

THE LEGEND OF THE RING

Vol. II

by Udrea Alina

This is dedicated to my beautiful daughter. I hope that when she grows up, she will enjoy reading it. I also hope that whoever reads this will enjoy it as much as did writing it.

Enjoy 😊

Chapter 1

Igor was riding his stallion at full speed towards his goal: the magic ring which would ensure his victory over his brother's army and which would help him rule the kingdom. He was whipping his stallion from time to time to remind him that he had no time to waste.

The wind was blowing so hard that it was bending the trees till almost breaking point but Igor didn't care. He had to have that ring, he had to take over the kingdom. His brother's ruler ship would soon come to an end and his time to shine would come. Everybody would obey him and only him! But where was that darn raven again? Margo had better not be playing with him or she would be sorry. She promised her raven would show him the way to the ring but it vanished into thin air again.

The weather turned stormy and as the raven was nowhere in sight, Igor finally decided to stop his gallop and find some shelter for the rest of the evening and for the night. The heavy clouds were chasing each other on the already dark sky.

By the way the sky looked, he had no choice. But it wasn't like the ring would disappear again now that he knew of it. The trip shouldn't take him more than a week. What was one more week in comparison with all those years he had already waited? Nothing! Just a grain of sand in the hourglass.

He was riding his horse on a winding never-ending path through the woods. The silence that surrounded him was like a heavy burden, it was almost freaking him out. Some distant bird was chirping happily a joyful song. Nature was indifferent to his worries, his dreams, him...

The rain started to pour as soon as the wind stopped. Now he was soaking wet and still no place for shelter in sight. His stallion was also showing signs of tiredness and restlessness. The rain was so strong that it was almost lashing his face, making it impossible to see anything in front of him. He was blaming everything on Margo, although she had nothing to do with the bad weather in fact and he knew it. But he needed someone to put the blame on and as there was nobody else there and as she was the first person that popped into his mind, he decided to blame it on her! He could almost see her yellow teeth or rather fangs coming out from her grinning face. He didn't know why but he felt he could slap that ugly face right now. Then he got a bit scared as it crossed his mind that the old hag might be able to read his mind and decided to think of something different instead. Like finding a damned shelter!

The trees were looking so menacingly in the dim evening light that they appeared to be alive and have a will of their own. Which was pretty strange especially as the wind had ceased blowing. Maybe it was just his wild imagination playing tricks on him. Then suddenly Igor burst into loud laughter. He was laughing at himself for his moment of weakness, for having let himself be scared by some trees, even if for less than a moment...

Igor was now laughing full heartedly as if to show the spooky trees that he was not afraid and that he had everything under control. Then all of a sudden something bumped his head from above and he lost all that courage. He clenched his teeth and put his trembling hands on his sword but the sword had somehow gained weight that he couldn't lift it anymore. And there was that something that had hit him still on his head. He finally let out a cry of terror and as he wasn't able to pull the sword from its sheath, he just ran his hands through his hair to see what it was. Then his hands touched it: the bloody raven, Margo's raven.

“Son of a ...! If I didn't need you to show me the way to that wench, I would pluck all your feathers for disappearing like that and for giving me a fright! But have no fear, when it is all over, I can still have you for dinner, you stupid bird!”

But then the raven, as if in answer to his threats, pecked his head and then flew away again, leaving him alone in the scary forest once again.

“Good! Just go away, who needs you anyway!?” Igor yelled after it with anger and frustration in his voice. Then his stallion stopped suddenly and as he was still looking after the raven and wasn't paying attention to the horse, Igor flew from the slippery saddle right in a large puddle of mud, face first. Now he was really mad. Not only was he wet from the pouring rain, but now he was dirty too. He got up from the dirty puddle and was about to lash his horse when he stopped with his whip in his hands just before throwing the blow. There was a small entrance through the rocks! Shelter!

After mumbling to himself for his misfortunes, he tied his horse to the nearest tree and decided to explore the cave. He had his sword by his side if there were wolves inside or anything else. That would be his shelter for the night, no matter what beast might be in. But, then again, maybe it was empty. He took a few steps closer to the entrance and listened carefully for any noise coming from inside. As he couldn't hear anything, he decided to enter. First he lit a torch he was carrying in his bag and then he slowly entered the dark cave.

Chapter 2

Angela was still wondering how that little piece of metal had such effects on her, making her feel the way she did. She was pretty brave and sometimes even reckless, but from the moment she put the snake-shaped ring on her finger, everything had taken a different dimension. Her fighting skills were at another level. And she loved it. But she wanted to be that good even without the ring, so she practiced every day at least a few hours in the forest, close to the hunting cabin. She practiced with an old rusty sword against imaginary foes and she also practiced with her bow, shooting at the small birds on the sky first. Then, as she got better, she started to practice on the beetles she saw on the trees. But as even those proved easy targets for her new skills, she started firing her arrows at flying insects and to her surprise, she never missed. It was as if she had become one with the weapon she had in her hands, no matter what that weapon was.

Angela felt that she had a responsibility now, she felt it wasn't fair to just enjoy her powers. She had to protect those who couldn't protect themselves, and there were plenty who needed help, any help. But she couldn't just roam the streets like that, she needed to protect her identity. So she needed a

costume, something to help her stay safe. But she only had some rags, nothing good enough to make a costume of. Never mind, she thought, she would appeal to another one of her skills, stealing. But it was for a good purpose this time, not just for her benefit. She wanted to protect the helpless but at the same time she wanted to be able to remain under cover. And she knew the perfect place in town to get what she wanted, the shop owned by the greedy and most wealthy man in town, an old local merchant named Caspar Kerdory.

Caspar was old, but he wasn't stupid. He had guards protecting his shop, his merchandise. His goods were of the highest quality, brought from Asia, and he sold them for a high price to the richest ladies of the kingdom. All the respectable ladies in the kingdom bought their dresses from him. He was so renowned that ladies from the neighboring kingdoms also came to buy from him. So his merchandise needed protection and paying the guards was only a small monthly fee that was worth it in comparison to the risk he would take otherwise. This way, he could sleep like a baby at night, knowing that his goods were protected. It was where he got his money from, so it was what mattered most to him.

He had been married a few times, but he had no children. Now, at his old age, he was sorry he had nobody to leave his fortune to when he would be no more. He had been a selfish person all his life and now he realized that probably that was

why all his wives left him. But he was too old and it was too late now.

So Angela decided that his shop was the perfect place to find something nice and useful. She also knew that the place had two or three guards protecting it. But that never stopped her before. So why would it stop her now, especially as she was stronger than ever and she had a higher purpose!? Nope, nothing would stand in her way. Now it wasn't just about stealing some scraps to eat, not anymore. Not since the ring. Now she had to do something more with her life, not just steal to survive. No, now she was going to help others.

She approached the street silently. The street lights were all on already, especially here where the most expensive shops in town were. Caspar's shop was well illuminated and there were three guards patrolling the perimeter. She reckoned he probably sold more than just clothes, probably jewellery too. But she didn't care about that, she just wanted a nice costume, worthy of a heroine. If she was going to help people, then she would be a heroine....she liked how that sounded. But she still had to steal to survive. Well, she was a different kind of a heroine, that was all, she told herself.

She hid in a nook of a building opposite Caspar's shop to observe the guards and try to find a flaw in their patrolling ritual. She stood there and waited. She didn't want to fight them if she could avoid it. Not because she was afraid but because she knew they were only doing their jobs. There was

no point in hurting them if she could avoid it. Because she was sure they would be hurt if engaged in a fight and not her, even if she was alone and they were three. They were no match for her, especially with the ring on. So she stood there and studied their moves and habits.

“Hey, John”, she could hear one of the guards say, “I need to take a dump, can you cover for me?”

“Sure, take your time”, another guard answered and instead of being more attentive to patrol the first guard's spot too, he sat down on a stump of a tree and lit a cigarette as the other was going to his business. The third guard was patrolling the back of the building. So now was Angela's chance, before the first guard returned and while the second was quietly enjoying his cigar. But she had to be fast. He was only a few paces away from the main entrance, which was of course locked. She crept in the shadows with stealth and reached the door. She had to move fast as it was well lit, before the guard finished his cigar. She took out a pick lock and started to pick the lock. She moved it like usual, left and right and so on but then she glanced at the guard as he was smoking. His cigar was almost finished. She panicked and her lock pick got jammed.

“Damn it!”, Angela whispered to herself. “Come on, come on”, she was almost pleading it. Then just as the guard was extinguishing his cigar butt she heard the familiar click of the lock and she was inside. She closed the door behind her and took a look around: she was in heaven...so many pretty dresses.

But she didn't want a dress. She had no use for it. Where would she wear it? In her small dank room at the orphanage? No, she needed something different. Something nice but at the same time to be able to move in it and fight in it. She looked everywhere but all she could see were dresses...all sizes, shapes and colors. Until she thought she would puke. She saw enough dresses to last her a lifetime. Then, disappointed, she sat on a stool in a corner of the shop.

“All this effort for nothing!”, she told herself and looked up as if to ask the heavens why she was so unlucky. Then she saw a small trap door in the ceiling and decided to check it out. She put the stool right under it and climbed it. She tried to push it open but, guess what, it was locked.

“Go figure!”, she whispered in a low voice. She took her lock pick again and started doing her magic until she could hear the familiar click. Then she opened it and was up in the attic. She fumbled in the dark and then she remembered she had a match in her pocket. She struck the match hoping to find a candle. As the match was already dying she took a quick glance and there it was, a candle. She lit it and looked around. There were spider webs everywhere and nothing valuable drew her attention. Then she saw a trunk on the right side of the attic. It looked old and was covered in dust, like everything else in the attic. And of course, it was locked. But the lock was old and she only had to hit it with her foot to break it.

“What do we have here? Could good old Caspar have locked anything of use here and forgot about it?” Angela was thinking as she opened the trunk. She brought the candle closer to inspect the inside of the trunk. A few spiders crawled out in a hurry. They were as black as the darkness surrounding her. But there was something inside, something just as black. She touched it to see what it was. It felt like a leather material. She took it out to inspect it better.

“Wooooow!”, was all she could say. She dropped the rags she was wearing and put it on. It matched her perfectly, thin black leather trousers and a leather vest. It was awesome! She also found an opening in the roof and decided to exit the building that way than the way she had come and she was gone.

Chapter 3

Daniel was tired of the boring life at the castle among his servants and wanted to enjoy a day on his own in town. No servants around, no luxury, not even George or Adrian. He just

wanted to spend a normal day among his people but as one of them, not as their prince. That way he could find out what the people of Green Valley really thought of him and his parents. He wasn't interested in what people told him when they knew who they were talking to because most of them were flattering him on purpose and he didn't like that. He wanted to know what they really thought of him and what better way than disguising himself as a commoner and spending an ordinary day at the pub amongst his people.

So Daniel had to sneak out of the castle in order to have that or his loyal squires, George and Adrian, wouldn't allow that. They were responsible for the Prince's well being, payed by the king himself to protect Daniel, the only heir to the throne. But sometimes he needed some time alone, to act goofy if he felt like it, to act natural, without worrying about etiquette and about what others would think of him if he did this or that. Just be himself from time to time and enjoy life as it came.

Adrian was younger and easier to be put off of his trail but George was a sly fox and couldn't be fooled that easily. But he had done it before, he would do it this time too. He would just give them some important mission and so he could get rid of them for the rest of the day. As for his parents, he would just tell them that he was indisposed and wanted to spend the day in his room.

So Daniel sent the two to bring him news from the border of the kingdom. They were to meet the scouts positioned near the border and come back with news. This, Daniel reckoned, would take them at least two or three days including the time needed to get back. Which was just perfect.

After giving them assurances that their mission was of the utmost importance to the kingdom and that he wouldn't get in any trouble till their return, George and Adrian finally climbed their horses and were off. Then Daniel got rid of his fancy clothes and jewels and put on some rags, messed his hair, put on an old pair of boots and took an ordinary sword for protection. He couldn't take his favorite sword as it was fancy and expensive and had his family's crest on it and people would recognize him. Then he was off. Not alone, though. He took Princess, his golden retriever, with him. Princess would also protect him if need be.

It was early in the morning when he left the castle as he wanted to enjoy a full day on his own. George and Adrian had just left and Daniel was already on his way to town, Princess on his tail. He was whistling a song as he went and enjoying nature. The walk from the castle to the outskirts of the town where the pub was would take him at least an hour and a half without his horse but he didn't mind it. Walking on foot was healthy and Princess also enjoyed it as she didn't have to run after the horse to catch up. Everything was just perfect. He would soon enjoy a cold pint of beer and chat with the

common people of Green Valley, his people. He had his purse of gold strapped to his belt as he needed to pay for the booze. The gold inside was jiggling from side to side as he walked, making a faint sound in the otherwise complete silence.

When he was half way to town he had to cross a small forest and then he would get to open field again. The forest gave him the chills as it could be dangerous. He had heard rumors of thieves attacking people there and robbing them of their goods. He had Princess by his side and his sword. It wasn't his best sword, but it was sharp enough to do what it was meant to do if it came to that. He stopped whistling and started paying more attention to the road, at least until he was out of the woods. Princess was a bit agitated, too, or at least that is what he thought.

“What is it, Princess?”, he said and petted the dog. Princess calmed down a bit and started wagging her tail happily at her master's soft touch.

“Grrr.....” and Princess was on alert. Something was wrong. Daniel took out his sword and leaned against a tree for more protection. But he couldn't see anyone. Princess, though, was still snarling at something or someone so he decided to wait a bit and see what it was. Then suddenly Princess rushed into the bushes and left him all alone.

“Now! Attack!”, Daniel heard a male voice ordering nearby. Hardly had he heard that when some youngsters, just a few years younger than himself, rushed at him, knives and blades in

their hands. He started fighting them off but they were five and he was alone. He managed to injure the plump one of them who screamed with pain and retreated from the fight.

“Are you all right, Greg!?” he heard someone say.

“I’ll live” came the answer from the fat one of the boys and Daniel was wondering why he even tried to fight as it was obvious he was not fit for that. The remaining four jumped him all at once and he was trying to fend them off, slashing right and left but he grew tired while they were still fighting...

“What do you want? I just have a few coins for a beer, nothing else worth stealing...”, Daniel tried to make them leave him alone. He couldn’t tell them he was the Prince. Then they would kidnap him for a ransom. Which meant his father whom he loved and respected would find out of his foolishness. And this meant something else: he would never be able to pull something like this again as he would be supervised more carefully by his father's men. And he needed days on his own from time to time. So he had to get out of this jam on his own, somehow...

“We’ll be the judge of that!”, came the harsh answer from the one who seemed to be their leader.

“Surrender, and we might let you live...”, another one said and the others grinned while they kept fighting him.

Then, out of nowhere, someone shot an arrow, pinning one of the four remaining boys to a tree as the arrow went through

his right arm and stuck in the tree. A yell of pain swept the forest as the skinniest of the gang got pinned to the tree.

“What’s going on? Chris, who did that?” asked their leader again with obvious concern in his voice.

“Argh...I don't know, chief....someone fired an arrow from behind those trees.” Then he started trying to get loose and grabbed the arrow with his other hand. He tried to snatch it but he couldn't as he was bleeding hard and he wasn't strong enough to release himself with just one hand.

Daniel was also wandering what was going on when he saw a black figure approaching from behind the trees. There were only three more boys now as one was pinned to the tree and one he had injured earlier and was still sitting on a rock trying to recover.

As the figure got closer, they all saw it was a woman. She was clad in black leather and had a black hood on her head so they couldn't make out who it was. But she had a bow strapped on her back and a shiny sword in her hands. And by the looks of it, she was more than ready to use it.

“Clark, who is this? You said he was an easy prey!”, one of the boys addressed the leader, panicked.

“Shut up, Dave! Boys, get her!”, Clark ordered his gang.

“What about the peasant?” asked Nick, the most decent of Clark's gang of brawlers from the orphanage. “We should have

stuck to small burglaries when no one was home... We shouldn't have attacked him or anyone as a matter of fact.”

“Shut up, you nincompoop! Grab your sword and kill her! And then him!”, said Clark pointing first to Angela, as she was of course the mysterious figure, and then to Daniel.

“Sorry, this is not who I am. I am not killing anyone. I helped you steal but I won't kill anyone for you! And I won't let you do that, either!”. Then Nick looked at the others and went on: “you are better than this, stealing to survive is one thing, but killing is quite another!”

“You will be next, fool, once I finish with these two!”, growled Clark through his gritted teeth. “Get them, boys!”

Nick went next to Daniel and they stood back to back to protect each other. Meanwhile Greg recovered from the blow and was attacking them while Clark and Dave rushed towards Angela, although nobody knew it was her as she was well disguised.

Angela was now dueling the two. They were good, but she was better. And she had the ring on, so they were no match for her. She hit Dave's blade so hard that his blade flew up in the air and then fell a few feet away. But he still had a knife in his hands and was trying to cut her while Clark was still handling his sword pretty well. He almost touched her right shoulder with the tip of his blade when she ducked the blow and with a really swift move she cut his palm and made him drop his

sword. Clark started cursing but he was out of the fight. Dave, seeing that Clark wasn't fighting anymore, lost some of his courage. It was all that Angela needed. She unarmed him just as easy and then slapped him over his legs with her sword in its scabbard as it was obvious they had lost this fight.

And Greg was down again, beaten by Daniel and Nick.

“Now get out of here!”, she commanded. Daniel even helped Chris and released him from the tree. He joined Clark, Greg and Dave and they all ran back towards town. Only Nick remained. He was an outcast now and couldn't go back to the orphanage or Clark and the others would surely torture him or even kill him. He was confused as he didn't know where he would get a roof over his head from that moment on...

Princess was next to Angela, wagging her tail as the dog had recognized her, unlike her master Daniel who had no clue who she was.

“Thank you both for saving my life”, began Daniel, “and as for you Princess, what has gotten into you? Why did you leave my side?”

Princess, understanding that her master was scolding her, put her head down with guilt. Angela on the other hand, would have left that instant as now Daniel was safe but she knew the boys and what Nick did was brave and kind. So she knew he would have no roof over his head from that moment on, unlike her, as nobody had recognized her and she could just take on

her usual clothes and go back to the orphanage. She had also recognized who the man dressed in the shabby clothes was, she knew it was the Prince himself. So he could help Nick.

“You know he has no place to stay now for having helped you...”, she said to make Daniel aware of that fact. Then she vanished in the woods just as fast as she had come.

Daniel thought he had heard that voice before but couldn't remember where. He dropped that thought for later and now thought of her words...the lad who had helped him needed help now.

“What's your name, boy?” Daniel asked him after a pause.

“I'm Nick... I am sorry. I didn't know Clark was going to hurt you. We were supposed to scare you and rob you. That doesn't sound better, I know, but it is the truth. You can turn me in to the guards in town if you wish. It would probably be for the best. That way I would at least have a roof over my head tonight, even if in a dungeon cell...”

Daniel looked at him and wondered what he should do. There was a short fight inside him as he was oscillating between turning him in to the guards or....

“I have a better idea”, Daniel finally said. “How about I give you a second chance? You don't seem a bad guy. Perhaps you didn't have much of a choice so far in life. What would you do if I told you that you could become the Prince's personal

bodyguard? Would you take this chance and turn your life around? Give up stealing and earn an honest living?”

“I would in a jiffy. Never liked that life but had to. Clark, as bad as he is, provided better and more food than the orphanage did....but if I had the chance to work, any honest work, would be better.”

“I think you misheard me. Glad you want to be a better person. But would you like to train every day with the king's men and be the Prince's bodyguard? That way you would have a roof over your head and as much food as you can eat.”

“Why are you asking me that?? Do you know the Prince? Can you arrange for me to get such a job? Why would you do that? And how could you do that? By the way look, you are as needy as I am...”, Nick said and started going towards town. But Daniel grabbed his arm.

“I AM THE PRINCE!”, he said and waited for Nick's reaction. He didn't have to wait long.

“Yeah, right!”, Nick said mockingly as he didn't believe a word of what Daniel was saying. “And I am the King!”, Nick went on, laughing at Daniel.

“You are not”, said Daniel calmly, “my father is old and wrinkled while you are just a boy. Listen, I am giving you a chance here, take it or leave it, I am going to the pub as I wanted and then going back to the castle before my parents realize I am gone. You can either come have a drink with me at

the pub and then at the castle where I will give you a room of your own and whatever else you need or you can go back to your friends, but I doubt that will work for you now...". Saying these, Daniel left Nick dumbfounded and started towards the path that led to town.

After a few meters of walking by himself and wondering what was taking Nick so long to decide, he finally heard him behind him.

"Are you serious? Did we just attack the Prince of Green Valley!?" Nick asked astounded.

"Well, technically, you ended up protecting me, so... "

Princess sniffed him out to also decide if Nick was a friend or a foe. She finally decided he was ok so she just followed the two men.

"It would be an honor to be your bodyguard....", Nick said and he knelt before Daniel.

"Get up, you fool! What if other thieves see us like this? I am disguised, remember? So please lower your voice and stand up. You begin work now. From this moment onwards, you are my personal bodyguard. But I have to warn you... I have two squires who will want to know everything about you. But no worries, I will deal with them."

"Thank you, your Highness!", Nick said babbling.

“Oh, don’t ever call me that. I don't like it. I am Daniel.” And Daniel shook his hand to Nick's further amazement.

“I heard stories about you, your High...I mean Daniel. But never thought they were true. But looks like they were.”

“What do you mean?” Daniel asked as he got intrigued as he was finally going to find out what people thought of him.

“I heard rumors that the young Prince is kind and fair. But I thought I would only believe it when I saw it. And now I did.”

Daniel smiled with content.

Chapter 4

Igor woke up shivering. The cave was dark and cold again as the fire had long ago died out. He had fallen asleep as he was tired but now he felt rested and hungry. He decided to make a small fire again to get warm and eat cooked meat from his bag and then start on his journey again.

One hour later he was on his way once again. The raven was circling him in the air, showing him the way.

Now that the weather was better, the forest didn't seem so scary anymore. Everything seemed so still and quiet. There was a brook nearby where he made provisions of fresh water. Even the glassy surface of the water seemed eerie in the morning light. But the water was so refreshing and cool. The water was flowing so slowly and calmly that it was as if it was almost standing still.

After taking enough water for the journey, he started galloping again.

The only sound he could hear was the stallion's heavy breath as it was galloping. He couldn't even hear the sound of the stallion's hooves on the ground as the ground was muddy and soft from the rain the day before. Everything was so peaceful. But his mind wasn't. All he could think about was grabbing the ring and then with it and with his army he could try to conquer Green Valley. If Margo was right, this ring was exactly what he needed to have an advantage over the King's army which was more numerous and better equipped than his. But Margo said that if he could snatch the ring, he himself would be worth one hundred skilled men. She said the ring would enhance his already great abilities to such an extent that he would be invincible. All he had to do was to find the wench wearing it and take it from her. How hard could that be? She

was just a girl, Igor thought smiling so widely that his face looked deformed for a second.

With that in mind, Igor was rushing towards the outskirts of Green Valley, towards his goal. A few more days and he'd be there. Good thing that his stallion was young and strong and up for the challenge as he wanted to get there as soon as possible which meant as few stops for breaks as possible, too.

Igor knew that Daniel would soon inherit the throne of Green Valley as his father, his step brother, was getting old and weak. It was just a matter of time. So it would have been best if he could take the throne before that happened. He was afraid that Daniel would make a better king than his father and that he would raise a bigger and more disciplined army than him. And then it would be more difficult to take the throne. So best thing was to conquer Green Valley before that happened. He had heard rumors of Daniel and of the fact that he was wise and brave and that the people were loyal to him. And Igor dreaded that. He needed to take control over the kingdom sooner rather than later. And make the people be loyal to him. Either with money or by force.

He was riding restlessly day and night to get there. It was so close now. Just half a day's journey away.

Chapter 5

“What about Nick, Clark!?” , asked Dave.

“What about him? He chose his side so now he had better stick to it! And better not face me again or he will be sorry!” , answered Clark clearly shaken by the way things had ended up.

“But he is one of us, right...?” asked Greg still not sure of what had just happened.

“Are you blind or just plain stupid, boy? Did it seem like he was on our side? Is he by our side now!?” , yelled Clark, his eyes popping out of his head with anger.

Greg lowered his gaze, ashamed that he had even asked something which seemed so obvious for the other boys. He decided to try to keep up with the others and just listen to what they were saying, afraid not to upset and trouble Clark anymore. He was afraid of him. Clark could be very vengeful. If he hated someone or wanted revenge for something, he usually didn't give up until he got it. No matter what it took or how long it took. He always got his way. So a few years back when Clark had first approached him, he almost pissed his pants. He had always been fat and everybody mocked him. But when Clark offered to include him in his gang, he was thrilled.

Even if he was their bait. At least he was in Clark's gang. And that meant from that moment on he was protected from the rest of the boys at the orphanage. Since that day, nobody had ever mocked him again. Besides Clark himself, of course. But it was preferable to withstand that than to suffer humiliations from most of the boys at the orphanage. This way, he only had to endure Clark. And it wasn't that bad, he didn't always pick on him. Only when he was really upset. But as that didn't happen often, he was ok with it.

“Ouch, what was that for?”, asked Greg as Clark slapped his head.

“That was a reminder that we don't daydream. What were you smiling about anyway? Do you find anything of what happened as being funny?”

“No, sorry, I was just thinking that if we could find out who the girl behind that mask was and we could get our hands on her....”, he lied as he wasn't going to tell Clark that he was in fact happy that he was the only one who was abusing him, compared to his life before meeting Clark which had been far worse.

But he couldn't finish his sentence as Clark snapped him again.

“Ouch!”, said Greg and decided to walk more slowly and let the others go a bit ahead so he wouldn't be slapped again. But

Clark addressed him, fixing his eyes on his as if it had all been Greg's fault.

“And if we do find out who she is, do you think we can beat her? We couldn’t do it today, so what makes your fat ass think we could do it next time, huh? Will you be more prepared to fight then, Greg!?”

“But why me, boss?”, said Greg, almost crying now. “You make it look like it was my fault... Nick is the one who left us to join that stranger while I am still here with you”, he added putting the blame on Nick.

“He is right, Clark!”, Chris intervened. “Let’s not turn against each other and rather lay low for a couple of days and then try to get our hands on Nick and that guy. Show him what we do to traitors.”

“Ok, ok”, Clark finally admitted that Chris's plan was good. “Oh, and one more thing...send word among the kids in the orphanage to keep their eyes and their ears open for any information about the leather dressed girl. Whoever gives me information to get her will be suitably rewarded. Maybe even offer him or her a place in our gang, especially now that we have lost Nick. This is also valid for you, too. If any of you find out anything, let me know. I want to get my hands on her, too.”

With these being said, Clark, Greg, Chris and Dave were returning empty-handed to the orphanage.

Chapter 6

Rose was waiting for Angela to return. It was already dark and she wasn't back yet. As the hours went by, Rose started to wonder if Angela wasn't in any trouble. It wasn't like she couldn't have. She had trouble written all over her. It was like she enjoyed and attracted trouble. But she was a good girl. And she was more than her roommate, she was her friend, even if she wouldn't admit it. She was her only friend.

She was looking out the small window that overlooked the front gate as it was almost time to be locked for the night. And Angela was still not back. Rose was looking so hard through the semidarkness, trying to distinguish the shapes in the yard, that her eyes stung. But all she could distinguish was the shape of the old oaks in the yard and of the few benches which she had never used. She didn't like to sit on the benches in the orphanage yard because it only added up to her insecurities. She didn't like to be out in the open like that. She felt safer in their small dank room than out there. Some of the other kids in the orphanage could sometimes be real jerks, teasing her and upsetting her. It was not like they had something against her in particular, it was what they did to all the weak kids in there. The strong were bullying the weak and Miss Eveline always seemed oblivious to all these. Yeah, good Miss Eveline...

Suddenly, something caught Rose's eyes. There was someone in the yard. She started to look more carefully through the window, trying to see better and hoping it was Ange. There was a black silhouette running fast next to the wall. Who was that and why didn't she come straight through the yard? Because by the shape of the silhouette it was clear it was a girl and not a boy. It was as if she didn't want to be seen, as if she was hiding. Then the silhouette got under her window and looked up for a second. That's when Rose had a better view. It was a girl clad all in black leather and she was wearing a hood. But when she looked up she saw her features, she saw her kind and daring eyes, she saw ...Angela!!

"Ange?", Rose whispered after she had opened the window.

"Shush!", came a short pleading reply and now Rose was sure as she also recognized Angela's voice. But what was she doing? Why was she sneaking like that and what was with the costume??

"Open the window more, Rose, and let me in."

"Through the window?? Why don't you use the front gates as...", but she was interrupted by Angela.

"Shush, please, just do as I say. We'll talk once I am I side, ok?", and with that they were both quiet.

To Rose's astonishment, Angela started climbing the walls to their room like a cat. Good thing they were living on the first floor and she didn't have to climb much. But still...

Rose was looking at Angela, wondering how she was able to do that. She was like a mountain climber but she had no safety hooks. She could have fallen any time. But somehow, Rose knew that Angela wasn't going to fall. She was too skilled by the way it looked and too fast. Before she had time to even think of anything else, Angela was standing next to her in their tiny room and closing the window behind her.

“Uh, what's with the costume, Ange? Did you go to a masquerade ball without me? Why would you do that? You know I never have any fun, you could have at least asked me...maybe I would have come, too.”, and Rose pretended to be upset as if Ange had just hurt her feelings.

“Oh, shut up. We both know that if that was the case, you wouldn't have come, anyway. You never leave this room except for breakfast, lunch and dinner when you go to the canteen. And you do that because you have to and because Miss Eveline won't serve your meals to your room, otherwise you would never leave this room”.

Rose lowered her eyes in acknowledgement. She knew that Angela was right again. She was a scardy cat. She was just trying to survive in the cruel world she was born, with no family or friends besides Angela. For a brief moment she thought of what they were going to do next year when they'd turn 18 and Miss Eveline would kick them out of the orphanage. That thought obsessed her. She even had nightmares almost every night

about it. And she would wake up screaming and sweating like a dog, although dogs don't sweat.

“No, you fool, I wasn't at any costume party. I was ...can I trust you!?”, Angela asked her dead serious, piercing her eyes with her gaze as if she was trying to read her soul.

“You must know by now that you can. Whatever it is, I am your friend. You know you can trust me, Ange. It's not like I have a lot of other friends I am going to talk to about any of whatever this is. You are my only friend. And even if I had other friends besides you, which I don't, I would still keep your secrets.”

Angela seemed more relaxed. She knew Rose was right and that she was no snitch. But she had to be sure. Her life depended on it, so she went on asking her while she was undressing and putting on her casual shabby clothes.

“Would you keep quiet even if Clark and his nincompoops would torture you!?”

“Uh, well, in that case I think I would even give them a drawing of you with this costume on and a key to our room to get you...”, she said smiling.

“What?” Angela almost yelled.

“Hold your horses, Ange, I was only messing with you. You know that I would keep quiet, no matter what. I may be shy and a coward when it comes to fights with bullies, but I will tell you something that I am not: I am not a traitor! No matter what

they would do to me. I'd rather die than let them hurt you. Think it this way, if you want to be certain: if they'd hurt you, who would protect me then, huh? I would be vulnerable. So no, whatever this is, your secret is safe with me”.

“Thank you, Rose”.

“So, what is it, Ange? Why are you dressed like that and why were you sneaking?”, Rose asked her with curiosity in her big bright eyes.

“How can I put this? Do you remember the snake shaped ring? This ring?” and Angela showed her the snake shaped ring with two rubies for eyes.

“Yeah...what does that have to do with anything? You are not making any sense.”

“It has everything to do with it. Well, truth is I was good with a bow and arrows before, too, and pretty skilled with my rusty sword and I could also handle a knife well but now... now I am great with all these weapons and God knows what else I could be good at and haven't tried yet. It's because of the ring. I am one hundred procent sure it is because of it. I will never take it off. I like it. But not just for me. I will help those who need my help, those like you, if I think about it. But I can't just go running around as myself and do this. I need this disguise. Now do you understand?”.

But Rose was looking at her agape. She heard what Angela was saying but she was looking at her as if she didn't

understand what she was saying. So Angela approached her and closed her mouth as she was standing with her mouth open in astonishment. Then she started laughing at her to lighten up the tension in the room. The tension was almost electrifying.

“Soooo... let me get this straight”, uttered Rose when she finally found her words again. “Do you mean you are like a superhero or something? If so, then first of all, I am your biggest fan, and second, I am the luckiest person around, to have a superhero living with me in this not so grand orphanage room... but never mind the room, this is great news, Ange! Let me see your costume” and Rose took the leather pants from the bed and started studying the material. Then she took the vest and the hood, touching their fabric as if they were made of golden thread.

“The costume is exquisite! But where did you find it? And how did you afford it? I've never seen anything like this before...”, Rose was saying mesmerized by the costume's beauty and simplicity.

“That’s a long story. But let's just say that I think it is one of a kind and as for affording it, I....I filched it. Don't judge me. I know we only steal food to survive, but this is for my survival, also. It will keep my identity safe. Just imagine what some people would do to have the ring. No one must know of it or who the one behind this costume is. Because I will help those in danger and in difficulty and I will upset those who put the first

ones in danger. But I want to be able to put my head on the pillow at night without worrying that someone might try to kill me to take the ring. But truth is I was lucky to find the costume. Let's just stop here and have some sleep, ok? I'm tired", Angela said yawning already and almost asleep in her bed.

"Ok, just one last question" Rose insisted, "did you save someone already!? Tell me all about it...". But Angela was snoring by the time she finished talking so she dropped the subject and as Angela was safe asleep in her bed, she also decided to get some rest.

On her way to sleep, Rose started imagining Angela fighting like a she-devil with a fire sword in her hand and an ice shield in her other hand, slicing monsters that were coming to life from the deepest corners of her mind. It wasn't long till two different snores were heard in the small orphanage room. A black raven was resting on the ledge of the window in the darkness that engulfed everything like a mantle and was looking at them as the two girls were snoring peacefully.

The night was dark and the perils lurking everywhere were even darker....

Chapter 7

“Wow, I have never been so close to the King's castle until now. Are you sure you are the Prince? You don't look like a Prince and you sure as hell aren't dressed like one...” Nick started lamenting as Daniel and him were approaching the castle gates and there were guards everywhere. He started wondering if Daniel wasn't just some lunatic who believed he was the Prince. Because he seemed pretty much convinced of what he was saying. At least for him it seemed to be true. But what if for the normal people it wasn't true? What if they'd get arrested, what if....

“Are you having second thoughts? You didn't doubt my words earlier at the pub when I offered you drinks and a hearty meal, did you?”, asked Daniel, winking at the guards while Nick stood behind him and by the look on his face, he was probably thinking of running away. So Daniel grasped his shoulder to stop him and nudged him forward. He couldn't refrain himself from a good laugh when he saw that Nick's legs were wobbling and that he looked as if he was going to throw up everything he had eaten at the pub.

He approached the guards who seemed a bit confused at first but then they really seemed to know him.

“Hey, Steve”, Daniel addressed the chief of the guards, “will you open the gates for your Prince? Or are you going to make me waste my time here with you? You know I would love to chit-chat, but I am kind of busy right now, showing my new bodyguard to his chamber and giving him a tour of the castle. After I change my clothes, of course, as he seems not to like my style....”

Now Nick was sweating, fear, no, terror in his eyes. He really thought that his newly made friend wasn't in his right minds. But it was too late to run now, his legs were so weak that he wouldn't be able to take more than a few steps in the state he was in. This was a bad idea. Maybe it would have been better if he had stuck with Clark and his gang. But it was too late for that, too.

“Oh, sorry, my Prince I didn't recognize you in your...ugh....fine clothes. The King said you were in your room, indisposed and that you weren't to be disturbed. Were you out by yourself? No guards...?”, babbled Steve who seemed now even more scared than Nick, if that was even possible.

“Yeah, I was indisposed but then I got better and decided to have a stroll on my own. Now there is no need for the King to find out, right, Steve?”

“No, of course not....but what about this guy?” Steve said looking at Nick with inquisitive eyes.

“He is Nick, my new bodyguard. You will train him every day. He is your responsibility from now on. I want you to turn him into a real warrior, ok?” and Daniel punched him in a friendly manner on his shoulder. “He starts training tomorrow”, went on Daniel as he was entering the castle gates, followed doggedly by Nick.

“This wasn't so bad, was it Nick? I can't believe you chickened out. You should have seen your face. Marvelous!”, said Daniel laughing from the bottom of his heart.

“I admit I got scared a bit...”said Nick, trying to recover from the fright.

“A bit? You almost pissed your pants!” and Daniel laughed even louder. “Come, let me show you to your room and present you to the king. You can't go around the castle before I introduce you to the king and the generals and the guards. I will tell them that I hired you at Steve's advice. So no worries.”

Nick had finally managed to control himself and get over the shock of it all. He couldn't believe he was actually in the castle, in the presence of the Prince. And furthermore, that he had a job, an important job, as his bodyguard. It was like a dream. He was wondering what he did to deserve all these. Then he told himself that he must have done something good in his life if God helped him like this. So he was going to take his chance and do his best to deserve it. He would be faithful to Daniel. He swore it to himself. He had served Clark out of necessity but he was going to serve Daniel out of friendship. By giving him this

job, Daniel had saved his life, had saved him from himself, from his old lifestyle, from all the things he had to do to survive while at the orphanage. He owed his everything, he owed him his new life. And he was going to be a good warrior to be able to protect him. He was happy beyond words.

Chapter 8

Clark was struggling to understand what went wrong. Who was the leather dressed girl who had kicked their butts? If he could get his hands on her... He had put a ransom on her but so far nobody seemed to know anything. It was as if she was a ghost. Maybe he was approaching this the wrong way. Perhaps what he needed was not a ransom on her head but a trap. He needed to make her come out and take her by surprise. So he made a plan with the rest of his gang.

“What are you saying, Clark? That you plan to rob the jewellery store down town and want us to brag around about it

before doing the job?” asked Greg who was not particularly smart.

“We are not really robbing it. We are just sending this message around hoping the leather girl will get wind of it and try to stop us. It's a trap, you nincompoop!”, yelled Clark wondering why he still kept Greg in his gang. But as Nick was gone, it was not the time to lose another member, even if he was sort of stupid and fat.

Greg lowered his eyes ashamed. He knew he was the weak link, but he was doing his best to please Clark. He'd be worse if Clark decided to kick him from the gang...

So Clark, Greg, Chris and Dave looked around the orphanage canteen to choose the best table for lunch, so more kids would hear their conversation. But they had to make it look like they were whispering and that from time to time they let some phrases escape their lips louder than they should have. It was all part of Clark's plan. All kids were already there for lunch, waiting for the scrappy meal. So they decided totake the table in the center to have more ears around them. Then, Clark saw Angela and Rose sitting at their table in the corner, waiting quietly for their meal. Then an idea struck Clark's mind, what if...could it be?

Clark suddenly rose from the table to his companions' puzzlement. “Follow me!”, he ordered in a low voice.

The table next to Angela and Rose was occupied by two young girls and two skinny boys. When they saw Clark and his boys coming for their table, they all rose quickly and took the table where Clark had just sat.

“We’ll take this table. I have a hunch...”, Clark whispered in Dave's ears. They all sat at the table in silence at first. Then he winked at them to begin the conversation.

“Yes....the jewellery store....should be an easy job.”, Clark was saying, peeking at Rose and Angela to see if they reacted in any way. But they seemed unperturbed in their conversation, not even looking at them.

“Lots of money out of it.....” Dave was also saying, eyeing Angela as now he understood why Clark was suspicious of Angela. He remembered the fight with her here at the canteen when she had beaten all of them. Maybe she was indeed the leather girl...

“We do it tomorrow night!” said Clark as a conclusion, being sure that he had given the girls enough information to trap Angela if she was indeed the one who he was looking for. Meanwhile, the scrappy food had been served and the girls were eating quietly, pretending not to notice Clark and his gang.

So Clark stood up from the table and left, followed closely by his boys.

“Did you hear them, Ange?” Rose was asking as soon as they left.

“Yeah...”

“And? Aren't you going to do something about it? Or are you just going to let them rob the store?”

“That’s none of my business. The owner of the store is a greedy bastard who deserves what's coming. Let the guards handle it. I will only help who deserves to be helped, like kids being bullied by them or poor people attacked in the streets. You know what I mean. But I won't help someone who has gotten rich like the jewellery store owner.”

“Oh....”, was all Rose said as she had to agree with her friend. Angela was right in a way. Not all people deserved her help, so let him handle it himself.

On the following day, Clark and his gang were waiting for her next to the store. But no matter what they did, they didn’t see anyone coming to try to stop them. It had been a fiasco. They finally gave up and went back to the orphanage, mumbling all the way. Still, Clark believed that there was something about Angela, that she could still be the one.

“I got it!!” Clark said suddenly as they were returning to the orphanage. “There is another way. We can ask Rose.”

“And you think she'll just tell us? Don't forget Angela is her friend”, mumbled Greg but as soon as he said it, he was slapped over his head by Clark.

“Of course she won't do it willingly, but we can convince her, right boys?”, he said laughing with an evil laugh that gave Greg goose bumps.

So the next morning after breakfast they were all waiting for Angela to leave Rose by herself. She always had breakfast and then she would only come back for lunch and Rose would be by herself till then. That was when they had to make their move. They waited till they saw Angela leave the orphanage and then they knocked on Rose's room.

“Who's there!?” came Rose's feeble voice from behind the door.

“It's Clark, open up, I want to have a chat with you.”

“I have nothing to tell you.” She said scared from behind the door. She knew the door wouldn't stop Clark from getting inside if that was what he wanted. And Angela had just left. She was all alone and frightened. She had no idea what Clark wanted from her but she knew it couldn't be anything good. If only she had the guts to descend down the window... but she wasn't Angela, she was just Rose...

“Open up or I'll break the door! You know I'll do it and then I won't be that nice to you!”, Clark commanded in an authoritative voice that sent shivers down her spine. She only wished Angela was here to protect her.

She opened the door. Clark, Dave, Chris and Greg were grinning widely at her. Clark pushed her aside while the others

entered the small room. She fell to the ground with a thud. All her bones in her small feeble body hurt from the fall. She was no match for them. She was no match for anyone as a matter of fact. She felt so powerless, so helpless, so lonely and scared.

“Wait, what are you doing”, Rose managed to ask from the dank wooden floor as she was trying to get up. But none of the boys were paying any attention to her, as if she was invisible. They started ransacking the small room, obviously looking for something. Each of the boys seemed to demolish the room in his search for something.

“What are you looking for?” Rose asked as she finally managed to get up from the floor.

“Proof!” yelled Clark from the bottom of his lungs.

“Proof of what?” she barely whispered, realizing what they were looking for. They were looking for Angela's leather costume, the proof that she was the one fighting them back, giving hope to the ones who needed help, just like she did now...

Clark turned his attention towards her as if he was seeing her for the first time. He grasped her by her neck with his powerful hands and lifted her in the air while the others were still turning the room upside down.

“Where is it!?” Clark said, his eyes all red with anger while he was almost choking her.

“Uh...” was all Rose could muster when he released his grip letting her fall on the floor again.

“Boss, I think I found it!” mumbled Dave with a bag in his hands. But hardly had he said that when a tall good looking man entered the room. He was armed to the teeth.

“Put that down!” he ordered them calmly as a man used to being obeyed.

“And who the heck are you?” asked Clark dumbfounded while checking out the stranger.

“That doesn’t concern you.” The new comer said when he saw Rose lying on the floor.

“Is this your boyfriend, Rose?” Clark asked mockingly while the other boys joined him and started laughing at poor Rose who was just as surprised as they were.

“Enough talking, put the bag down and get out while this offer is still available or you'll be sorry!”, the man said threateningly.

“Get him, boys!” ordered Clark who was sure of the outcome as the stranger was alone and they were four. Or better said he could count on three, including himself, as Greg wasn't a fighter.

Dave, Chris and Clark all attacked the stranger at the same time, sharp knives in their hands. But as the room was small, they could only get at him one at a time. Clark was first to get

to him. He swung his knife and then tried to slash the man's arm but he quickly drew his sword and in a single move unarmed Clark. His knife flew in the air and fell next to Rose who picked it up. Then the stranger kicked him and Clark fell on his butt next to Rose. He grabbed her hands and took his knife back from her. Meanwhile Dave attacked the stranger but he didn't have a better fate and he landed next to Clark, whining with pain. Chris fell on the bed and broke the poor thing in two. He screamed in pain while the stranger grabbed the bag from Clark and handed it to Rose who was speechless.

“I think this belongs to you, miss” and he bowed in front of her as if she was a fair princess or something. She was just looking at him, not knowing what to say or how to react.

“Scram!” he addressed Clark and his gang.

They crawled out, beaten and humiliated by a total stranger. In their own home, as the orphanage was their home. They ran as fast as they could once they were out of the room. Without having seen the content of the bag first, still not sure that Angela was the leather dressed girl. But things had just gotten worse. Now there was another enemy, this stranger who had just kicked their butts.

“Who are you and why did you help me?”, Rose asked, her cheeks red with emotion.

“Well, it looked like you needed help.” The man said helping her get up from the floor.

“ Thank you I guess. But who are you and why are you here?”

“I’m Igor. And I am afraid I am not much better than the guys that have just left.”

“Huh!?. What do you mean?” Rose asked even more puzzled now than before.

“I want something that your friend has. As soon as I have it, I will leave both of you alone, I promise.”

“What could Angela possibly have that you would want?” Rose asked thinking of the costume that he had just given her back, unknowingly.

“A ring. I must have it. I need it. Then I will leave you alone, I have no quarrel with you.”

“And what if she doesn’t want to give it to you?” asked Rose afraid to listen to the answer.

“Then I am afraid I will have to take it by force. Nothing will stand in my way!” he said and his eyes shone with desire and confidence.

“Then there might be a problem because as far as I know Angela, she won't just give it to you. She likes that ring. But by the way you are clad and all I think you can afford any other ring. There is a nice jewellery store downtown where you can choose whatever ring you like...”, but somehow Rose knew he was after that particular ring and he wasn't interested in any other, unfortunately.

“Don’t get smart with me. You know I need her ring. So we will just wait for her to return, ok?” he said smiling.

“As if I have a choice...” muttered Rose and she sat on the bed with the handsome stranger next to her. Igor...she had heard that name before. But she couldn’t remember where.

Chapter 9

Angela wanted to relax and a day in the hunting cabin would help her do that. She was wondering why Daniel, the Prince of the land, had been wandering off on his own and dressed like a commoner the other day when she saved him. Because she recognized him even if he didn’t recognize her. Maybe he too wanted to enjoy a day away from his duties from time to time. And what way to do that than to walk around disguised? But without anyone to protect him, that was kind of stupid and reckless. Perhaps they weren't so different after all..

The forest was so quiet and still. Just a few birds were chirping as if to remind her that the forest was alive. Then she heard a familiar barking. Where had she heard that barking before? But hardly had she finished her thought when a big golden retriever was standing by her side, wagging its tail.

“Princess! What are you doing here?” Angela asked as if expecting an answer from the dog.

“I might ask you the same thing”, came the answer. But not from the dog, of course, but from its master, Daniel.

“Uh...hi Daniel”, Angela said blushing. So much for her quiet day out in the woods. But this wasn't bad, either, she had to admit.

But this time Daniel wasn't alone. He was followed by his trusty squires George and Adrian and by Nick from the orphanage. He immediately recognized her as well. They were all dressed up for hunting.

“How's your leg, Angela?”, Daniel asked concerned while he was already examining it with his gaze.

“It's healed thanks to you.”

“Hello Angela”, exclaimed Nick wondering how come the Prince of Green Valley knew a common girl from the orphanage.

“Hello miss” exclaimed both George and Adrian at the same time. They remembered their previous encounter when she

had hurt her leg in one of their traps and when the Prince had sent them with chocolates for her and her friend at the orphanage.

“George, Adrian, why don't you take Nick and show him how you hunt deer. Because you haven't caught any game yet and this is his first time hunting.”

“But then you'll be on your own, you need at least one of us to protect you....”, whined George who didn't like to know that the Prince was alone, even if with a girl. Now he had Nick, his bodyguard, but he still worried for the Prince. He had known him since he was a baby and he knew Daniel would make a great king some day.

“What, don't you think I can handle a girl? Do you think she will attack me?” asked Daniel laughing.

“I promise I'll be good”, Angela also entered his little game, laughing too.

“All right then, let's hunt some deer!” said George and winked at Adrian and Nick. At least Princess was there to protect the Prince and the girl in case they needed, he thought, and they wouldn't go far, either.

“So...” Angela began feeling a little awkward to be alone with the Prince.

“Come, let me help you up on my stallion. I'll show you a cold brook nearby, it has the most tasty water in the kingdom. And

the view is wonderful, too”, he said not taking “no” for an answer.

But she wasn't going to refuse his invitation. She was thirsty so this only made his offer even more tempting. He helped her up next to him on his stallion. She clasped her arms around his waist. He was so muscular beneath his clothes, she could feel it. The day had just got a lot better and more interesting than what she had planned.

The wind was playing in her hair as they rode on Daniel's stallion. The leaves were also playing in the wind, almost flying. She was wondering where the brook was as she thought she knew this forest but she had never found this brook Daniel was talking about. After a while, she decided to just enjoy the ride. She wasn't afraid of him, she knew he wouldn't hurt her. And she was sure he would indeed be a great king someday. He was a good-hearted person, kind and compassionate.

“Here we are”, she heard his voice suddenly, waking her from her daydreaming. “Let me help you down”, he added as he jumped off his horse. Then he helped her down too. He tied the horse to a tree and pushed away some bushes, helping her get past them. Then her breath was taken away by the beauty of what lay in front of them. A narrow brook with crystal clear water was flowing slowly and on its banks lay the most beautiful flowers she had ever seen in her life. It was breath taking! It was like a dream, it seemed so unreal, so wonderful! The scent was so strong from the multitude of flowers that she

could hardly breathe. So many flowers and so many colors! And the brook was so enticing, so luring, that it made her even thirstier. She hurried towards it to fill her hands and drink. She first washed her face in the cold brook and then she drank. It was so invigorating. He was watching her, mesmerized by her beauty and simplicity. Then he took out a flask and filled it with water.

She lay in the grass among the flowers. She looked up at the sky as some white clouds seemed to be chasing one another, carried away by the wind and not able to catch up with each other. It was the best day ever. And the Prince of the land was next to her, a poor orphanage girl, when he could have been anywhere else, with anybody else. But instead, he was there, spending this afternoon with her. She just couldn't believe it.

“Hey”, Angela heard Daniel say, “what are you thinking about?”. And he also lay down beside her in the grass, among the flowers. Princess sat between them.

She slowly raised her head from the grass and as she was about to open her mouth to answer, he closed it with a kiss. She closed her eyes and kissed him back.

When she realized that she had just kissed the Prince she tried to guess his thoughts. Had this been a mistake? Was he sorry for having kissed her? She wasn't going to apologize for having kissed him. So what if he was the Prince? And if she thought about it, he had kissed her first, she just kissed him back. While

she was struggling with her own feelings, Daniel addressed her in the sweetest voice possible, looking straight into her eyes.

He started talking and she had to pinch herself to make sure she wasn't dreaming.

“You are the only reason I was out hunting today. I was hoping to meet you at the cabin. If I hadn't met you today either, I would have come at the orphanage tomorrow to see you. But I was afraid that you would refuse me. So I am glad I met you at the cabin”, said Daniel and he leaned and kissed her again. His full lips were so soft on hers.

“You were afraid I would refuse you? Who are you kidding? You are the Prince while I...you know, no other girl would have refused the Prince. Hmm, but I might have refused you if I didn't like you, even if you are the Prince.”

“I know. That's why I was afraid. You are stubborn and proud and courageous, even reckless sometimes. You are like no other girl I met.”

“Thank you, I guess. And you are like no other Prince I ever met”, she said teasing him.

“Why, have you met many Princes before?”

“No, silly, you are the only Prince I met. What did you think? That Princes from all over the world were making a queue at my doorstep at the orphanage?” said Angela laughing.

He stood up and grabbed her hands and pulled her up from the grass. When she was up with her face next to his, he pressed one gentle kiss on her cheek this time and then they untied the stallion from the tree.

“We had better head back to the cabin or George will come looking for us. He worries most for me, nagging me more than Adrian and Nick together. He is worse than my mom.”

When they got back, the three were already waiting for them. And George was fidgeting on his horse, clearly worried about him. The moment he saw Daniel, his face muscles relaxed and he gave a faint smile.

“What, George? Told you we were safe, you worry too much”, and with that, Daniel patted him on his shoulder.

“Let’s accompany Angela to the orphanage!” Daniel ordered them.

“Maybe your Highness shouldn't be seen in the company of a common girl from the orphanage”, said Adrian, “we could get her home, if you wish...”, he went on but he was cut short by Daniel who hated that Angela had to hear that.

“Are you thinking of my reputation, Adrian? Let me worry about that, ok? I am the Prince and I get to choose my company. I don’t care what people think as long as I do my duties for this kingdom. Who I go out with is nobody’s business but mine.”

“Maybe he is right, Daniel. Nick can take me home if you want....” She said although there was nothing she wished more than for Daniel to take her home.

“Nonsense! We'll all accompany you. If I don't care what people think or say, why would you?”

She tightened her grasp around his waist happy beyond words. This is how they got in front of the orphanage gates where Daniel asked the others to go ahead until he bade her goodbye. As she was promising to see him tomorrow again, she thought she saw the curtains from her windows move. She wondered if Rose had seen her with him on his magnificent stallion.

Chapter 10

Igor withdrew from behind the curtains as soon as he saw Angela with the Prince, with his nephew, Daniel. Things had just complicated. He wasn't expecting this so he decided to leave

the ring for some other time. He panicked when he saw Daniel. He ran out of the room as fast as he had come but not before placing a kiss on Rose's forehead, making her dizzy, her heart racing in her chest.

He was out of the orphanage just as Angela was entering. She went straight to her room, all blushed and happy. When she entered, she found Rose with her cheeks red too.

“Angela, you won't believe what happened!” Rose said in an agitated tone. But there was also something else in her voice, emotion and fear and something more.

“You won't believe what I am about to tell you, Rose!”, Angela said at the same moment with Rose.

They were looking curious at one another, each wondering what the other was going to say.

“You first, Rose. What could have happened here, at the orphanage!? You seem excited about it.”

“A lot since you left, I don't even know what to start with”, said Rose.

“Maybe with the beginning?” Angela invited her.

“Yeah, guess that makes sense. Ok, first Clark and his gang were here. They know or at least they highly suspect you are the one with the leather costume and that it was you who they fought in the forest. They were looking for the leather costume.”

“Hmm, pretty bad, so much for my disguise them. But you said there was more. Anything else happened while I was away?”

“Yeah, something even worse, I reckon. Some weirdo came to take your ring. He knows about you ring, Angela! But then he looked out the window and suddenly fled. I don't know what made him change his mind because he seemed pretty determined to take your ring. It seemed important to him”, Rose told her deciding to forget about the part where he had kissed her before leaving.

“Oh....this sounds bad. Have you seen him before, Rose?”

“No, I don't think he is from around here. But he looked dangerous, he was armed to the teeth. Maybe you should return the ring from where you got it?”

“Not in a million years, Rose! Anything but that! It's the best thing that's ever happened to me. I mean I was a good fighter and archer before, too, but with the ring I feel ...invincible! And I am not kidding. It must be magical. Felt it since the first time I wore it on my finger. I don't want to take it off, ever! And besides, I am sure it doesn't belong to him, either! He just wants it for its magic!”

“How do you know it's not his ring, Angela?”

“That's easy, did you see any guards with him? If it was his ring, he would have gotten me arrested by now. So he wants to steal it from me. Well, let him try. I am not afraid of him.”

“That makes sense....just be careful, ok? He will surely make a move soon to take it. I don't want you to get hurt, that's all.”

“I won't. I promise”, said Angela smiling to reassure her that everything would be fine.

“Ohm, what happened with the bed? Why is it broken?” asked Angela when she saw the bed broken in half.

“Clark and his gang fought the stranger and broke the bed...”

“Okay, help me fix it or we'll sleep on the floor”.

Half an hour later the bed was usable. Not quite fixed but they had put a stool under it and a plank to be able to sleep in the bed. It was good enough.

That night Angela went to sleep thinking of Daniel, of the time they had spent together, wondering what her life would be like if she lived at his castle with plenty of food and even butlers to get it for her instead of living in this dump. Then she wondered who the stranger was, the one who wanted her ring. But as she was falling asleep, her last thought was of Daniel kissing her. She fell asleep with a large smile on her face next to Rose who also fell asleep with a smile, thinking of the handsome stranger who had kissed her forehead. That was her first kiss, even if not on her lips...

Chapter 11

Daniel ordered his guards from the palace to follow him. He sent for Steve, the chief of the guards. Meanwhile Nick was by his side, ready to protect and serve him.

Steve entered the hall where Daniel had summoned him, accompanied by George and Adrian. None knew what this was all about, wondering what Daniel had in mind. They didn't have to wait long. As soon as they bowed before him, Daniel addressed them in a grave voice.

“Steve, I want you to take 10 of your best men and follow me, Nick, George and Adrian to the orphanage. We have an arrest to make. There are four trouble makers there who need to be taught some manners. You will put them behind bars for a month. Then depending on their behavior, I will decide what to do with them. But they are to stay in prison for at least a month, got it?”

“Of course, your Highness. The men will be ready in 10”, said Steve, bowing again as he was already exiting the hall to gather his best ten men.

“We will meet in front of the castle gates then”, Daniel said examining Nick's face. By what Nick had told him, these boys

had to be locked away. They were a peril for everyone else. But they were still young. Maybe a month in prison would make them reconsider their lives. He was willing to offer them a second chance. If after a month spent in the dungeons they were willing to change, to give up their old lifestyle, he was willing to help them, even offer them jobs in his army, as soldiers. But first they had to pay for their deeds and a month in his cells would be their punishment.

One hour later Miss Eveline saw the Prince and his guards in front of the orphanage gates. She knew something was wrong so she almost had a heart-attack from the panic. But then she decided she had better go out and see what it was all about. She put on her most humble look hoping that whatever this was all about, the Prince would take pity on her. She thought he had come to arrest her for feeding the kids only scraps and taking most of the money for herself. She swore to herself that if she got out of this, she would never steal the money destined for the kids' food. She would be better, she would feed them better food, she would even buy them chocolate once a month, she would... But her thoughts were interrupted when she got in front of the Prince and his men.

She bowed before him, trembling, shaking, almost fainting with fear. She didn't dare address him, she waited for him to give the sentence that would change her life, turning her into a prisoner into one of the cold dungeon cells. Cold sweat was running down her face, along with guilt for all the years she had

only fed the children from the orphanage scrappy meals while she took the rest of the money for herself. She was prepared to promise anything to avoid prison. She fell on her knees in front of Daniel even before he had a chance to speak. Then as she looked up at him, she saw Nick, one of the boys from the orphanage, standing right by Daniel's side, nicely clad and armed. Now she was sure, they had come to arrest her. Nick must have told the Prince, he must have complained about the food. But she had no idea how he got to stand next to the Prince, as it was obvious as daylight that Nick was working for him now.

“I have come to make an arrest, in the name of the King!” Daniel said in a clear and powerful voice.

The moment he said those words, Miss Eveline could bear it no longer. She was ready to admit it all, to beg, to promise, to do anything to avoid prison. She knew she wouldn't make it in prison, she would die there. She tried to utter something, but the words froze on her lips and she just mumbled something unintelligible. Not even she could understand what she had just uttered. She decided to make another try, to speak up. In vain. Words just wouldn't come out of her mouth. It was as if her lips had been glued to one another. Finally, she fell to the ground, unable to speak.

“What's wrong with her? Pick her up!” said Daniel while looking at Miss Eveline and wondering if she was sick.

Nick unmounted his horse and helped Miss Eveline up. She was conscious, but he could feel her body shivering although it was pretty hot outside.

“I’m sorry....”, Miss Eveline finally managed to babble in a low voice, hardly audible at all.

“You should be for not turning in trouble makers like Clark and his friends! They are under arrest, we are going in. Follow us, Miss, and explain to the other kids what's going on. Also tell them to behave if they don't want to end up like Clark, ok?” said Daniel, while he was unmounting his horse, followed by Steve and the other guards.

Miss Eveline couldn’t believe her ears. They hadn't come to arrest her, but Clark and his gang! She couldn’t believe it, this was just great, she was going to get rid of them without having to fear their revenge. A minute ago she almost had a heart-attack and now she was so happy. Life at the orphanage would be a lot quieter without those boys, her life would be a lot better without them, they were always bringing trouble wherever they went. She was so glad to get rid of them. But the fright, the possibility of being arrested, that was something she didn’t want to go through ever again. So as she was following the Prince, she made a promise to herself that she would serve the kids better meals and that she would indeed be a better person.

Clark, Chris, Dave and Greg were having lunch at one of the tables. All the kids were in the canteen, having lunch. Angela

and Rose were in their usual spot, in the corner of the canteen, enjoying their lunch when Daniel entered, accompanied by his men. They were all so shiny, so distinguished, in comparison to everything else that was surrounding them.

Angela almost choked on her food when she saw Daniel there, in the canteen, at the orphanage. But it was obvious he wasn't there for her, he was surrounded by too many men. She put down her fork and looked, wondering what was going on, wondering if he saw her there...

Then she saw Daniel's men arresting Clark and the other three. Which was a good thing. Who was she kidding? It was a great thing, but it wasn't enough. What about her? Was he going to ignore her now that he saw her with the other orphans? Yesterday she seemed good enough for him....

The guards were already departing with their catch. But Daniel, Nick, George and Adrian stood behind. Miss Eveline started trembling again, thinking she wasn't out of the woods just yet, thinking that maybe now it was her turn to be arrested. All the children and a few nurses were watching the scene, wondering what was going to happen next, but a sense of relief was on everybody's face as Clark and his gang had just been placed under arrest.

As Miss Eveline was about to plead for mercy, Daniel saw Angela in her corner, next to another skinny girl whom he realized was her roommate, Rose, the one that Angela had spoken of.

Daniel went right past Miss Eveline who swooned as he passed by her, hitting her head on the way down against one of the tables. The nurses rushed to her help. He saw that she was attended to, so he went straight to Angela and Rose's table, to everyone else's amazement.

All the kids in the orphanage had dropped their forks and spoons, witnessing this once in a lifetime scene. The Prince in their orphanage, making an arrest and heading towards a girl from the orphanage, who was just as poor as themselves, just an orphan, like all the other kids there...

“Hello, Angela”, the Prince said, smiling his sweetest smile at her. “This must be Rose, nice to meet you”, he went on as he shook Rose's hand. Then, he addressed Angela again, just as Miss Eveline was coming to her senses.

“Would you like to meet my parents, Angela?”

Miss Eveline almost fainted again when she heard that and she had to take a seat at the table to avoid it. No one in the canteen could believe what they were seeing and hearing. Then, all the kids started applauding and cheering. Angela blushed, not sure that this wasn't just a beautiful dream. Then he kissed her in front of everyone else, her, a poor orphan....Nope, this wasn't a dream, it was as real as she was, this was really happening, the Prince of Green Valley had just kissed her in front of witnesses. So he really liked her...

“I would love to meet your parents, as I haven’t met mine” she said smiling and crying at the same time.

Daniel took her hand and they mounted his horse, followed closely by Nick, George and Adrian.

One year later, she was the Queen of Green Valley, next to Daniel, her husband, as the old king had died, leaving the throne to Daniel. Daniel was King now, ruling the kingdom with her.

Rose became her maid, as she already was her friend. She never had to starve again.

Miss Eveline kept the promise she made to herself and she never again starved the children.

As for Igor, that's another story. He was out there, somewhere, free, waiting for an opportunity to take her ring. But now, Angela wasn't alone anymore, she had Daniel and his army at her disposal. And she told him all her secrets, about the ring, about her costume and about the mysterious stranger. Daniel realized it could only be his uncle, Igor, but it didn’t matter. He wasn't going to let Angela out of his sight, he was going to protect her for as long as he lived. But as he knew her, she might be the one protecting him and Igor had better think again before attacking her.

Green Valley was a better place. Angela still used her leather costume to protect her identity and roamed the streets looking for anyone who needed her help. The fact that she was now

Daniel's wife didn't change that, she still wanted to use her skills to help those in need. With time, Daniel got used to this and didn't try to stop her anymore. She had proved him more than once that she could take care of herself and at the same time be useful not just with good decisions regarding the kingdom, but also being out there, among the people, helping the helpless...