



ROGUE'S PAWN

JEFFE KENNEDY



Rogue's Pawn
By Jeffe Kennedy

This is no fairy tale...

Haunted by nightmares of a black dog, sick to death of my mind-numbing career and heart-numbing fiancé, I impulsively walked out of my life—and fell into Faerie. Terrified, fascinated, I discover I possess a power I can't control: my wishes come true. After an all-too-real attack by the animal from my dreams, I wake to find myself the captive of the seductive and ruthless fae lord Rogue. In return for my rescue, he demands an extravagant price—my firstborn child, which he intends to sire himself...

With no hope of escaping this world, I must learn to harness my magic and build a new life despite the perils—including my own inexplicable and debilitating desire for Rogue. I swear I will never submit to his demands, no matter what erotic torment he subjects me to...

92,000 words

Dear Reader,

Inspiration comes from the strangest places. Every month, I whine a little when my coworker in charge of production, Jenny Bullough, emails to tell me it's time to write a new Dear Reader letter. "But, but, I don't know what to write about," I say. This month, I added to my whine, "People have been telling me they actually READ these letters. Now there's PRESSURE." To which Jenny replied:

My usual offer still stands ;)

Dear Reader,

Angela is busy sunning herself on a beach somewhere; we'll return to our regularly scheduled dear reader letter in August. Meanwhile, enjoy this book!

~Jenny Bullough

Unfortunately, since I write these letters months in advance, while this particular letter is going in the July books, and you're perhaps reading this during the summer, the truth is, right now I'm dealing with allergy season, and not beach season. Though I did get to visit a beach in Florida a few weeks ago during a conference. Ahhh, memories...

But I hope, for your sake, as you're reading this, you are sunning yourself on some beach. With a tropical drink or frosty beer in hand. And a good-looking cabana person of your choice serving it. Oh, and no biting insects (our beach has biting insects and they hurt!).

Still, I thank Jenny for the offer, and the inspiration to help me start off this letter. I have to admire the dedication of our authors who, every month, use their inspiration and write such fantastic stories that make great companions on the beach, by the pool, or even in your favorite reading spot indoors. This month, we have another creative and diverse group of releases for your reading pleasure.

Kicking off the month is a sweeping historical romance

from Laura Navarre. *By Royal Command* offers everything you're looking for in a great historical read: rich historical details, sweeping passion, intrigue and, I don't think I'm giving anything away by saying this, an amazing happy ending! Joining Laura in starting off our month of releases is debut author Kait Gamble with her fascinating science-fiction romance *Liar's Game*. Meanwhile, KC Burn keeps readers in the detailed science-fiction universe of *Spice 'n' Solace* with her follow-up super-hot-and-spicy erotic m/m novella *Alien 'n' Outlaw*.

Longing for a particularly delicious erotic romance to turn up the heat inside, while it's hot outside? We've got you covered this month. In addition to *Alien 'n' Outlaw*, check out erotic romance offerings from Delphine Dryden and Karen Erickson with *The Theory of Attraction* and *A Scandalous Affair*, respectively. And we're proud to announce debut erotic romance author Samantha Ann King with her ménage novel *Sharing Hailey*, and debut author Zaide Bishop with her erotic historical novella *Eliza's Awakening*.

Meanwhile, Michelle Garren Flye offers a compelling and emotional contemporary romance, *Where the Heart Lies*.

Also this month, join Allegra Fairweather in another paranormal adventure in *Island of Secrets* by Janni Nell. And make sure you check out Jeffe Kennedy's *Rogue's Pawn*, which kicks off her new fantasy romance series!

Other returning Carina Press authors this month include Natasha Hoar with *The Ravenous Dead*, the next installment in her Lost Souls series; Dee J. Adams's *Dangerously Close*, which continues the high-octane Adrenaline Highs series; Anne Marie Becker, bringing you another slightly creepy and very suspenseful romance in *Avenging Angel*; and Hunter Raines with the paranormal m/m romance *Sight Unseen*.

In addition to Samantha Ann King, Kait Gamble and Zaide Bishop, we're proud to introduce another debut

author, R.L. Naquin. If you enjoy your urban fantasy with a cheeky edge and a sense of humor, while offering the urban fantasy and romantic elements you love, make sure to check out Naquin's debut novel, *Monster in My Closet*.

I hope you these July 2012 releases as much as we do. And that you really do have a cabana person to wait on you ;)

Remember, we love to hear from readers, and you can email us your thoughts, comments and questions to generalinquiries@carinapress.com. You can also interact with Carina Press staff and authors on our blog, Twitter stream and Facebook fan page.

Happy reading!

~Angela James
Executive Editor, Carina Press

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Dedication

To Deedee Boysen, first fan of this story,
whose begging for more chapters kept me going.

Acknowledgements

This story, my first long fiction work, took many years—and support from many people—to come into being. I wish I could remember every person who encouraged me and offered advice. I will no doubt fail. If I've forgotten you, ping me and I'll buy you a drink. Or something better.

Many thanks to Kevin Reitz and Valerie Moon Meiers, who read this novel in its earliest, grittiest stages and pronounced it good.

Special thanks to early reader Karen Koonce Weesner, who told me this was a book she would keep and read over and over. Only one of the many wonderful things she's said to me all these years of our friendship.

A heartfelt thank you to Lise Horton, contest coordinator for her RWA chapter, who reached out to me when this story received very high and really abysmal scores. She told me it was that kind of story and not to lose faith. I've never forgotten it.

Thanks to Tammy Doherty, another contest judge, who became my critique partner for a while at a time I desperately needed it.

Thanks to Alyson Hagy, who encouraged me to write fiction and who helped me with the beginning. Several times.

Deep gratitude to Laurie Potter, friend, colleague and day-job boss, who read this, encouraged me, and without whose support everything would be so much more difficult.

Thank you to Allison Pang, for always believing in this book, even when she got invited to the party without me.

Big kisses to Laura Bickle and Marcella Burnard, who seem to be there to hold my hand when I need it most and shout my successes louder than I ever could.

Thanks to the rest of the Word Whores, for their bawdy support and enthusiasm.

Many thanks to Catherine Asaro, who read this and told me a story about wading through waist-deep snow. I think my toes are thawing out now.

As always, many thanks to my insightful editor, Deb Nemeth, for loving this story, too. And for knowing which century Western saloons should be in.

Thank you to my family, for being so nice to me.

Finally and forever—thank you to David. You’ve been there with unfailing support. I wouldn’t be here without you, my dear.

Part I

Fundamentals and Context

Chapter One

In Which I Achieve Escape Velocity

Wagon-wheel chandeliers and red velvet. Why on earth every damn hotel in Wyoming seemed compelled to decorate their conference rooms like nineteenth-century saloons escaped me.

But then, everything annoyed me lately.

I shifted, sipping from my glass of Jameson. My feet throbbed from standing around in my heels all evening, and restless irritation crawled across my skin. I'd rather be home, having a quiet evening with my cat, Isabel. I should be in the lab trying to make sense of that last batch of probably worthless data. Being Clive's convenient arm-candy fell pretty low on my list.

And yet, look where I'd ended up. I'd caved to him. Yet again.

The reception was really important to him, and as his fiancée—and here Clive had pulled out the big guns, since he usually only referred to me as his girlfriend—I should be by his side. I always found the energy for *my* job so if I really loved him, I would. On and on and on. Sometimes I think I agreed with him just so I wouldn't have to hear about it anymore.

What the hell was wrong with me these days?

My brain pulsed against my skull. The fragile bones

felt as if they could explode from the sheer pressure of what seethed inside.

I couldn't keep living my life this way.

How did you realize these things? Not in a flash, I thought. Not the epiphany complete with rays of light and singing angels. Instead, it was a slow, creeping restlessness. A depression that sent out fingers of anguished rebellion. You gradually noticed that every morning you dreaded going to your prestigious university research job. Worse, every night you came home to face the guy you thought was The One and you find yourself on the doorstep, hand on the doorknob, and you're suddenly desperate to be *anywhere* but walking into that house.

I suppose I was finally facing the fact that I was miserable. Dreams about a black dog, both compelling and terrifying, had been disrupting my sleep with a message I couldn't interpret.

Or, more precisely, that I didn't want to hear. When I met Clive he'd seemed so different, so mature and, well, like *husband* material. He fit the neat little peg-hole in the car of my personal Game of Life. Somehow in shining up that image, I'd forgotten that a nice salary and polished shoes didn't make someone a good partner. I'd been just as guilty—letting him see me as the cool, logical scientist. He'd never signed up for a woman with a formless restlessness and these dreams that lately obsessed me.

No, it hadn't been a flash, but standing at that party, it became obvious to me.

I didn't love Clive. Half the time I didn't even like him. Nothing in my life had turned out quite as wonderful as it had seemed when I planned it.

The conversation washed over me. The usual bally-

hoo about oil, more drilling, politics, crazy environmentalists. Nothing new. I'd heard the conversation twenty times over and knew better than to argue any of the points. I didn't even think I was listening until I found myself saying, "Oh, Clive, that statistic has been discredited ten times over!"

Clive gaped at me. The other men looked surprised that I spoke.

Try to be softer, my mother said. So far as I could see, soft got you nowhere. Soft got you married to a man who spent his life making up problems to solve and leaving you to sleep alone. Besides, Clive knew I was right. I'd proved him wrong on that point before.

Now we'd have to stay up half the night discussing why I couldn't mind my smart mouth in public and how I didn't have to be always right. He'd explain until I wore down and agreed.

He patted me on the hip—the socially correct version of a pat on the bottom—and said, "It's okay, sweetie, I don't think you really understood the concept of what we were discussing. But love ya, babe!" And with an off-color joke, he guided the group of men away, leaving me standing there.

Maybe I just needed sleep. Probably I shouldn't be drinking whiskey.

With every intention of swapping my empty Jameson glass for some Chardonnay, I headed to the saloon-style bar. Better to have something cool I could sip slowly. Drinking whiskey never contributed to my resolutions to get along with Clive. I appreciated that Clive was a great catch, handsome, successful, charming. Everyone said so. Somehow that just wasn't enough anymore.

Maybe it was me. Perhaps, like my father, nothing could make me happy.

Lately Clive had been saying that logic meant more to me than love. I had to bite my tongue to defy him to prove to me that love existed outside of Hallmark cards and romance novels. Did it register on an oscilloscope or an EEG?

I didn't think so.

I set my highball glass on the bar, nodded to the very cute but very young bartender...and kept walking.

Pulling my coat and purse from the hooks near the reception hall door, I walked out the door. My body carried me away as if it belonged to someone else.

And no one saw me go.

I wasn't thinking about what I was doing until I was driving down the two-lane rural highway, turning up the radio to non-Clive-approved volumes so I could better hear Nickelback assure me that everything would be all right. But just not right now. I sang along, a curious sense of elated freedom lightening my mood. It felt good not to think.

When I did start thinking again, the first thing my brain did was point out that I wasn't on the interstate. Instead it coursed off to my left about half a mile across railroad tracks and prairie, angling away. I hadn't passed any kind of sign in quite a while, but I'd definitely missed the interstate access and was probably going east, not west, in the deepening evening.

Well, shit.

To get on I-90, I'd have to turn around, which I found myself absolutely unable to do. As if I'd gained some kind of escape velocity from the immense gravity well of Clive, from my old life, momentum I couldn't afford

to lose. So I just kept driving, feeling the tension bleed away with the rhythm of the highway.

I ended up at Devils Tower.

What can I say? The weathered billboards with the big arrows caught my eye.

They produced a kind of longing in me for something I couldn't quite define. That cold, creeping restlessness in me warmed to the sight of the arrows, like they pointed to the one thing I'd always wanted and never had. I felt compelled to follow them, as I did in those dreams. As if someone was sending messages I couldn't quite hear.

Not logical, but at least it seemed that the plates of my skull might hold together.

Night hung heavy under the trees, a shadowed contrast to the spring sky, which still held a little light. As I wound around the hills, buff-colored sandstone stood out in bright relief to the dark greens of the pines, which in turn made dark silhouettes against the gloaming. Wyoming skies radiate light—one of the best things about the place.

The next bend revealed the tower, starkly outlined against the blue dusk. I might have seen it before, had I been looking in the right place—down instead of up. I'd expected a peak thrusting against the sky, but Devils Tower sits down in a river bottom, carved out of soft sandstone by the Belle Fourche River until only the striated stump of granite remains. As I dropped into its valley, the tower showed black against the darkness, so dark the shadows around it paled to vivid blues.

I found the gates to the park open but unmanned, so I filled out the yellow envelope at the self-pay station with one of those three-inch pencils provided in the bin.

Name, date, car make and year, a ten-dollar bill stuffed inside. I kept going, excited now, circling the base of the tower that loomed so immediately above me that I couldn't see it much anymore.

The road terminated, fittingly, in one final curl—a circular parking lot at the base of the tower, gleaming in the growing moonlight. I stood out in the dark, leaning against the car, as if I was waiting for someone. Like when you were a teenager and every trip to the mall held limitless romantic possibilities. I remembered the champagne giddiness of it all, as if, if you could just walk around enough, you'd find him. Or he'd find you.

Mule deer wandered nearby, cropping the new green grass in the center parkway. And that was it. Pretty evening. Peaceful scene. Nothing else happened.

So much for epiphanies.

Oddly disappointed and abruptly exhausted again, I drove back down the paved road. I didn't know what I'd been expecting. Something more than deer.

A dirt turnoff to the right was marked by a peeling sign for Devils Tower Lodge: Friends and Guests Only. A place to sleep was absolutely what I needed. I turned in. A sign at a second cattle guard repeated the invitation and warning.

At the end of the road a few buildings clustered beneath the bright light on the pole, the same blue-tinged spotlight every rural homestead in Wyoming seemed to have, as if they came free with cattle-guard grates, woven wire fencing and sheet-metal tool sheds. A new-looking Jetta was parked in front of the house that didn't look like a lodge. As I walked up to the door, another sign said Welcome. Piano music tumbled softly within.

Okay then. I rang the bell.

“Hi there!” said the guy who opened the door, as if I were a neighbor who stopped by frequently.

I hesitated on the doorstep. He wore several beaded chokers around his neck, framed in the open collar of his faded work shirt. A white mustache stood in stark relief to his tanned, wind-roughened face. An ex-hippie.

“I’m Frank,” he said, holding out a hand. It seemed he might be about to hug me, but then thought better of it.

“Dr. McGee,” I answered automatically.

“You got a first name to go with that title?”

“Oh—sorry. Habit. Obnoxious habit,” I amended, embarrassed. “Jennifer.”

He shook my hand. “I’ve always liked Jennifers. Come on in!”

“Is this a lodge? I’m looking for a hotel or something.”

“I have four rooms, all empty, you can take your pick. When the rooms are full, you can camp in the yard. Come any time!” He turned and walked back through the mudroom. A shelf ran along the wall with various hiking boots and climbing shoes ranged along it. A scribbled sign said Shoes, with a helpful arrow pointing to the shelf. I slipped off my pumps and set them there with the outdoorsy footwear. Frank waited for me inside the house, by the now-silent piano.

“I’m sorry to come so late, without notice...” I began. Maybe this was a bad idea.

“Hey, I figure everyone who comes to this door is brought by divine inspiration of some kind—Buddha, God, the devil, whatever you believe. It’s my job to help you on your way.”

Definitely an ex-hippie. But harmless, obviously. I sure wasn't driving any farther tonight if I could help it.

"So, M.D. or vet?"

"Excuse me?"

"Doctor, right?"

"Oh." I waved my hand, regretting my slip. "The PhD kind. I'm a professor at UW." I left out that I studied neurophysiology. Somehow I could never make that come out right. It was like telling people you were actually a rocket scientist. They never looked at you the same again.

Frank nodded to the hallway on my left. "You look tired. Take the Burning Daylight room. It's our honeymoon suite. In the morning you'll see sunrise on Devils Tower." He said it as if there was no greater experience. Maybe to him there wasn't. And I could barely keep my eyes open.

To hell with it.

"Do you need to swipe a credit card?" I reached to open my purse, but Frank just waved a hand at me.

"We can do that in the morning, after pancakes."

I fell asleep to the sound of piano music. Ironic to find myself in the honeymoon suite, when I'd finally walked away from Clive. He was, no doubt, furious over yet another example of my erratic behavior. Illogical and dangerously emotional. Lying in that lodge bed, I really wondered what had possessed me. Maybe I needed to consider seeing a counselor. Out my window, the tower loomed, blacker than the night sky, a silhouette that blocked the stars. An absence of light that somehow still beckoned me.

I dreamed of the Dog, yet again.

The room was warm and steamy, lined with stones.

The floor, ceiling, walls were all formed of rounded cobbles. I stood at the edge of a black pool. At least, it looked opaque in the flickering torchlight. At the shallow edge, near my toes, I could see that the water was transparent. The floor sloped down, the pool growing deeper and darker, until it disappeared into shadow. No end in sight. I must have been planning to bathe, because I was nude.

Then the Dog was there.

The angel hairs on the back of my neck lifted. I spun around. Like a statue of a hound carved out of black glass, the Dog sat on the stone steps that led down from above. Trapped. His amber eyes glinted with relentless hunger, and I wanted to flee but couldn't. His jaws dropped into a canine grin, white fangs echoing sharply pointed ears. I waited for him to attack, knowing I had no other choice.

He cocked his ears and tilted his head, waiting for me to answer a question. I didn't understand what he wanted. I just couldn't quite grasp it.

I awoke, drenched in nightmare sweat, to bright light and a sunny Devils Tower. It was always the same dream. Always the edge of disaster. Somehow that made it worse.

After a quick rinse-off in the shower, I dug my contacts out of the water glass I'd soaked them in for the night. I had to put my same panties back on—still slightly damp from the rinsing out the night before. Nothing I could do with my hair and makeup. Not that I'd look a whole lot better even if I had all my stuff. I slipped my necklace and earrings into the pocket of my purse, since the gold was too garish in the morning

light. I still looked a little too like a coed doing the walk of shame in last night's cocktail dress and makeup, but there was nothing to be done.

Frank gave me the promised pancakes and said nothing about my appearance, if he even noticed. The windows were filled with Devils Tower—and the spaces between had photos, paintings and etchings of the tower.

"Want me to help you climb it?" Frank asked, pouring strawberry yogurt an inch deep over his pancakes. "I take people up there all the time. I can loan you clothes and shoes."

I mulled that over. "I don't feel a need to climb the tower."

"Afraid of heights?"

"No, I never really have been."

"That's probably why you don't need to climb then. Your fear lies somewhere else."

I shivered and didn't look out the window. Though I knew perfectly well the Dog wasn't there. Then I had to look, just to make sure. Bright sunlight on Devils Tower. Nothing else.

"I'm not sure every fear has to be faced," I told Frank. "Some are just...figments. Bad wiring that got laid down early."

"Or they're not what you think they are," Frank agreed. "I find most things have two faces—like the tower there. Like love and hate. There's a dark and light side. Makes all the difference where you decide to climb."

"Good and evil?" I smiled at him.

"No." Frank cocked his head at me. "Just different aspects of the same thing. It was the Christian settlers who named it Devils Tower, when the natives told them

it was the place of dark gods. For the whites, that meant only one guy. Not everybody sees the world that way.”

“Who are these dark gods then?”

“Good question.” Frank nodded. “Many cultures, of course, have believed in all kinds of supernatural creatures populating the world—both divine and mischievous. Faeries, for example.”

“Tinker Bell and her ilk?”

Frank tsked at me. “You come from a Celtic background—you should know better. Our ancestors took messing with the fae very seriously. Of course, once they’d decided to mess with you, there’s little recourse.”

For no reason, a hot chill washed over me, goose bumps pricking in vestigial response. “I don’t believe in any of that.”

Frank shrugged. “You don’t have to.”

I left Frank’s, fully intending to get back on the highway, get home and start dealing with my life in a rational way. He hadn’t conceded the argument, I realized. Frank had wished me luck in a knowing way, like people do when they think you’ll need it.

When I got to the end of his road, I turned left, back to the tower parking lot. I’d come this far, I could at least walk around Devils Tower once. It had nothing to do with facing fear or reconstructing my life, what I did or did not believe in. Or looking for whatever I didn’t find last night.

A sprinkling of cars occupied the lot now. Mostly Wyoming plates and a few from nearby South Dakota and Colorado. Locals, more or less, out to see the sights before the serious tourist season began. The immense rock loomed above me.

The blacktop path, bordered by some gray govern-

ment railings, led up into the trees and brush that surged up against the mountain in a slowly greening tide. If I could stand for three hours in my heels at one of Clive's events, I could walk the advertised 1.3 miles around the tower in them.

I locked my old Honda by pulling out the handle and flipping the lock, a lazy trick that bypassed the key and never failed to annoy Clive, who predicted horrific locked-out-of-my-car predicaments. In deference to the spring morning chill, I took the fork to the southern side first, walking as briskly as the slick spots and granite outcroppings allowed. The sunny face of the mountain beamed warmth down on me. The air smelled of melting snow over warming pine needles. Swallows swirled in dizzy patterns overhead, their repetitive chimes ringing against the stark granite. A flicker answered, russet tail feathers flashing.

Then I rounded the north side to increasing shadows and snowy patches. Now the tower's dark face brooded down on me. The calls of birds and rustling of squirrels gave way to grave quiet. A two-faced mountain, indeed.

A cold breeze sifted through the pines, making the needles rattle. The small hairs lifted on the back of my neck. I shivered, fighting the urge to glance over my shoulder.

The Dog is not behind me. The Dog is not real.

I walked faster. Moldy leaves covered the asphalt trail, so my footsteps made no sound. Around an outcropping of house-sized boulders, a cluster of aspen stood in a hollow between the path and the tower. Fetishes and bits of ribbon hung from the limbs. This had to be where they came, the local tribes, to make their petitions to the dark gods, whoever they might be.

Fear trilled over me.

Okay, fine, I'd face it then. I stepped off the path. The air thickened as I approached the aspen grove, seeming to promise something. Their luminous trunks gleamed through the damp air, buds thick on their fairy-thin limbs.

Aspens' white bark with jagged scars always looked to me as if lovers had long ago carved their initials into them, careful hearts drawn around, to seal the two together. Silly, romantic and something else I'd never done. The tears that had been rising since I left Frank's pricked at my eyes.

Impatient with myself, I set my purse down on a sharp granite outcropping, pulled off my gloves and dug out a pocket knife. I traced a black pattern that could be my initials, digging in to make them really mine. My blade caught on a stubborn bit, hesitated and bit in.

Bemused by dull pain, I stared at the bright blood welling on my finger where the sharp edge had nicked me. An idea popped into my head, like a bubble bursting.

I swept the fall of my hair around and found a lock from the back of my neck, from the underside, where it wouldn't show, and sawed off a piece about half as big around as my pinky and as long as my forearm. I painted the hair with the blood from my finger.

No, of course I'd never done anything like that before.

Let's not even discuss that the blade wasn't disinfected. Logic and I had parted company when I walked out of Clive's party.

As with that precipitous exit, this felt right. Liberating.

Flipping the knife closed, I tossed it back into my purse, reached up and tied the lock of hair around one fine limb above my initials, so that the ends fluttered free. I stared at it for a moment. Watching its trance-like flutter.

That was the last thing I remembered—the ribbon of bloodstained dirty-blond hair waving from the tree limb, my red Coach purse on the boulder, my leather gloves crumpled next to it, like the discarded skin of a snake.

Chapter Two

In Which I Fall Through the Rabbit Hole

I awoke on soft grass.

This surprised me because I didn't recall falling asleep. As with general anesthesia, when the doctor had you count backward while the fluid flowed into your arm...and then you awoke without ever having been aware of losing consciousness.

I sat up, blinking against the dryness of my contacts, and found myself on a small hill. A glowing green countryside rolled out below, copses of trees scattered about in pleasing clumps. Morning sunlight still shone down on me, but both warmer and softer than the familiar Wyoming variety. Quite a bit warmer. I shrugged out of my heavy red wool coat, leaving my shoulders bare except for the spaghetti straps of the dress. After a moment, I slipped off my heels, too, and dug my toes into the silky grass.

No place I'd been to had this shade of emerald. Or a truly sapphire sky like this. It was as if I'd gone from black and white to Technicolor. Dorothy at the cusp of technology.

In a rush, it came back to me.

Cutting myself—my finger still throbbed, but the slice had scabbed over. And my hair... I reached up and

touched the shorn bit at the nape of my neck. Wild, unreasonable behavior.

And, shit, my purse was nowhere to be seen.

A shudder racked me and a sob welled up. What the hell had happened? This was like some fairy tale, where the hapless heroine wandered into a glen and ended up in a magic land. Maybe my escape velocity had hurled me clear into psychosis, colored heavily by Frank's suggestions of dark faeries.

I instructed myself to get a grip and be logical. What did I know to be true? I listed it in my head.

1. I had no idea where I was.
2. Nothing about myself was changed.
3. I had been unconscious long enough for my finger to scab over.
4. This sure as hell didn't look like Wyoming, much less any place in the world I'd seen. For what that was worth.
- 5...

I got stuck after that. But at least my heart had calmed.

I hauled myself up and scanned the countryside. Hills, trees, meadows. None of it looked farmed. I turned in a slow circle, ankle-deep in the thick grass. No signs of habitation anywhere. I had hoped to spot some kind of road, to take me to, well, somewhere else. A path, maybe a dirt road of some sort.

I completed my turn—and there it was. Just as I had imagined. The unreality of it slammed through my mind, making the edges of my vision shimmer.

Psychosis—looking more and more likely.

There lay my coat and shoes, just as I'd tossed them,

only now they lay on the verge of a road that had not existed a moment before.

A road that ended—or rather, began—at my bare toes.

This had to be a dream. A new chapter in the old nightmare. Sometimes I'd get so swept up in a dream that I'd think it was real. Until something really illogical happened and I'd think, as I had just now, *Wait! This is a dream, isn't it?* Once I'd caught on to the trick, it was as if I'd solved a puzzle correctly and my subconscious would relent, the dream dissolving away.

No such luck here. The world remained, dazzling, sharp. Improbably vivid, reminding me of the images in mirrors.

Okay then, I had wanted a road and now I'd gotten one. I looped my coat over one arm and picked up my heels in the other hand. While the sun shone warm, I might as well go barefoot—I might be walking for a seriously long time. Hopefully the road wouldn't be too rocky. I found, after a few steps, that the road wasn't rocky at all, but rather a soft dust soothing to my feet.

It felt surprisingly pleasant to simply walk along. Though I grew warm. The coat draped over my arm annoyed me and I shifted it to my other arm. A drink of water would be nice, to offset the dust. That stuff felt good on the feet but not so great on the throat.

As if in answer to my thirst, around the bend a clear brook flowed. It looped out from the trees and back in again, dancing brightly over rounded stones.

I set my shoes down and dropped the coat gratefully, wishing I'd left it back at Devils Tower with the other things. I scooped up some water in my hand, then paused. I sat back on my heels, studying the crystal

drops. What about giardia? What about...something worse than that?

The ubiquitous velvety lawn was not Kentucky bluegrass, or any grass I'd ever seen. Botany might not be my forte, but I could recognize most tree species in general—and none of these trees were familiar. The leaves were shaped all wrong, with feathery tips and funny points. And it was quiet. No birds. No insects.

Not real.

Observation Number One still stood: I had no fucking clue where I was.

This might seem to be a fantasy version of Ireland, but it could be Hades' realm, for all I knew. Which would make me Persephone, trapped here forever if I ate or drank anything. Not to be superstitious, but if I admitted that I'd been somehow transported from Devils Tower to Elsewhere—which would be difficult to argue against—then the Underworld could be as possible as anything else. Or Faerie.

I racked my brain for the old tales I'd never paid much attention to. There always seemed to be banquets and falling asleep for hundreds of years.

Regardless, it wasn't wise to drink water I knew nothing about. I went to wipe my hand on my dress but, feeling suddenly paranoid, turned to wipe it on my coat instead.

Which was now gone.

Happily my shoes still lay on the grassy verge, though all alone. As if the coat had never existed.

Or, as if I *had* left it behind with the other things. At last, I had another observation to add to my list.

5. My wishes were coming true.

Deep, cleansing breaths.

I gazed at the water, clearing my mind. *Let the sound of the ripples soothe you. Relax. There must be some explanation for this.*

Then the angel hairs lifted on the back of my neck in familiar dread.

No, it can't be.

The Dog sat on the opposite bank.

A high whine rushed past my ears. My face heated to flashpoint. My stomach dropped in panic and every pore prickled with cold sweat.

He looked unreal, just as in my dreams of the past months, as if carved from volcanic glass. His amber eyes pinned me with fierce intelligence—and satisfaction? Tilting his gleaming head, he seemed to be asking a question. I still didn't know the answer.

"This is a dream," I said out loud. "This is just a new form of the same damn nightmare."

I wasn't naked, though, and not in that bathing chamber. I fervently wished to stay clothed and his jaw parted slightly, revealing a glimpse of white fang, as if he found me amusing.

And there I was, frozen, forever waiting for the attack.

My terror transformed into abrupt rage.

The fury beat against the inside of my forehead. I hated that damn Dog. Stalker Dog. Clearly I had gone over the edge into complete insanity, here in Disney Ireland with Stalker Dog and no birds. And now my wishes were coming true? Fine! Give me some singing birds with my fantasy brook and nightmare Dog!

The Dog's jaw snapped shut, ears lifting. We stared at each other across the bright water, which seemed to laugh with storybook joy, oblivious to the creatures

around it. The stream's chuckles were abruptly drowned by a crescendo of singing birds. Birds filled the skies and trees, shrieking song. I clapped my hands over my ears and ducked my head as robins, cardinals, blue jays, chickadees, even parrots swooped down, around, darkening the skies.

My stomach sank in horror. I'd done this. Claws caught my hair. A beak scratched one arm as a mynah and crow attacked each other.

The Dog still sat on the opposite bank—I saw him in the breaks of the flights of screaming birds, like a fog bank shifting and revealing small glimpses. A bubble seemed to surround him, the birds parting in their wild passage as water around a boulder.

He stilled and gathered, as if he drew shadows from the woods behind him. His eyes darkened to a fire-orange—the sparking flames of them bored through the birds between us. His hackles rose, haunches bunching as his body tensed. The coal-black lips pulled back again, but in a snarl, teeth somehow sharper-looking than before.

The attack, at last.

A low growl spiraled from his body, a sub-audible vibration, a keening wind that at first seemed to be part of the cacophonous bird calls, then rose to a sharper thunder that shook me. That shook everything.

The birdsong scaled to a single banshee wail, unbearable in intensity. The thunder and keening chorus became a ululating lamentation that I felt might break my heart.

Then was gone.

I cautiously opened the eyes I hadn't remembered closing. Even the brook's babbling had ceased. It, too, was gone.

The Dog stood an arm's length in front of me. He loomed a good half-a-head above me, where I was still kneeling in the pool of my black skirt. We were the antipode of the virgin and the unicorn. My already straining heart thumped with the tension.

I thought about wishing him gone.

He leaped.

I screamed.

My hands flew up like the frightened birds as his teeth buried in my throat, launching me backward. I braced to die. Being torn apart by a wild animal had always seemed the worst possible death to me. I waited for the tearing pain, wondering how long I'd stay conscious and aware—something I always wondered when I read those horrific news stories—but found myself still pinned under steel jaws while I sobbed.

I fought. Frantic. Shredding myself against him. The Dog pinned me, a relentless strength, a furnace of heat and muscles under glossy fur. Tears ran hot over my cheeks and down my neck.

A panicked shriek bubbled up through the sobs, my chest billowing with it, but the Dog only sank down tighter, stopping my voice, my breath.

A sweet fragment of blue beckoned me, past his great obsidian head. Wishes. I could wish for rescue in this crazy place. I focused on the wish, but the Dog growled softly and closed his jaws slightly more. Stars sparked at the edges of my eyes.

“Please...” I tried to choke out, part sob, part whimper.

Blood-dark gathered at the edges of my vision, seeping in, blurring the circle of blue sky above, then drowning it in blackness.

Chapter Three

In Which I Am Nullified

I awoke to stone walls.

My throat screamed. When I tried to swallow, it seared like the worst strep infection on the face of the earth. Or wherever the hell I was, since I was clearly still Elsewhere. I wasn't dead, at least, unless being dead sucked more than I'd imagined. My contact lenses were glued to my eyeballs, my body was one giant bruise, and the pain in my neck echoed dully through every joint.

Peripheral vision told me I was lying on some sort of bed, on top of a deep blue coverlet. The gray stones of the walls rose to a ceiling high enough to gather shadows. Misty light fell through a window behind my head and I could see a stripe of ashen sky through a window at my feet. The sill looked to be as deep as my forearm and so it cut off most of the view from this angle. There seemed to be no glass in it—nor in the one behind me, judging by the chill breeze coming from that way. It put me in mind of the ruined castles in Scotland. Only somewhat less desolate.

I shifted carefully, to see if moving would make me feel worse. It did. The pain in my throat consumed me. I reached up to touch it, wondering if I would feel a bloody gash, but the drag of chain on my wrist halted

the movement. Turned out, both wrists and ankles were chained.

Charming.

I lifted my right hand, rolling my eyes as far as I could to see it better. A silver cuff circled my wrist, attached to what appeared to be several feet of chain running over the edge of the pallet. Attached to the bed or wall somewhere, probably with iron rings cemented into the stones. I kicked up one foot. Same arrangement on my ankle. They probably didn't give me enough slack to sit up, though I wasn't feeling excited about trying that yet. This was fast going from Disney Ireland to Wes Craven's Ireland.

At least I wasn't chained naked to this bed. As it was, I felt acutely aware of the pressure of the cuffs on my skin, the soft slink of the chains as I moved.

With a sigh, I closed my eyes, trying to focus my thoughts. Okay, this could be real or not real. Under "not real" fell all sorts of unpleasant alternatives like concussion, coma, psychosis. I could be locked in my own skull for whatever reason, my neurons struggling to make sense of random signals. Not a pretty prospect. And not one I could control.

The "real" alternative, while spectacularly bizarre, at least left me with some options. If I had moved into some kind of alternate reality or another planet, then most physical laws promised I could go back the other direction. Therefore the most logical thing to do was focus on getting back. Me and Dorothy.

Instead of ruby slippers, it seemed I had wishing as my tool. Time to suspend disbelief and try to master what resources I had.

Concentrating, I wished to be free of the chains. I

pictured myself standing in the aspen grove at Devils Tower. Or the grassy hillside. I'd take my grassy hill over this. Or the brook. Not the Dog. *Don't think of the Dog*. I wished harder.

"It won't work, you know," a bell-like voice said, tinselled with amusement at my expense.

My eyes flew open and my head snapped around in shock—or started to, before the waves of agony shot up through my throat and over my skull. Tears filled my eyes with blurry heat. A woman towered over me, not three feet away. Definitely not human. Like a European model, she stood slim in a way that spoke of a different bone structure. Curved cheekbones set off rose-petal lips and gilt almond eyes. Porno-blond hair fringed pixielike around her face. Tinker Bell, right on schedule.

"It won't work," she repeated, "because you have been nullified. No more romping about the countryside creating roads, moving perfectly good streams and importing exotic creatures."

I opened my mouth but only a croak leaked through.

She smirked, the expression shattering the loveliness of her face. "You can't talk either, though that's not the silver at work. Personally, I think he should have ripped your throat out like the obscenity you are, instead of just rendering you unconscious. But my judgments are not considered." She made that sound like a crime against the order of the universe.

Nasty Tinker Bell thumped down a tray I hadn't noticed on the ledge of the window, splashing liquid in a bowl. She yanked the chain attached to my right wrist and, before I could resist, dragged my hand above my head, looping the link over a hook. With my arm out of the way and holding the bowl in one hand, she sat on the

bed, her unbelievably slim hip nudging mine, scooped up some of the liquid and held it to my lips.

Remembering my resolve not to eat or drink in this place, especially now that I was a prisoner, I clamped my lips together. I could at least avoid being drugged. Nasty Tinker Bell's pretty golden eyes sparked. Turning the spoon, she let the liquid dribble over my mouth so that it ran down my cheeks, past my ears and pooled at the back of my neck to join the crusted mess of hair and various dried liquids there.

Careful not to touch the liquid on my lips, I looked directly at her porno prettiness. *Fuck you*, I thought.

I knew Tinker Bell couldn't hear me but I felt better.

"Fine," she snapped, her voice a little bell being rung too hard. Nasty Tinker Bell clearly understood at least the insult in my eyes. She lifted the bowl, with the clear intention of dumping it on my head.

"Enough," a male voice said.

As if I'd ceased to exist, Tinker Bell blinked her eyes and regained her lovely self, face smoothing, shining once again in sunny elegance. Reboot and resume program. She gracefully stood and glided to the tray, set the bowl precisely in the center, lifted the tray and left the room without hesitation.

Booted footsteps crossed the room toward me. Act II, scene ii. Exit Nasty Tinker Bell, Enter God-Only-Knows-What-Now. My face was sticky with whatever the brothy stuff had been, my hair wet and fouled. I stank. I hurt. I was chained to a bed in a place so completely unknown I couldn't begin to understand it. I tried to squeeze my legs closer together, but the chains seemed at the limit of their reach. The energy of my

brief triumph evaporated, allowing tears to well up again.

Oh, please, please, please, do not cry. The threatening sting worsened. I closed my eyes and one tear leaked out. He stopped next to me, surveying me.

“You’re certainly a mess.” His wry voice was rich and smooth.

My eyes snapped open to glare at him through the blur. Fifty different smart remarks flew across my tongue, most along the lines that any failures of appearance on my part could be laid on the doorstep of someone besides myself. But even the buzz of the first word on my vocal chords brought searing agony. Relieved to have a legitimate reason for the tears, I almost welcomed the searing sensation.

“No, don’t try to talk—no one needs to hear what you have to say, anyway. Not that we can help it, since you think so loudly. And you have a decision to make. We have a quandary.” He began pacing, boots echoing against stone. “No one can heal you while you’re bound in silver and we can’t release you from the silver until you have yourself under control. Which will take a considerably long time—perhaps years of training—if you’re even able to accomplish it at all.”

I thought of the birds crashing in increasing cacophony with a small shudder.

“Exactly,” he confirmed. “And yes,” he said from the window behind my head where he seemed to be gazing out, “I can hear most of your thoughts—another reason to save trying to speak aloud.”

My stomach congealed in panic. Had he heard my secret thoughts? *Don’t think of them, bury them deep, deep. Think of other things...like what? Think of home,*

think of Isabel. Isabel, my cat—Clive hated her. What would happen to her now? How could I not have thought of her until this moment? Abandoned, wondering why I never came home for her... And my mother—she'd be frantic. How long had I been gone? They could be all dead and buried, lost to me forever. The anguish racked me.

"Shh." The man sat on the side of my bed now, heavier than Nasty Tinker Bell. He brushed the hair back from my forehead, then placed his long fingers over my brow and, with his thumbs, rhythmically smoothed along my cheekbones, wiping away the tears that now flowed freely.

I stifled a sob. I had cried more in the past day than I had in years. The sweeping along my cheekbones soothed me, melting warmth through my skull. The rhythm became part of my breathing. Deep breaths. Smooth, easy. The awful tightness in my chest gave a little sigh and released.

"Let's try again, shall we?" The man pulled his hands away. I could hear him brush them against his thighs. Soup, tears and blood. Yuck.

My eyes cleared enough for me to see him. Ebony-blue climbed over half his face. The winding pattern of angular spirals and toothy spikes swirled out of his black hair on the left side of his face, placing sharp fingers along his cheekbone, jaw and brow. For a moment, the tattoo-like pattern dominated everything about him. Ferocious and alien.

Once I adjusted, I could see past the lines. His face echoed Tinker Bell's golden coloring. He could be her fraternal twin, with those same arched cheekbones. But where she was golden dawn, he was darkest night. Mid-

night-blue eyes, that deep blue just before all light was gone from the sky, when the stars have emerged, but you could see the black shadows of trees against the night. He shared Tinker Bell's rose-petal mouth, but with a curious edge to it. I suppose a man's mouth shouldn't remind one of a flower, and there was nothing feminine about this man. Where she wore the pink sugar roses of debutantes and bridal showers, his lips made me think of the blooms of late summer, the sharp-ruffled dianthus, edges darkening to blood in the heat. His bone structure was broader than hers but still seemed somehow differently proportioned, his arms hanging a bit too long from shoulders not quite balanced to his height. Inky hair pulled back from his face fell in a tail down his back. One strand had escaped to fall over his shoulder and I could see a blue shimmer in its silk sheen.

He arched his left eyebrow, blueness in the elegant arch, repeating the deep shades of the fanged lines around it.

"Shall we?" he repeated.

I stared at him. What was the question?

"Shall we discuss your situation? Attempt to use some mental discipline and think yes or no, out loud in your head."

Mental discipline, my ass. *Maybe*.

Then he laughed, an open delighted sound that brought stars into the midnight of his eyes. "'Maybe' will work."

I felt momentarily dazzled. Or simply lightheaded from the throbbing in my neck. Probably serious blood loss, too.

He stood and resumed pacing, hands folded behind his back. "I can't hear every thought you've ever had.

Think of it like a lake. The first foot or two is clear. If I row my little boat on the lake and look down, I can see fish that come to the surface—especially if they come up for food or even leap out of the water. Deeper than that, I have no idea what fish are in there unless I dive in, which I'm not going to do because who wants to get soaked in someone else's lake water?"

He was lecturing.

"Yes, I often teach," he replied. "There's a good example—your observation that I was falling into a familiar lecture pattern swam up to the surface like a bright goldfish, right up to the bait I dangled in the water—which would be my words to you. The easiest thought to hear is a direct response to your own thoughts, vocalized or not. Especially fully and definitely formed as if you were about to vocalize it. Understand?"

Yes.

"No need to shout." He paused to stand over me again, that eyebrow once again raised in patient disdain. "No need to put any push behind it, just bring the little fishy to the surface for me to see."

Like I was a child.

"You are a child," he snapped—now I could see a flash of Tinker Bell. "Get that through your head right now. You're a toddler with a nuclear warhead, and there are those who will not hesitate to kill you for it. Who even now clamor for your death."

I gaped at him, not that my life being in danger was any surprise, but "nuclear warhead"? Were we in the actual world after all?

"Clear your thoughts, don't panic," he instructed, back in superior teacher mode. "Sort out what you want

to ask me from the emotional response—you just about swamped my little rowboat with frantic toothy fish.”

Torn between laughing and grinding my teeth, both of which would probably hurt, I pictured a nuclear war-head on my grassy hill and put a question mark next to it. My instructor rolled his eyes, but I caught a glimpse of the stars that brightened the blue of his eyes when he was amused.

“Nice picture, but words, please. We’re not babies. Tut, tut—keep the anger out. Emotion only clouds the water.”

How did he understand my words anyway—was he speaking English?

“Aha!” He beamed at me, resuming his measured pace around the room. “Now there’s our logical girl! No, we do not speak the same language. If you concentrate on only the sound of my voice and not the sense, you’ll hear that you don’t understand the words I’m saying. But because vocalized words are like ducks on the surface of the lake, you are hearing the sense of my words, not the actual words themselves. You should be able to understand anyone here, except those who are insane or with *very* unclear thoughts. Also, someone who does not mean what they say will confuse you.”

Interesting. So maybe he didn’t say “nuclear war-head,” but something that I translated as my equivalent of whatever that would be here.

“Exactly. Congratulations, we can enter you into kindergarten now.”

I started lining up questions to ask, starting with *Where am I and how did I get here?* but he held up one long-fingered hand. Again, out of proportion, fingers

just slightly too long for the hand, the whole hand just a little too long for the arm.

"Still your thoughts, let your fish swim deep and listen. Let's return to our original conversation. Answering all of your questions will take many days and we have more pressing concerns to attend to."

He sat on the bed again, frowned at my right hand still chained up to the hook and reached up to release it. He laid my hand down to rest on my stomach, smoothing the small wound on my finger with what I would have called tenderness, if not for the cool remoteness of his face. I could feel anger that wasn't mine, a low tone in the background, along with several other muddier emotions. They were coming from him. He was upset.

"No," he said, hand still over mine. "There's a great deal going on you don't understand, little girl. Can we focus on solving the immediate problem, please? Since it is *your* problem, not anyone else's?"

I tried to be still and thought of a calm lake, no fish.

"That's a start. You're still thinking of *something*, but at least it's something quiet for once." He smirked at me. "Now, it may have escaped your attention, but you were recently savaged by a wild beast. You're injured, you will not eat or drink—yes, I could hear *that* from downstairs, speaking of shouting—and we cannot use magic to heal you without releasing you from the silver, at which point you would likely destroy us all by accidentally setting off your nuclear warhead."

His words settled into my spinning mind, the implications finally becoming clear. *I can do magic?* I asked the question as quietly and clearly as I could manage.

He regarded me with a mixture of amusement and

sympathy. “Yes. Of course. What did you think you were doing?”

I didn’t know. I suppose I’d done my usual thing and had avoided thinking about it directly. Not that I’d had much leisure for contemplation.

“The crux of it is, you are a natural sorceress, but you are not natural to this place. You are like a diseased predator—dangerous and unable to control yourself. That’s why you were stopped.”

His eyes dark, he leaned forward and gently touched my throat. I gasped and my head spun as the pain reared up. He stood abruptly. Paced across the room, steps a sharp clip. He returned from the far corner with a silver hand mirror.

“Allow me to elucidate.” He held up the mirror.

My throat looked like it had been torn out.