



THE CHRISTMAS CHRONICLES

THE
MIDNIGHT
BLIZZARD

A CINDERELLA RETELLING
MARY MECHAM

CHAPTER 1



S*tepfamily or not, I won't be cheated by anyone*, I thought grimly as I trudged along the frosted forest road. My stepfamily's carriage had long since faded from sight, headed off toward the royal castle. How far it still was, I had no idea. The snow-capped trees hid all else from view, and even on straight stretches, the icy path extended ahead of me as far as I could see. The royal castle seemed like a speck on the faraway hill, so tiny it was easy to lose amongst the slowly falling snowflakes. Kodiak's white fur blended perfectly with the white landscape, and he leapt in and out of the snowbanks, barking at the falling flakes then turning to face me, his tongue lolling out to the side and panting, a silly grin plastered on his face.

"Good dog, Kody," I praised. The second I'd spoken, he dashed off again, leaping through the drifts in great bounds, showering powder all around and swirling the snow on the breeze.

At least one of us was having fun. My father's funeral had barely been a month ago, and it had taken my stepmother, Valencia, less than a day to seize his assets and

hide the will that I knew named me heir to his vast estate. Then last week, she had revoked the funding and shut down the school my father and I had founded to educate young mages, who were banned from receiving a normal education. She wasn't the one who had to send the youth back home, tears streaming down their faces as they thought of the second-class life they would be subjected to without a proper education and equal rights. If Valencia thought she could escape my wrath by whisking her two daughters off to the castle to compete in the prince's bride competition, she was sorely mistaken.

I still couldn't believe how I'd landed myself in this place. I'd been so stupid. When Valencia had invited me to come with them to watch her daughters compete in the bride competition, I'd clambered right into the carriage, determined to use the ride to badger her into reopening the school and discover where she'd hidden the will so I could use the funds to reopen the school myself. I hadn't even packed anything other than a change of clothes, expecting to come back within a day or two. I should have known that Valencia had something else planned when she'd allowed Kodiak to come along without so much as a word of complaint.

When I'd stopped the carriage in the middle of the forest that afternoon to let Kodiak run for a few moments, they had set off again without me. I could still hear her laughter ringing in my ears as the carriage trundled away, moving much too quickly for me to ever catch up on foot.

It wasn't as though I planned to participate in the bride competition. My stepsisters, Vallia and Vanessa, may have harbored desires to marry Prince Stephen and become queen one day, but I simply wanted the inheritance that my father and I had discussed so many times so I could

continue his work of helping mages. Many girls shared the same ambitions that my stepsisters did, and had swept ahead of me in sleighs, gaily laughing as each dreamt of a life of ease and luxury. I exhaled through my nose so mist appeared in the air before me. Ease and luxury were worthless if it meant a life devoid of significance. Did they know that? Or did they simply not care?

I scooped a handful of snow, compacted it into a ball, and threw it for Kodiak to chase. He tore after it, leaving a trail of pawprints in the snow behind him, then leapt and snapped his large jaws, crushing the snowball into a flurry of powder. "Good boy!"

I threw another, glad of something to distract me from the frigid cold that numbed my toes and shriveled my lungs. Only the memories of the injustices dealt by my stepmother rankled me enough to cause a burning heat that kept me warm. The young mages I taught couldn't advocate for themselves, and I refused to let any weather, no matter how cold, deter me from fighting for them.

None of the occasional sleighs stopped to offer me a ride even when I tried to flag them down, and the hem of my dress and cloak became sodden and heavy as they absorbed the snow's moisture. Kodiak put his front paws up on a tree and let out a bark that sent four birds fluttering up from the branches, calling out their protests as they flew away. The castle remained a distant glow as the sun dropped lower in the sky and was eventually lost from view behind the pine trees. Darkness closed in, and no additional sleds came my way.

The bravery fueling my decision to complete the remainder of my journey on my own dwindled and evaporated just as quickly as the temperature dropped. It was easy to be brave in the light. Courage at night in the unf-

miliar darkness required far more bravery than false bravado.

Wolves howled loud and long at the full moon overhead. I shivered and drew my cloak's folds closer around myself, my breath forming puffs of white in the icy air. Kodiak growled as his fur stood on end. Many patches of road were so icy that my progress had been slow. As much as I knew my stepfamily disliked me, I was still in shock that they'd left me abandoned on a lonely forest road, exactly halfway between the last village we'd passed and the village that surrounded the castle, risking my exposure to the cold and dangerous nightlife in the forest.

Kodiak drew closer to me, his pointed ears sticking straight up as he became unnaturally quiet, eyes focused on a specific point in the dark forest's tree line. Howls came from behind us, and I whipped around, staring with wide eyes into the nothingness of the forest that stretched its scaly arms toward me, creeping closer and closer. I stooped to pick up a branch from the ground, a poor excuse for a club if we really were attacked. It was nearly a full moon, and the moon's light reflected off the snow so that if I kept to the road, I had fairly good visibility.

Kodiak braced himself in front of me as two pinpricks of light glowed at the forest's edge. I froze, heart pounding, as the ominous shadows gathered to form a wolf, its fur blending into the grey of the winter forest and eyes glinting with a predatory hunger. A trembling that had nothing to do with the frigid night shook my entire body, and I flexed my hand around the makeshift club. That wolf was enormous; there was no way I could win in a fight against it. I licked my dry lips, hoping that I looked too bony and thin to be worth attacking.

Before I could react, Kodiak lunged forward, his growls filling the air as he raced at the wolf.

“No!” I screamed, darting after my beloved pet, but the flurry of fur and teeth held me back. “Kodiak!” The force of my shout tore at my throat. I watched in terror, considering throwing the branch, but doing so would run the risk of hitting Kodiak as well. My eyes filled with tears and I couldn’t draw a single breath as the wild snarling continued. A jingling sounded nearby, but in my panic, I couldn’t focus on anything other than my endangered dog.

Both Kodiak and the wolf snapped at each other, each baring its teeth and aiming for the other’s throat. I clutched at my face, terrified, as a shout sounded from the road behind me. Ice daggers shot past my face to pelt the wolf, which yelped and disentangled itself from Kodiak, who whimpered and struggled in my direction, leaving a trail of disturbed snow in his wake. More shards of ice in a whirlwind of snow flew around me, barricading me and Kodiak from the wolf and swirling so fast that I couldn’t see anything past the wall of white. I buried my face into Kodiak’s snow-crusting neck and felt a wet warmth that shouldn’t have been there. Blood began to stain the snow around his trembling body. “It’s going to be all right, Kody,” I told him, my voice shaking just as much as my hands. “You’ll be fine.”

The wolf’s yelps grew fainter. As they faded, so did the swirling snowstorm. I raised my head to find the glow from an illuminated lantern lighting up the rugged features of a young man whose hand was still outstretched at the retreating wolves, snow exploding from his palm to chase the wolf away. Behind him, a team of sled dogs stood at attention with noses twitching as they all watched the wolf’s retreat.

“Are you hurt?” The man stepped toward me. A shock of white hair protruded from beneath his woolen cap that didn’t match the youth in his face, and his eyes were a vivid, electric blue. He was a mage.

“No, but my dog is. Please—”

“Let me look.” Instantly, the man knelt down and examined Kodiak, parting his fur and pulling medical supplies from the pack he had strapped to his side. With my heart hammering against my ribs, I knelt next to the man, my throat closing off as I watched. If Kodiak died, I would never, ever forgive my stepmother.

There was a large gash down his side, and his fur was matted with blood. I held Kodiak’s large head on my lap, stroking his ears and neck while the man worked on him for several minutes, occasionally jogging back to his sled for additional supplies. “You’re going to be fine,” I told Kodiak again, willing it to be true.

The man’s dogs had stopped staring at where the wolf had gone and began playfully barking and snapping at each other. I scratched under Kodiak’s chin as the sled owner finished tying off the bandages. “I’ve stabilized him, but we need to get him seen. Do you live far?”

“At Frostwood Estate in Evergreen. It’s almost a day’s journey.”

“I know a place that’s closer. I’m Jack, by the way.”

“Noelle.” I stuck out my hand to shake his. “I don’t know how to thank you.” With a suspicious glance at me, he took it, pumping my arm once before quickly letting go and looking away.

I squatted down to try to lift Kodiak into my arms, but the white-haired man beat me to it. “Get in,” he told me. “I’ve got him. He probably weighs more than you do, anyway. What’s his name?”

“Kodiak.”

The dog sled was low and cramped, but by squeezing next to each other on the seat and laying Kodiak across both of us, we managed to barely fit.

“Mush!” Jack shouted. His yapping dogs instantly went silent and leapt ahead, driving forward in the direction of the castle so we were jolted into movement. I stroked Kodiak’s head and stared at the crimson blood staining the bandages as he whimpered. What would happen to him?

“Why were you out so late and all alone?” Jack asked.

“I was trying to get to the castle.”

“Off to compete in the prince’s bride balls?”

“No. My stepfamily has something of mine, and I intend to get it back.”

Jack didn’t ask any more probing questions about my motives and within twenty minutes, we swept into a small village. Jack pulled up next to one of the shops. The windows were dark, but Jack slipped out from under Kodiak to pound on the door anyway.

“Beryl! Open up!” Jack returned to the sled, scooped Kodiak into his arms, then continued to pound on the door with his foot, so loudly that I looked around in alarm, wondering if the other townsfolk would wake up and begin throwing things at us. Having made my way to his side, I nervously patted Kodiak’s head, and he let out a piteous whimper.

“I’m coming! I’m coming!” a man grumbled from inside, heavy footsteps thudding across the floor. The door creaked open, and a bearded man poked his head out. “By holly, Jack, can’t this wait until morning?”

“No.” Jack lifted Kodiak and nodded at the injury.

The man I assumed was Beryl sighed and opened the

door. "It's *always* dogs with you. Bring him inside. I'll stake your team."

While Beryl went to secure Jack's team, Jack laid Kodiak down on a table. Shelving ran from floor to ceiling all around the room, crowded with jars and bottles.

"Beryl's a healer," Jack explained quietly. "I can bind up injuries well enough, but if that wolf had a disease, which is fairly likely..."

"Thank you for everything you've done," I told him. "Truly, I don't know how to repay you."

He shrugged. "No need. I don't like many people, but I do like dogs."

"Likewise." I scratched under Kodiak's chin and he wagged his tail feebly. "Dogs don't talk back or judge."

Jack ran his hand along Kodiak's back. "That's always a nice quality."

"Now how did you convince any girl to stand being in your presence for longer than three seconds?" Beryl had returned, stomping snow from his boots and pulling off his gloves. "You sure you want to be out with this shady mage all alone, miss? You never know what he may do. Or is Jack using his magic to manipulate your mind?"

I bristled, drawing myself up to my fullest, though still short, height. No one, healer or not, should have such a low opinion of mages. "For your information, the law banning mages from interacting one on one with any non-mage was lifted ten years ago, so neither of us were doing anything illegal, and Jack has been a perfect gentleman. Being born a mage was proven to be completely random and not hereditary at all. Mages are just as trustworthy as anyone else, and *furthermore*, there is a proposed bill to—" I broke off, confused as to why both men had begun laughing.

"Calm down, lass, I was only teasing. Jack's an old

friend of mine. It's rare to find someone who supports mage rights so vehemently."

Tension drained from my shoulders. While I didn't appreciate being laughed at, it was at least comforting to know that I didn't need to give yet another lecture about mage rights. Kodiak let out another whine, and all three of us clustered around him.

Beryl's brow contracted as he cut the bandage away and examined the injury. "Tell me what happened."

I told the story of the wolf attack, and Beryl listened as he began dabbing dollops of a pale-pink salve onto Kodiak's side. "That will numb it so he doesn't feel anything. Now, why were you out walking alone so late at night on a deserted forest road? Were you hoping to be eaten alive?"

"I was...separated from my stepmother and stepsisters during our journey."

"Where are they?" Beryl asked. "Shall I send for them?"

I let out a hollow, humorless laugh. "No. They were the reason I was left behind."

Jack threw a sharp look my direction. "They abandoned you?"

"Essentially. I think they assumed I would go back home."

"Why didn't you?" Beryl didn't look up from where he was stitching Kodiak's wound.

I didn't answer. I didn't want to admit that my own stubbornness had nearly killed me and my dog, but even if I had tried to backtrack to the previous village, it could have been just as dangerous. To avoid his question, I cast around for a change in topic. "I can pay you back for everything you've done, but I'll need to go back home—"

"No need. Watching a tiny scrap of a girl prepare to

fight a fully grown man over the trustworthiness of mages was payment enough.”

“You’re going to go out of business if you keep giving away your services for free,” Jack told him. “I’ll ensure you’re paid.”

“I will ensure that you’re paid,” I said stubbornly. It was well known that mages were already paid poorly, if at all. Whatever Jack did for a living wouldn’t earn much, and it was my dog, not his.

Beryl shot a wink at me as he shoved a paste into Kodiak’s mouth. “It isn’t every day a lovely lady will rush to defend an ugly and grouchy old sorcerer. I’m sure Jack wouldn’t mind getting to know you better.”

Jack’s serious facial expression didn’t change. “I can’t get to know any woman in that way, Beryl, and you know it. Not all laws are as forward-thinking as Noelle here.”

“Laws can be changed.”

“Don’t you need to tell her about her *dog*?” Jack asked pointedly.

“Not as much as I need to tell her about you,” Beryl answered with a mischievous twinkle in his eye, then turned to me. “Your dog here will be fine. He’ll need to stay and rest for a day or two, then you can pick him up. But you may want to watch out, there might be *another* sly dog in our midst...”

Jack rolled his eyes. “I think it’s time to go. Noelle has business at the castle.”

Beryl, finished with Kodiak, leaned back and looked at me. “Oh, that’s right. My daughter Peggy was wishing she was old enough to run off to the ball.”

“How old is she?” I stroked Kodiak’s head. He had lazily closed his eyes, though I wasn’t sure if it was to enjoy being

petted, from exhaustion, or from the medications Beryl had forced into him. Likely a combination of all three, I decided.

Beryl let out a great, booming laugh. “She’s nine. She still has a long way to go before she needs to think about anything like courtship and bride competitions.”

“It isn’t a *competition*,” Jack stated. “It’s a week of balls and activities designed to help the prince—”

“Yeah, yeah. You’ve told me before. But it’s a competition and we all know it, even if the royalty pretend otherwise,” Beryl replied, rolling his eyes and laughing. “Dangle a wealthy prince as a prize and all the women come flocking. Personally, I think it’s a little *wed-iculous*.”

“*Wed-iculous*?” I groaned. “That’s terrible.”

“See, Beryl?” Jack told him triumphantly. “I told you long ago that your puns are terrible. Noelle agrees with me.”

“Noelle’s off to compete, isn’t she? I think she’s hoping it will be her *crowning* achievement.” Beryl laughed so hard that he nearly knocked over a rounded bottle on the table. “Oh, come on, Jack. That was hilarious! Are you too serious to ever laugh? Has your ice magic frozen your heart completely?”

“I have a sense of humor,” Jack protested.

“And that’s *snow* joke,” I added, fighting to keep a straight face.

Jack’s mouth twisted to hide a smile.

“Oh, you’ll laugh at her puns, but not mine? I see how it is.” Beryl looked from me to Jack, who was carefully scooping Kodiak into his arms. “How interesting. I’m going to make myself scarce now. I’ll see you two in a day or so.”

CHAPTER 2



Jack held the door open for me as a blustery wind bit at my exposed fingers and nose. I shivered and drew my cloak around me even tighter, acutely aware of the absence of Kodiak's warm fur. Once outside, I hesitated. Walking away from my dog felt like leaving half of my heart behind. Since Mother's death five years ago, Kodiak had been my constant companion. I hadn't ever realized how isolated I would feel without him. My clothing was slightly stiff in places where streaks of Kodiak's blood had dried during the extended time in Beryl's shop, but as the fabric had been red to begin with, none of the blood was visible.

"So how is it that you're so knowledgeable about mage laws?" Jack's gaze raked my hairline for any trace of white. "You aren't a mage." He busied himself untying his dogs from where they were staked and detangling the harnesses.

Unsure if he expected me to get into his sled or not, I hung back. The castle wasn't far; I would be able to walk the rest of the way by mid-morning if I needed to. Now that Kodiak was stabilized, my reservations about being alone with an unfamiliar man surfaced. Not far down the road, I

saw a line of eight bleary-eyed milkmaids traipsing along toward a barn. "My father was one of the ten lords, and he had a special interest in mage rights. He always said that withholding rights from mages was a detriment to society."

Jack turned, the gang line in his gloved hands. "You don't mean Lord Cedric Frost, do you?"

I nearly stumbled in the snow. "Yes. Did you know him?"

"Very well. We worked together drafting several laws; did he...did he never mention me?"

My eyes bulged. "You're *that* Jack? I had no idea...Father never mentioned an age, just that he was working with one of the prince's advisors named Jack. I assumed it was someone much older." Giddy excitement flooded through me, tingling my fingers and toes. It was as though I was back home in front of the fireplace on those evenings when Father read off the bits of drafted laws to me and articulated how they would help the merchants to have the added support from mages and how they would help businesses grow. "I can't believe it; you must've been working with him for the last ten years, but you can't be that much older than I am. How could you get the experience?"

The little remainder of Jack's frosty demeanor melted under my rapt attention. He leaned forward conspiratorially and jerked his eyes up toward where his shock of pure-white hair flopped into his eyes. "I don't know if you noticed, but I've been a mage all my life."

I laughed, unable to feel the cold as warmth blossomed in my chest. He had known my father and had worked with him on the same issues my father and I had shared a passion for. My stepmother had always put on a grand act of paying attention anytime Father rambled on about mage rights, but inevitably, she would end up penning letters or

engrossing herself in a book by the discussion's end. Other than a few overexaggerated bits of flattery about how my father's passion for advocating for suppressed populations had caught her eye from the beginning, she never contributed anything substantial to the conversations.

"Cedric said he had a daughter who founded a school for young mages, but I never thought we would meet; my duties require me to stay close to the castle, but I had always wondered..." Jack ran a hand through his hair, displacing the bits of snow that had settled there. I couldn't tear my eyes off him, desperately curious to know what he had been thinking. "Get in. I'll take you the rest of the way."

Any misgivings I may have had about being alone with a strange man vanished on the spot. Jack handed me into the sled and slid down next to me. A peppermint scent lingered about his person, and I found myself drawn to it. Despite it being pitch black and well past midnight with no sign of dawn on the horizon yet, the exhaustion I knew should have come was still held at bay by the excitement of my new discovery.

"Mush!" Jack shouted, and we were off.

"Tell me," I asked eagerly. "How did you manage to get a position as the prince's advisor at such a young age? Father made it sound as though you've been the one proposing the majority of changes on laws about mages to the other nine lords."

"A gross exaggeration," Jack answered in embarrassment. "My mother was the queen's handmaiden and I'm only a little older than the prince, so he and I became friends. The king and queen had already been working on amending laws, and it looked good to have a mage as a member of staff. Cedric was really the mastermind behind all those laws."

"But they ask your opinion with each proposed bill. Father told me."

"Well, I *am* a mage, so I can give an insider's perspective."

I stared at him in awe. Meeting him was so surreal; it was as though one of the characters from my bedtime stories had come to life. Father had talked about Jack so much, but it had always been from a professional point of view. I had passed those tales onto my students, who had all begged for me to tell them again and again, delighted at the idea of a mage who wasn't rejected by society and instead rose to a position of prominence.

"Cedric talked a great deal about you," Jack told me. "He was very proud of all your accomplishments."

"Which all pale in comparison to yours," I protested. "Royal advisor, mage with ice magic, clearly an accomplished dog team handler..."

"Says the woman who founded a school on her own, won multiple ice skating awards at ten years old, and trained dogs for agility competitions when she was twelve. You're the amazing one. I just have white hair, was born in a convenient location, and made friends with the right people."

I blushed, slightly embarrassed but also secretly pleased by his praise. A fluttering in my chest warmed me; Jack remembered what my father had told him about me. "I didn't found the school on my own. Father helped. It seems that we can both agree that we both think the other is far superior to ourselves?"

Jack flashed a grin that showed off teeth just as white as his hair. "I can agree to that. Haw!"

The team veered to the left, pulling the sled's runners smoothly through the snow. The jingle bells fastened to the

sides chimed merrily. Basking in the relief that Kodiak would recover soon, I continued to joke with Jack as we sped toward the castle, traveling much faster than I ever would have on foot, and we pulled into the castle's dog yard just as the sky began shifting from inky black to velvety blue, hinting at dawn. I stole a look at the heavens. It must have taken much longer to patch Kodiak up than I thought.

"Easy, easy," Jack called to the dogs, slowing them until he finally let out a long, "Whoa." The sled skidded to a halt as Jack set the brake.

"Give me a few minutes," Jack said, patting each dog in line, who all had tongues lolling out and panted hard. "Good girl, Shooki. Nice hustle, Nanook."

"What are all their names?" I asked, unable to resist patting their heads as well.

"The lead is Ace, then the swing dogs are Yeti and Shooki. The others are Belinda, Nanook, Cinder, Sierra, and Rocky."

I bent down to help strip off the booties that protected the dogs' paws from becoming too packed with snow.

"You said you needed to come to the castle, but only said that it wasn't for the prince's bride competition. What is it for?"

"Oh, right." In the excitement of meeting Jack, I had all but forgotten my purpose in setting out in such a foolhardy manner. "Before my father passed away, he said that he was going to pass his estate to me so I would be the next lord and also be able to use the funds to continue keeping the school open. But his will and all his documents vanished the same day he died, and I have reason to suspect my stepmother had a hand in it."

"Do you have any proof? And are you suggesting your

stepmother took the will, or that she had a hand in his passing?"

"No, I don't think she's responsible for his passing," I admitted grudgingly. "She wouldn't have done that, even if she doesn't like me, but I also didn't think she would leave me abandoned on a forest road yesterday. Father had been ill for a year before he met Valencia, and he seemed to be getting better. His death was sudden, but the doctors all said it was his illness from before. I don't have any proof that Valencia took the will, either. But why would the documents vanish otherwise? There is no one else who would lay claim to the estate, and she was the one who revoked the funding and had the school closed."

"It does seem suspicious," he agreed. "What did your stepmother say about it?"

"She denied everything. When I questioned her, she broke down crying and asked why I was badgering a newly widowed woman who was still in mourning."

Jack *tsked* quietly. "I can see how that would be effective in deterring prying questions. Did they have a reason for leaving you last night?"

"You have to be nobility to compete, correct? My guess is that if the estate passes to me, my stepmother and step-sisters won't have titles anymore and can't compete. I'm assuming they wanted to ensure that they would be entered."

"But you said you don't care about participating in the balls?"

"No. I heard that the archives keep records of wills and other legal documents and I planned to search them. It's why I was so eager to come with my stepfamily when they said they would be attending."

"*Sometimes* they keep records," Jack clarified with an

apologetic shrug. We had finished unharnessing the dogs and unfastening all of their paw coverings. While I stored the booties in the compartment Jack showed me, he wrapped the gang line and tug lines into neat coils and hung them on the wall. "But only when things are submitted with the proper credentials. It's a legal nightmare to get anything processed in a timely manner, if I'm being completely honest."

"Yes, I know. Father and I had to go through a mountain of paperwork just to get our school's license approved. It rather felt like he and I had to leap through flaming hoops to get the license originally, and now if I can't get it renewed in the next six days, it will expire and the school will be closed permanently, or at least until I start all the paperwork over again. And if that's the case, I have to have a lord's approval for it. If I'm named the next lord in his will, I can approve it myself, but that means I need to find the records." I massaged my temples. "It gives me a headache even thinking about it."

"Ah, yes. About the records room..." Jack took a deep breath. "It's off-limits to all but the most senior of staff here. I can't promise that a copy of Cedric's will would even be here, and with the balls, all the staff are busy. If you intend to press charges, there won't be anyone to help with that until the balls are over."

"How long would you say that will take?"

"A week. There are several balls and a feast, and..." Jack hesitated. "If you aren't participating, you won't be permitted to stay. The head steward has been very strict about that rule. He says he has enough to deal with at the moment."

I bit my lip, staring at three stray hens that had perched themselves up in the rafters, far from the dogs' sharp teeth.

My stepmother would easily be able to forge a new will in that time and the deadline to renew the school's license would expire by then. I couldn't afford to wait any longer, and the longer these proceedings were drawn out, the longer my students went without an education. If I only had enough time to search for the records or find someone to talk to about funding... "Can I compete so I can stay, then drop out later?"

Jack held his hand up to his chest in feigned shock. "A damsel who doesn't wish to wed a prince tells his advisor when said advisor is in charge of eliminating contestants?"

I grinned mischievously. "Eliminating innocent young girls? How do you ever expect to improve the public's perception of mages if you go around killing anyone you dislike?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "You know what I meant."

"Do I? I did only just meet you last night. For all I know, you could be one of those untrustworthy men that women are always warned about."

Jack laughed. "I guess I've been called far worse. To answer your questions, yes, you can sign up and drop out later. All you have to do is prove that you're a noblewoman and sign some forms stating that you understand competing does not guarantee marriage to the prince."

My mouth twitched. "Can contestants be any age? I know plenty of eighty-year-old women who are nobles and very eligible. I'm sensing a lot of flaws already."

"No eighty-year-old women as far as I know, and the prince does get to choose, you know. I can't imagine that he would be wildly attracted to any woman four times his age."

"What sort of tests are in the competition?"

Jack's white eyebrows jumped up on his forehead. "Oh,

and now you expect me to divulge information and give you an unfair advantage over the other girls? You'll have to rely on more than just your looks if you want to weasel that sort of information out of me."

"I didn't realize you had noticed my looks," I told him with a shifty side glance.

Jack's pale complexion did nothing to hide the intense flush that burned on his cheeks, which made his electric-blue eyes stand out even more in the early dawn. "Not that I—I mean, I wasn't...if you think..."

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about. I noticed your looks too," I teased.

"Now see here," Jack spluttered, hastily backing away from me into his pack of dogs, who all wound between his legs and brushed against his sides. "You can't just go around saying things like that."

"I don't usually listen when someone tells me I can't do things. There's nothing wrong with a little harmless flirting."

"There is when you're flirting with a mage," he answered solemnly. "And it isn't you who would get in trouble for it."

My heart sank as my heady recklessness faded, instantly replaced by regret. I'd been so swept away in the moment that I'd quite forgotten that there were still laws forbidding mages from entering into courtship with non-mages. Of course Jack would be wary of giving any appearances of flirting. He could lose his position or even be imprisoned for such an offense.

"I'm sorry," I apologized. "I...I didn't think before I spoke."

Jack's jaw tightened. For several minutes, he busied himself with wiping down his sled. I couldn't think of

anything to say, nor could I find anything to do besides stand and awkwardly remember my foolish and hasty comments that might have alienated him before our friendship had done anything more than bud. My heart pounded, willing Jack to forgive me. It cast into reflection all the things I took for granted, like the ability to be courted by anyone. At least, I amended in my mind, I could be courted by anyone other than a mage. Jack had no one. Of course, he could court another mage if he could find one, but when mages only accounted for maybe one birth in several hundred, finding a girl his age that he was compatible with was next to impossible. My school was tiny compared to others, with only a dozen mage pupils, and they ranged from five years old to eighteen.

After he finished wiping down his sled and got it propped against the wall, Jack relaxed slightly and the sparkle returned to his eye. "Judging by all your actions from today, I get the impression that not thinking before speaking might be common for you."

"Only judging by my actions? Meaning that my father *never* said I was impulsive? It's like he didn't know me at all."

His smile broadened. "Cedric did mention that a time or two." He finished securing the ropes to hold the sled firmly in place before he turned to me. "You should enter. I'd be willing to help you look into the situation with your father's will, and if you ended up with Prince Stephen, then you wouldn't even need an inheritance. You would be able to open a hundred schools."

"Will you have time to help me? Being an advisor, especially during the balls, must be demanding."

"I'll find the time." Jack's eyes softened as he looked at me. "I did know your father, after all."

“You’re doing so much for me; what can I do for you? I don’t want you to think of me as a charity case.”

His lips pressed into a thin line. “I wouldn’t say no if you convinced the king to grant full rights to mages.”

“I would do that anyway. I could...I could give you an ice skating lesson or help you with your dogs.” I cast around for another idea, my eyes begging him to recognize my attempt at making up for putting him in an uncomfortable situation. Besides, if he didn’t accept any help from me after he had saved Kodiak from a wolf attack, gotten him medical care, *and* brought me to the castle, I didn’t think I could ever ask for his help again. I already owed him too much.

“I don’t think I’d be a particularly graceful ice skater, but I may take you up on the offer as long as you promise not to laugh at me.”

“I promise.”

“In that case, I accept. Let’s get you signed up for this bride competition.”

“I thought you said it wasn’t a competition.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Forget I called it that. As long as I’m one of the prince’s advisors, I’m not allowed to say anything other than ‘a week of balls’, but”—he shot me a sly grin—“only one girl will make it to the end without being asked to leave. You can decide for yourself if it’s a competition or not.”

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Follow along with Noelle and Jack as they navigate their HIGHLY forbidden love, all while Noelle is competing in the prince's bride competition (that Jack has to watch and judge!)

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