

CHAPTER ONE

A RUN IN THE FOREST

Mireille could barely see through the tears pooling in her eyes as they lowered her beloved grandfather's casket into the cold ground. His unexpected death had been a shock to everyone who knew Daniel Arsenault.

Skid marks showed that his SUV had swerved to avoid an animal and rolled into a ditch. The cold autumn night hadn't been enough to slow the bleeding before he was found the following day. The police told her that he'd probably been unconscious the whole time. She wasn't convinced, but she hoped they were right.

She sat at the graveside until the bitter end. Friends and former colleagues came to offer their condolences. Finally, it was just her and her brother Robert. He offered her his arm for support to walk to the limousine.

"It's okay. You won't have to worry about anything. I'll make sure you're taken care of," Robert said. "You'll never have to worry about finances."

"Robert, that doesn't matter to me. You know that." Mireille looked out the window. "I'm going to miss him."

"Me too," Robert replied.

Mireille didn't say anything. She sat in silence all the way home. The next day was going to be hard enough. Tonight, she just wanted to stop. She still needed to come to terms with the fact that she'd never see her grandfather again.

At 10 am the next day, the two siblings were sitting in the attorney's office, listening to him read the will's provisions.

"Mlle. Arsenault, you are your grandfather's primary heir. Other than a few bequests to long-time staff, you are getting the bulk of the estate. Mr. Arsenault, your grandfather made a provision to pay all your debts and give you a small annuity of fifty thousand dollars a year. If you want more, and I am quoting your grandfather, you need to get off your ass and earn your own living."

"No, that's not possible," Robert yelled. "She's not blood."

"Robert..."

"No, it's not fair. I'll fight this will. You'll see." He stood and stomped out.

Mireille watched, confused by the turn of events. She hadn't known that her grandfather was leaving essentially everything to her and cutting Robert out. She also hadn't realized that Robert didn't consider her blood. Her mother had married his father when she was only eight years old. They'd been killed on their honeymoon, and Daniel Arsenault raised them both as siblings. Robert was a direct blood descendant, and she wasn't.

"I want to give him half of everything," Mireille said. Robert was her brother, and he was just upset.

"I'm very sorry, Mlle Arsenault, but you can't. The money is for you, not Robert. Your grandfather made it very clear in his will. If Robert challenges the will, he will lose what he already has."

"That's not right. Robert deserves to get half. He's my brother..."

"That's not what he thinks," the attorney said.

"I don't understand any of this."

"Your grandfather was very proud of you, and he wanted you to continue your work. Robert doesn't work. He plays. He spends. He gambles. He's essentially a parasite."

"That's not true. Robert ..."

"Mlle Arsenault, I know you're upset. Why don't you go up to the lake house and spend some time relaxing. You need to get away."

"I suppose you're right. I love the lake house, and Granddad did too."

Mireille stood and thanked the attorney and went home to pack. A few days away wouldn't hurt.

The house was tucked away in a forest, near a lake. She had spent summers and weekends here with her grandfather, and she felt closer to him there. The memories were good ones.

When Mireille arrived, she made herself coffee before deciding to go along the trails she and her grandfather had marked.

She put on her red leather jacket. Granddad had given it to her, telling her she needed some color in her life.

She paused in front of the hall mirror. She was surprised by the image in the glass. She knew that she was unremarkable, dull really. She was a short, slightly overweight brunette. At least, that's what everyone told her. She looked worse than usual. Her mid-length brown hair was dull, and her brown eyes were washed out in a sea of red. She wore her everyday black clothing, and the only color was the coat. She stuck out her tongue at her image and walked out the door.

She'd never really worried about her appearance, and she wasn't going to start now.

She started down the familiar path and breathed deeply of the crisp autumn air. This was her favorite time of year when the forest put on a colorful display before settling in for the long winter sleep.

Mireille walked and paused every once in a while, lost in memories made with her grandfather.

"Sister dear."

Mireille looked around for the source of the voice.

"Mireille."

"Is that you, Robert?"

"Mireille."

"Robert, where are you? Come out."

"Did you think that I went to all the trouble of setting up the accident for the old man just to let you get all the money?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The accident, Mireille. Put it together. You're supposed to be the smart one. I knew when Grandfather was going to be driving the road to the cottage. I simply set up a plastic deer. I knew he would swerve. I was ready to kill him, but he was unconscious when I reached him. I didn't have to do anything."

"Oh my God, Robert. Tell me this is a terrible joke," Mireille pleaded. She was still looking around, trying to find the source of the voice.

"Do you really think I would joke about something like that?"

"Robert..."

"Run, Mireille."

"What?"

"Run."

Mireille took off. She was running for her life. Actually, it was more of an awkward jog. Mireille Arsenault wasn't the kind of woman who engaged in vigorous physical activity of any kind. She was a self-avowed couch potato. She sat at her desk all day and went home to her small apartment and sat in front of her television or her home computer all evening.

She had never imagined that her beloved brother would want to kill her to inherit all of her grandfather's wealth. He was hunting her like a deer, and since it was hunting

season, he could reasonably get away with her murder. Robert would be distraught at such an 'accident,' and she would be dead.

Mireille had to choose a direction. She knew that heading back to the house would be a death sentence. Actually, getting caught would be a death sentence. She headed towards the nearest town.

Running through the forest had never been on her agenda. She paused to listen for pursuit. It was difficult to hear anything other than her deep panting breaths unless it was her heart pounding in her chest.

She bent over to try and relieve the stitch in her side.

"I'm not... cut out... for this," she panted.

The only redeeming element was that her jacket was red. It actually provided a measure of camouflage in the autumn foliage, especially when she tripped and was sprawled amidst the fallen scarlet leaves.

Robert had given her a ten-minute head start, probably so that his cronies could show up.

"Mireille," a sing-song voice called out.

She cringed. She didn't call out. She watched enough crime dramas to know that answering was a bad idea, regardless of the taunt or cajoling. It would only serve to pinpoint her location.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are."

She moved along the trail, stepping carefully around the masses of dead leaves. The rustling would give her away as much as talking.

"Mireille, if you stop, I'll promise I'll make it fast and painless." This time the voice was hard. "Do you know how many times I wanted to slit your throat to get you to shut up?" he asked. His voice rose in pitch, and the sing-song quality returned. "Grandpapa wouldn't like that. Grandpapa wants you to stop hanging out with those men."

"Grandpapa. Grandpapa. I'm glad the old man is dead. Come on. I've had enough of this. Show yourself," her brother ordered.

Mireille was crouched behind a large sumac bush. The red leaves effectively hid her presence. She tried to breathe quietly while still catching her breath.

At the start, she panicked and ran blindly. Her only direction was... away. She had tripped and ripped more than her pants. Her hands and knees were bleeding, and the wounds were filled with debris. She knew that she'd feel it later, but right now, the adrenaline masked the pain.

She made herself as small as possible when she spotted Robert. He was wearing his hunting jacket: not the safety orange one, the one with the forest camouflage pattern. Mireille snorted mentally. The green woodland design stood out starkly against the autumn foliage. That's when she realized she had a chance. Brains over greed.

Mireille exhaled softly when he moved away towards the road that brought people to the lake house. In her panic, she had unknowingly run laterally, and that had saved her life.

She breathed a sigh in relief when the hard echo of footsteps grew fainter. Robert must have taken a different path. She stopped and listened. She hadn't imagined it: he was moving away from her.

Mireille kept going. If she continued on this path, she would get to town in ... five hours. Right, better slow than never.

It was a solid thirty minutes before she heard the dog baying. Her brother wasn't taking any chances. She tried to remember all that she'd ever read about losing a hunting dog before the conclusion hit: you didn't. Dogs don't stop unless they're dead.

"Mireille, I called some friends. We're going to have a party. Why don't you come join us? They brought their dogs. You love dogs. Come out," Robert called. His voice was faint, so he wasn't close.

She picked up speed. She was running for her life. The blazes on the trees weren't as obvious, and she was getting tired. She needed to think. She knew these woods. Grandpapa had walked with her and shown her some of the beautiful, secret places. She hadn't appreciated them at the time. She remembered that there was a shortcut that could take her to the village. It was a little tricky, but she had an eidetic memory.

I can do this, she thought. I just need a little luck.

Mireille stood cautiously, peering over the bush. She listened for the rustling sound of leaves being crushed. She nodded to herself, the sound seemed to be moving further away.

She kept walking, trying to be as quiet as possible, as careful as possible. A twisted ankle could leave her even more vulnerable than she was now.

It was slow and arduous, trudging through the forest in heeled boots. Mireille knew she was leaving very distinctive footprints. She considered removing her footwear, but her feet would never survive.

"I really hate you," she mumbled as the heel of her boot stuck in the soft soil one more time. "Only in the movies can a woman run around in white stilettos and not get them dirty or even break off a heel."

"I heard that," Robert yelled. "Where are you?"

Mireille plastered herself against a large maple and waited. Her pulse pounded in her ears. Had he seen her?

She jumped when she heard a gunshot. She tucked her hands in close to her hips, flattening them against the rough bark. She held her breath and listened. The sound of men moving through the forest diminished. They were going the wrong way.

She slumped in relief. Her luck was holding. She looked around and sighed when she spotted the first marker. The tree was storm-damaged, but she recognized the distinctive knot in the trunk. She crouched down and walked towards the tall pine in the distance. There was no trail in this direction, and she had to skirt around small trees and step high over fallen logs. All the while, she kept turning around every few steps to see if there was anyone behind her.

It had been twenty minutes since Mireille had started the run for her life. She was shivering from the cold, but she'd reached the base of the tree. She looked for the next marker: a boulder that looked like a pickup truck. It took precious minutes to locate the distinctive shape. Mireille closed her eyes in relief. She moved towards it, stepping more confidently. The ground was harder, and if she walked on her toes, she wouldn't leave easily identifiable footprints. She hoped.

The weather wasn't cooperating. The clear day had turned, and clouds darkened the sky. A low-lying fog started to curl around the trees, obscuring the trail.

"Mireille," Robert called out her name in a high-pitched sing-song. "Come out, come out wherever you are."

Mireille stumbled in fear. Things had just taken a turn for the worse, if that was even possible. Robert was high. It would explain why he had moved back to the house and called his 'friends'.

"Come on. Give up. You know I'll catch you in the end."

Mireille kept going. She knew that when she reached the boulder, she'd have stone between herself and the men hunting her. The land dipped, and she followed the narrow track. She hurried but still placed her feet carefully. She was too close to relative safety to risk falling.

"Mireille, I can see you." Robert's voice was stronger, closer, but she knew that he couldn't see her. He was trying to get her to panic, trying to flush her out.

Mireille kept walking as silently as possible. Slow and steady.

BANG

The sound of the gunshot echoed through the forest. Mireille stopped. She was below the edge of a gully. Robert had to be firing blind. She bent over but kept moving.

RAT-A-TAT-TAT

A machine gun, really? Mireille could see the impact of bullets on the trees beyond her location. They'd found her.

She hurried. The heel of her right boot caught between two roots. She stumbled and fell. The boot was truly caught, and after tugging fruitlessly, she took it off. She also

removed her left boot so that she wouldn't be unbalanced. Mireille decided on her trajectory and ran.

RAT-A-TAT-TAT

"Mireille. Just stand still, and it'll be over quickly."

She didn't stop, didn't turn around. She knew she was going in the wrong direction, away from the second marker. She stumbled again and fell, her body stretched out. It saved her life.

RAT-A-TAT-TAT

Splinters of bark flew off the tree trunks and peppered her skin. She crawled on her elbows until she was hidden in a dip of the land. She sat and leaned against the dirt bank. She wiped her tears with the back of her hands.

BANG. BANG.

Mireille jerked with every discharge of a shotgun. She couldn't stay here. Which way? Which way?

She rolled to her hands and knees and followed the edge of the embankment. Her movements were sluggish: fear and cold were slowing her movements.

She knew she had to be careful. The soil was soft and shifted with her weight. There was a sheer drop-off coming up on her left. She moved closer to the dirt wall on her right and kept going.

BANG.

Mireille jerked in reaction and the edge crumbled and she started to fall. She clawed at the dirt, trying to find purchase. She moaned in fear and defeat as she slipped and rolled down the steep hill.

“GOTCHA.”

Mireille heard Robert’s triumphant yell as she reached the bottom. She was coated in dirt and leaves, and a white mist was creeping up from the ground, covering everything around her in a two-foot-deep shroud.

Maybe Robert won’t find me, Mireille thought as the mist closed over her.

“Where is she? I don’t see her. Can you see her?” Robert’s voice was fading as though he were moving away. Mireille knew that her brother had seen her fall. All he had to do was climb down.

BANG. BANG.

Mireille knew that they were shooting into the mist. She didn’t move. She had nothing left. She heard the sound of gunfire again, and the white swallowed up her senses until she was gone.

“Come on, get up. He’s going to find you,” she whispered. She needed to encourage herself. She didn’t want to move. She felt as though she’d hit every rock on the way down. She listened but didn’t hear anything. Robert and his ‘friends’ must have moved on. Mireille couldn’t even hear the dogs. She wasn’t sure where she had landed, but she knew that she had to keep going.

Her head was now above the fog and she tried to get her bearings. The depression she was in was sloped gently at the opposite end. She rolled to her hands and knees and sat back down. Her wounds were making themselves known. She tried to work herself into a position where she could stand without aggravating her injuries. She used her elbows and crawled, rolling from side to side until she reached a sapling to pull herself

up. She was still sitting when she realized that the trees were green. Not yellow. Not orange. Not red. Green.

She didn't have much time to ponder this development. She felt some ground tremors. She quickly identified the source: runners. Some people were running through the forest. She strained to hear the voices. Was it Robert returning? He didn't run. Was this something else?

Mireille leaned towards the sound while trying to stay hidden.

Her eyes grew wide when the group came into view.

"Oh my," she whispered. They couldn't be Robert's cronies. They were all large, muscular men, running in pairs. Probably military, Mireille thought. She couldn't think of another reason for a group of seriously fit men to be running together.

Dogs were one thing; a team of military guys was something else. Question was: were they good guys or bad guys? Were they hired mercenaries? If so, when did Robert have time to contact them? Another thing, they weren't armed.

She crouched behind some bushes and watched them run by. They didn't seem to be looking for her. One man stopped and looked around. Mireille ducked down and prayed he wouldn't see her. A moment later, she heard him run to catch up to the others.

Mireille sank down, closed her eyes, and sighed. She was exhausted. She was dirty. She was hungry. She used her hands to push herself to her feet.

"Oww."

She sat back on her heels and shook her hands before examining her palms. Bits of dirt and gravel were embedded in her skin, and she had a few cuts.

"It doesn't look too bad," a deep voice said quietly.

Mireille screamed and twisted. She scrambled back. The man standing in front of her had to be at least 6'2" with short dark hair and lots of lovely, bunched muscles. He was wearing a sleeveless tunic which made his musculature more obvious.

"Stay away," she yelled, putting her hand up. "Stop."

Allator crouched down and gently took her hand. He held on tight when the woman tried to pull it back.

"Don't be frightened. I am a grigor warrior. You're safe," he explained.

"A what? Never mind. Did Robert hire you?" the woman asked nervously, still trying to get him to release her hand.

"No," Allator replied absently. He was turning her hand while examining all of her. It was obvious to him that she had been running hard, but she wasn't dressed for the woods. She was dirty and had pieces of bark in her skin, her hair and on her clothes. Her hands were damaged, but it was her knees and feet that needed immediate care. Allator shook his head; she wasn't even wearing boots. Something had happened to this woman.

This woman was beautiful. Her long brown hair was wild and filled with dirt, bark and leaves. Her brown eyes were wide and filled with tears. Tears of fear. He frowned but then smiled, but only inwardly. She was afraid of him even *after* he explained that he was a Grigor warrior. The true reason for his smile: she was wearing red. Experience had proven that women appearing in unusual places, wearing red attire, were

Summoned. The first male to make contact was the Summoned One's mate, and he had found her. Something inside settled.

"Don't be afraid, little one. I'll help you," he said. He didn't move but kept hold of her hand. He waited patiently for her to relax. He needed her to trust him. She kept tugging, trying to free herself. Allator slowly realized that her shivering wasn't just fear. She was cold. Unacceptable!

He stood, pulling her up. He swung her up into his arms while calling to Rigur.

I have found a Summoned One. Guard.

"What are you doing? Put me down." Mireille wriggled in his grasp and pounded on his shoulder.

"My name is Allator. I am a grigor warrior, and you are safe now."

"No. No. Put me down," she yelled again.

Allator thought quickly. The woman wasn't just scared; she was terrified. He took a few steps and sat her down on a boulder and stepped back.

The woman tried to back away and overbalanced. Allator caught her and sighed.

"You're going to hurt yourself. Calm down. You're safe," he repeated before backing away again. He crossed his arms and waited.

He watched as she visibly pulled herself together. She brushed her hair out of her face with the back of her hands. She winced when strands caught in the abrasions on her palms. Her breathing finally evened out. He suspected that she would panic again if she turned around: Rigur's flight was guarding her back while staying out of her line of sight.

"Are you working for Robert?" she asked again.

"No," Allator denied emphatically. "I would never accept an assignment from a man who would terrorize. I am a grigor warrior. I work to remove such people from power."

"Okay," the woman said, not entirely convinced.

"Would you tell me your name?" he asked.

"It's Mireille. Mireille Arsenault."

"Mireille," Allator repeated. "A name as beautiful and exotic as its bearer."

"It's ordinary," Mireille protested. "I'm ordinary."

"I disagree." Allator uncrossed his arms and stepped closer. He stopped when Mireille's eyes opened wide. "I'm Allator," he said with a smile. "In case you forgot."

Mireille smiled back. It was a small smile, but it was there.

"Just Allator?"

Allator drew himself up and put his closed fist against his chest. "I am Allator, heir to the Realm of the High Lakes, flight leader, son of Lara and Sular, brother to Leelu."

Mireille stared at him for a moment. Her lips twitched. "That's a lot."

"There is a reason that I don't usually recite all my antecedents and honors," Allator explained with a grin.

Mireille nodded in agreement. "It would be a lot to put on a business card. Soooo, is this cos-play or SCA?"

Allator frowned in confusion. "I don't understand."

"Right, you're staying in character. Where are we, by the way?"

"This is the Thabored Forest in the Realm of Gavla," a deep voice answered from behind her.

Mireille shrieked and leaped off the boulder, straight into Allator's arms.

Thank you, my friend.

It wasn't my intent but accept the obligation, Rigur replied.

Allator looked down at the woman once again fighting in his arms.

"You're safe. Rigur and his warriors will not harm you."

She's very skittish, Rigur said.

She was being hunted, Allator explained.

Rigur finally noticed Mireille's injuries. "Who hunts you?" he demanded harshly.

Mireille stilled and turned her head towards the man who had frightened her.

"Shh. Rigur won't hurt you. He's angry that you were hurt. Like me, he hunts the hunters of men," Allator told her.

Mireille closed her eyes. It was so embarrassing to admit the truth. "Robert," she mumbled.

"Who is Robert and why is he hunting you?" Allator asked.

Mireille was shaking her head and tears were running down her face. "He's my brother, my step-brother. He wants to kill me because Grandpapa left me everything (hiccup) because he's my father's wife's son and not a blood relation and when the lawyer left he went crazy (hiccup) and then his friends were there and they had guns and I fell down the slope and the mist swallowed me (hiccup) and I woke up here and the leaves are the wrong color and there were men running and ...

Allator put his fingers to her lips to stop her rambling.

"Sorry. It's been a hard day (hiccup)."

"No need to apologize, little one," Allator said softly. He lifted Mirelle into his arms again and this time, she didn't fight him. Allator starting walking towards the trail, Rigur and his flight surrounding them.

"Rest. You're safe." He tightened his grip when she laid her head on his shoulder. "That's right. It won't take long to get you back to the stronghold. I'll take care of you."

Mireille sighed and allowed herself to sink into the warrior's warmth. If he wanted to stay in character, she wasn't going to object.

"You said that you're the heir to Realm of High Lake. So you're SCA?" Mireille asked.

"SCA?"

"Society for Creative Anachronism. Weekend warriors using swords, you know."

"I've been known to use a sword from time to time," Allator admitted with a grin.

"Sometimes even in battle," Jurrim quipped. The rest of the men chuckled.

It took Mireille a moment to get the reference. Her blush was hot enough to start a fire. She cleared her throat.

"Where are you taking me?"

"To the Gavla stronghold. The healer can take care of your injuries.

"Okay... Allator? Where am I? Really."

Allator looked at the woman in his arms. She had been through so much. He had to add to her burden. "You're on another world."

Mireille blinked. Hard. "Please repeat that."

"This is a different world than the one you left. Tasha, another woman who was transported here, says that it is a parallel world."

This was too much. Mireille took a deep breath and passed out.