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CHAPTER ONE
Princess Evelyn

A TINY BEAD OF BLOOD BLOOMED WHERE the knifepoint pressed against the tip of her finger. She held it over the rim of a glass vial and watched as the droplet fell, turning the liquid in the bottom from pink to a dark, inky blue.

Strange.

She'd always expected a love potion to be red, not blue.

CHAPTER TWO
♥ Samantha ♥

THE DIRT CAKED ONTO THE CURVED glass surface of the jar is so thick, not even a hint of a label is visible. I give it a quick scrub with the edge of my sleeve before remembering Mum's stern warning not to keep ruining my shop clothes. Instead, I grab the rag I had shoved into my jeans pocket that morning. Another vigorous rub reveals my grandfather's spindly handwriting, neat and precise except for where the ink has bled into cracks like fingers reaching out in the linen parchment.

Berd du Merlyn

'No way.' The words slip out as a sudden swell of excitement wiggles its way up my spine. I have to put the jar back down onto the shelf and take a few deep breaths to calm myself before I can continue.

'What have you found?' My best friend Anita looks over at me from her perch a few shelves over.

The two of us are balancing on ladder rungs three storeys and thirty-six shelves high. We have a deal. Anita helps me with my huge, mind-numbing task of doing an inventory on my family store's thousands of ingredients and mixes, potions, plants and wotsits. In return, I agree to go with her to watch the Princess's eighteenth birthday concert on one of the big screens by the castle, even though hearing about her life makes me cringe. I've secretly packed a book in my bag, just in case.

I grin widely and Anita drags her ladder towards me. The tracks are old and clogged with dust, and even with the drops of oil I use to lubricate the wheels they still won't run smoothly.

I turn the jar in her direction. She lets out a low whistle. 'Do you think it's real?'

'Who knows,' I say. My thumping heart betrays me. Every time I search these shelves, I feel like I'm digging deeper and deeper into a lost treasure trove, and one day I'm going to find something great. This could be it. 'There's a plant I've read about in *Nature & Potion* that's known as Wizard's Beard. This could just be an old name for it.' Uses for Wizard's Beard spring into my mind before I can stop them: *A key ingredient in potions dealing with shock – brew for five minutes in hot (but not boiling) water to help ease the sharing of bad news*. It's a relatively common ingredient, and wouldn't be that exciting a find.

If, however, this turns out to be real Merlin's Beard – from the man himself . . . well, I suddenly know how we're going

to pay for the leak in the roof I found yesterday (the hard way, with a wet head) which is now temporarily taped over with duct tape.

I web my fingers over the top of the lid and twist with all my might. There's a brief tug of resistance and then the lid jumps off the jar, along with a great puff of dust which explodes right in my face.

A hacking cough and frantic arm-waving disperse the dust, but my heart sinks.

Empty.

Anita pats me on the arm. 'Something else to add to Kirsty's list?'

'Looks like.' I sigh, then take a pen out from behind my ear and jot down 'Wizard's Beard' on my list of missing things to ask Kirsty, our Finder, to collect for us. And it looks like I'm going to have to find another way to fix that leak.

Sometimes, if I'm feeling romantic, I think about all the generations of Kemis that have stood on these rungs, how many great alchemists have studied these shelves.

But then reality hits: the store is falling apart, our supplies are diminishing and we have no business coming in to change it.

It wasn't always this way. Kemi's Potion Shop was once one of the most prominent apothecaries in Kingstown. But no one needs apothecaries any more. Not when they have the megapharmacies downtown selling synthetic versions of traditional potions for half the price. Now, we're leftovers from a previous time. Relics.

Anita's dad also owns a potion store, specialising in mixing techniques from Bharat. When his apprentice left to retrain as an engineer, Mr Patel decided not to hire another – even though Anita offered to give up her place at university to take over. When he retires in a couple of years, he's going to close his shop for good. Another apothecary bites the dust, while Kemi's Potion Shop clings on for dear life.

Mr Patel is lucky. At least he's chosen to close his store, so he has some measure of control. A familiar pit opens in my stomach as I wonder what will happen to me when our time runs out.

Anita slides back along the shelves to where she'd last been working. I try to drum up some enthusiasm for the task again, but it's disappeared into the ether like the dust motes from the empty jar.

'Oh my god, Sam, look at this!'

'What?' I scramble my way across to her. What could she have found? Sphinx breath? Or maybe even a dragon's tooth?

She thrusts her phone in my face. Onscreen is Princess Evelyn posing inside one of the grand Palace ballrooms. 'The Princess is wearing the same Prime Store dress to her eighteenth that I wanted to buy for the summer ball! Great, now it's going to be sold out everywhere,' she pouts.

'I can't believe you're actually going to the summer ball.'

'Yeah well, not all of us shun boys for potions, like *some* people I know.'

'Very funny. You don't have a date, though, do you?'

'I'm lining up my suitors like I'm Princess Evelyn herself, just waiting for my perfect match.' Anita flicks her long, glossy black hair, then sticks out her tongue.

I throw my cloth at her and she giggles.

'So who's your bet for her date tonight?' Anita asks.

'What do you mean?'

Anita rolls her eyes at me. 'Come on, if you're going to force me to help with your inventory you have to make it a bit fun for me. I'll go first, I think it'll be Damian.'

'No way. The Royals would never let the Princess marry a pop star. It'll be Prince Stefan from Gergon. It'd be good for diplomacy.'

'Well *that's* boring. Ooh, I know. Zain Aster.'

'You think?'

'Why not? Arjun says all anyone at uni can talk about is how good friends he is with the Princess.' Arjun is Anita's brother, two years older than we are. He and Zain had been in the same year at our school. 'Have you seen Zain around lately?' Anita wiggles her eyebrows suggestively.

'That's all in your head, silly. Zain Aster has no idea who I am.'

'If you say so.'



CHAPTER THREE
Princess Evelyn

HER HEART POUNDED AS RENEL, THE most senior advisor in the Royal household, announced Zain's arrival. Around her neck was a silver heart-shaped locket, which she clutched tightly between her fingers. Yet the moment she saw him, she felt all her nerves and tension ease away. She even giggled as Zain strolled straight in as if he owned the place, bypassing her spluttering advisor.

'Evie!' He walked right up to her and wrapped her in his arms. He wore a musky, trendy cologne, with chemical undertones from the lab.

'You've dressed up for the occasion,' she whispered, placing her fingers lightly on the textured shoulder of his dinner jacket.

He laughed. 'Well, it's only the biggest party of the year and I have to look good for the ladies.' He started dancing on the spot and mimicked popping his collar.

'You scrub up okay, I suppose,' she said in what she hoped

was a normal tone, even though his words had been like miniature daggers to her heart.

'Renel, a moment?' she asked, and waited for the beak-nosed advisor to leave the room.

'You look insane!' Zain said, stepping back and holding her arm out to admire her.

She did look good. Her long blonde hair was tied back from her face, a ribbon straining to contain the loose tumble of curls, and her stylist had embedded feather-light wisps of gold amongst the strands. Her floor-length dress, made of periwinkle blue sparkles, floated around her lithe frame. So many designers had begged for the commission to style her for her eighteenth birthday party. She'd chosen a local designer, stocked on the high street – a decision called 'bold' and 'courageous' by the media. She'd just liked the dress.

The locket was the only accessory that didn't match. But it had its own purpose. And now it was time.

'Drink?' she asked, cursing inwardly as her voice squeaked. She crossed to a small table by the window.

'Of course!' Zain replied.

She smiled, then turned her back on him to pour wine from a delicate crystal carafe into two of the finest goblets in Nova, with beautiful pewter bases polished to a mirror shine. With one swift movement, she opened the locket. Deep indigo powder fell into the bottom of his glass, dissolving into the dark red liquid.

She examined the glasses closely and breathed a sigh of relief – they looked identical. She waited for a beat, but he

didn't question or confront her. All was going according to plan.

'To falling in love?' she proposed.

He took the glass from her outstretched hand and clinked it against hers, smiling.

'To you, Princess.'

'To us.' It came out as barely a whisper as she lifted the goblet to her lips and watched him do the same. Then she closed her eyes, threw back her head and downed the wine in a single gulp. It slid down her throat as gently as honey. A warmth rushed through her body, coursing through her veins until it felt like her fingertips and toes were on fire and her heart would explode with happiness.

Her eyelashes fluttered open.

And staring into the cool blue eyes reflected in the silver base at the bottom of her goblet, she fell madly, deeply and irrevocably in love.