peering down at the baby's peaceful sleeping face, she tore her gaze away to kiss her son's forehead. "I love you both so much."

With that, she rose. Drawing a steadying breath, she knocked on the wooden door loud enough to wake every sleeping creature in the surrounding forest and forced herself to return to the horse. As she mounted her mare to disappear into the night, a solitary candle flickered to life from inside the house.

Chapter 1 - A Better Home

The yellowed pages threatened to crumble beneath my touch as I thumbed through the weathered book. With a wistful sigh, I closed it and returned it to the shelf, next to hundreds, if not thousands of other books in a similar state of neglect. Countless stories—long forgotten or purposefully ignored.

The Cardonells weren't avid readers, and the layer of dust covering every surface of this room served as a testament to that. I didn't mind, though. I was relieved none of the inhabitants of this house had chosen reading as their hobby. This way, no one would discover me sticking my nose into places it didn't belong. Dusting the library for several hours until each book was spotless—or as spotless as old books could be—was more than bearable if that meant I could sneak a few illegal glances at the untold mysteries within the library. I much preferred the company of books to people anyway. No fake smiles to hide behind, no ulterior motives to worry about. Books only told the stories written on their pages—nothing more and nothing less.

But with every book I placed back onto the shelf, my heart ached a little more. I've been watching the knowledge rot away and be forgotten before my eyes. The nobles would rather let the stories crumble into dust than share the treasures under their roof.

Dusting my palms on my apron, I tucked the damp cloth, now a brownish grey, into the pocket of my dress and turned with every intention of leaving this room. That was until my eyes snagged on the very first book I had ever dared to sneak an illegal glance at.

A Collection of Myths and Folklore.

It had quickly become my favourite and I found myself rereading the short stories within more often than not. My heart ached a little more. Didn't they deserve to be read? To be shared and loved?

Surely one single book wouldn't be missed.

At least, that's what I told myself when I glanced at the door and listened. My frantically beating heart was all I heard. Gazing down upon my attire, I frowned. My dress had no pockets that could fit a book and the apron tied around my waist would have to stay here when I left for home. There was only one place to hide it.

Before I had the chance to think better of it, I began unbuttoning the front of my dress while hurrying over to my favourite book. I snatched the book from its place and made quick work of

lowering the bodice far enough so I could stow the old tome between the fabric of my dress and my stomach.

A few practised movements later, my clothes were as they should be. Taking extra care to tie the cotton strap around my waist, I smoothed out some imaginary wrinkles. I let out a breath, catching a glimpse of my reflection in the mirror above the fireplace. The girl in the mirror stared back at me, flushed and wide-eyed and only the faintest line of the book's edge was visible. All everyone ever spared me was fleeting glances. No one would notice the slight deformation of my stomach.

It was too late now anyway. I didn't want to part with the book now that I was so close to having it to myself. Spinning on my heels, I left the library, willing my erratic heart to slow.