

BOOK 1

MISFITS



CHAPTER 1

Once There Was a Girl...



Hold still now. I just want to help you.”

I keep my voice calm yet firm. If she moves too quickly, she could do more damage. I need to be careful not to spook her.

“That’s a good girl,” I coo, taking a step closer. “Stay right where you are. You’re safe.”

Crack! My bare foot lands on a twig, which makes a loud snapping sound. At the noise, she hobbles farther into the brush, making it hard for me to see anything but her panicked eyes. If she moves any farther away, I won’t be able to reach her.

“It’s okay,” I tell her as some of our friends quietly gather around to watch me work.

I step farther into the thicket, the chittering of the insects intensifying in the shady trees that surround me. The air is hot, and I’m sweating despite the fact that I’ve left my jacket and skirt back in the clearing. I snag a vine from above me and use it to tie back my pale-blond locks, which feel like they have a lot of leaves stuck in them. She’s watching me fix my hair with interest, but she stays put. I am going to have to do some convincing.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” I promise, my voice barely more than a whisper. Carefully, I pull something from my pocket I know she’ll like. I place the handful of cashews I swiped from last night’s dinner onto the ground between us. She eyes the nuts with interest, then quickly eats one. Nice!

The forest is unusually quiet. As she crunches on the nuts, I stay very still, listening to the sound of the brook babbling behind me.

“Good snack, right?” I’m trying hard to make her feel at ease. “I know I look young, but I have a lot of experience doing what I’m doing.”

She tilts her head at me slightly.

“It’s true! Just last week, Nox, the boa constrictor, came to see me in the clearing for a sore throat, and I mixed him a tonic that cleared it right up,” I tell her. “And when Peter lost his sense of smell after eating a bad batch of carrots, I made a broth that fixed everything.” I inch closer to the tangle of brambles where she’s perched. She doesn’t move. That’s a good sign! I keep talking. “And when Deirdre sprained her ankle after running from a bear in the Hollow Woods, I made her a splint, and now she’s walking just fine.”

I hold out my hand. She doesn’t recoil, but she doesn’t move in closer to me either. She’s still skeptical. Time to bring out the big guns. I strain my neck toward my friends below me. “Deirdre? Can you please back me up here?”

Deirdre takes a flying leap, landing on the tree branch next to me.

Did I mention she’s a flying squirrel? Or that the “she” I’m trying to help is a songbird?

Lily, my bearded dragon, pokes her head out of my shirt pocket to listen to Deirdre’s mix of clicks, clucks, and high-pitched squeaks that will hopefully get through to the little yellow bird with the injured wing. I can make out parts of what she’s saying, but not all.

I’m not fluent in squirrel yet.

Not like other humans! Really cares... Knows medicine! She can help... Trust her. We do! Friend!

I smile at that last word. I don’t have many friends. When you

tell the kids in the schoolyard you can talk to animals, most call you a liar. Or a freak. Some even say you're evil. Hey, I get it. Some of the greatest villains in Enchantasia have been known to turn into dragons or other flying fire-breathers. Being an FOA (Friend of Animals) is risky sometimes, but I can't help who I am. Besides, I am really good at this "helping animals" thing.

Carefully, I lift one hand and place my palm next to the bright-yellow bird. I can see her wing is sagging. She might have snagged it taking off from a tree, or maybe she narrowly escaped a larger animal or bumped into a giant. My animal friends say it happens a lot. The songbird sniffs my fingers with her beak curiously.

"That's it, now. Climb right in," I say in a soft voice. Deirdre chimes in too, squeaking her encouragement.

Finally, after a moment of hesitation, the bird steps into my steady palm! Below, I can hear the chattering cheer of my friends.

"What's your name?" I ask the little bird as I carefully cradle her fragile body.

She chirps in a small singsong voice.

"Scarlet? How lovely to meet you, Scarlet." I stand up and walk Scarlet over to my office.

It's really just a quilt stolen from the maid's quarters (Mother wanted it tossed anyway), my satchel of herbs pinched from the kitchen, and mending tools I've gathered from our sewing kits. I store everything in a hollow log near the clearing so no one questions what I'm up to when I go on my "daily walks" beyond our garden gates. I rinse my hands with the little jug of water I've brought with me, then open my satchel and pull out the small fabric slings I've been making when Mother thought I was practicing my needlepoint. Finding one that looks to be the right size, I get to work, setting the bird's wing as best I can. Scarlet

tweets excitedly when she's been set. Then I mix basil, chamomile, and willow bark seeds together with the water.

"This should help with the pain," I tell her. "Come see me again in a few days, and we'll see how your wing is mending. We can even help you find a safe place to sleep in the meantime."

I place the mixture in a tiny thimble and encourage Scarlet to drink. After a few sips, she tweets at me excitedly, and I know she's saying thank you. She has a sibling that lives in an old oak three trees over so she'll be safe there while she heals. That's a relief.

Everyone is so excited about Scarlet's new sling that they can't keep quiet. Between the neighs, snorts, and chittering from other animals, I'm worried a big bad wolf—or worse, the main house—will wonder what's going on.

"Okay, okay!" I say with a laugh, leaning back and soaking in the sunlight filtering through the trees. "Don't give us away!" The noise decreases slightly, and I smile.

I live for moments like this. Being a Creature Caretaker is all I've wanted since I was five. Mother was sure I'd grow out of it, which is why she didn't pay Father any mind when he brought me back a leather satchel filled with "animal doctor" supplies. But ever since, I've been rescuing spiders from drinking jugs, mending birds' wings on my bedroom windowsill, rescuing wayward kittens from hungry foxes, and getting an occasional visit from a unicorn that has lost its sense of direction.

I won't be "growing out of it" anytime soon. I don't know how I'm able to talk to animals or know what they need, but I'm not about to give a gift like that up. I stare at the birds on the tree branch above my quilt and smile. In time, as I increase my studies, or...um...learn where I can get actual studies in this area (no one I know in the village

is involved in Creature Care, which is why my services have been in such high demand), everyone in Enchantasia will be coming to me with their pets and woodland creatures. I can just feel it! Just like I can feel—

“*Devin!*”

I sit straight up. The birds stop chirping. Lily pokes her head out of my pocket again, and we stare at each other worriedly. No one should be looking for me out here. Not when I swore I was going to Lady Sasha’s afternoon tea at Mother Hubbard’s Tea Shoppe with some girls from class.

“Devin! Where are you?”

Drooping dragons! As the voice grows louder, I hear trumpets sounding. It’s as if a royal procession is about to roll right through the forest. I hear footsteps, then heavy breathing, as if someone’s running in our direction. I jump up, trying to put all my supplies away before someone sees them. Then I remember what I’m wearing. I look down at my undergarments and torn shirt and spin around in a desperate search for my skirt. The shirt and bloomers I’m wearing aren’t much different from the outfits the boys in the village wear, but it’s definitely not, as my mother would say, “princess appropriate.”

“Princess Devin!” says our footman, Jacques, sounding out of breath as he stumbles into the clearing. “There you are!”

I cringe. I *hate* when people call me that. “Devin is just fine, Jacques,” I say, trying to maintain an air of dignity as I spot my skirt hanging on a bush and run over and grab it. I quickly wrap it around my waist, pinning it on the side where I’ve cut it for easy on-and-off situations. With a ribbon tied and draped down the side, no one can tell I sliced it open other than Jacques, who has just seen my little trick. He blinks in confusion.

“Did you need something?” I ask him. “How, um, did you even find me out here?” I run a hand through my hair and accidentally pull out a spider.

“Miss, it’s urgent!” Jacques’s eyes widen as the trumpets in the distance sound again. “Your mother...father...the trumpets....your invitation, miss, it’s coming, and...”

I inhale sharply and stumble backward. Lily flicks her tongue wildly. “No,” I whisper.

“Yes!” Jacques insists, grabbing my hand. “Your invitation is here!”



FROM THE DESK OF THE FAIRY GODMOTHER

Headmistress Olivina would cordially like to welcome:*

Devin Nile of Enchantasia

to Royal Academy for her first year of princess training! Please arrive with a training wand, mini magical scroll, several quills, and no less than three ball gowns, two petticoats, and three pairs of dress shoes. (Glass slippers are discouraged due to high-wax floors.) Personal stylists and tailors will be on-site to assist all students in curating their signature royal style. We look forward to seeing you one week from today!

**The word “welcome” is only a formality! Attendance at RA for all young royals in the kingdom is mandatory. Questions should be sent by magical scroll to the Fairy Godmother’s office.*

CHAPTER 2

You Are Cordially Invited

Jacques pulls me through the clearing, and I let him because I'm numb, numb, numb. I've been dreading this day for a long time. I thought wishing it away would make it not happen, but I should have known better than that. My heart pumps harder as we near the grounds of the cottage.

Okay, it's not really a cottage. I just call it that. It's a castle. The word *castle* just sounds so obnoxious though. Like, "Sorry I'm late. It's a long coach ride from my castle." I hate when some of the kids I know say things like that. I hear the village kids talking about us sometimes. *Fancy schmancys* they call our type. If only they could see what I'm wearing right now.

Mother is already pacing at the garden gate as we approach, and that's when I realize I have a bigger problem than the invitation to end all invitations. Like the fact that my clothes are torn and I'm covered in dirt and leaves when I said I was going out to have tea with Lady Sasha. I dig in my heels on the grass, and Jacques falters.

"Princess!" He strains to keep me moving. "We must...go... Wow, you're strong."

Hanging from tree branches all day is great for upper body strength.

"I can't go in there, Jacques." I pull back. "I'm sorry."

"Your mother is waiting!"

"I can't let her see me like this!"

He pulls.

I yank his arm back. We could tug of war all day.

“Devin?”

We both turn to the garden gate, where Mother is peering through the ivy that clings to the fence. Her hair is styled in an elaborate updo even though it’s just a regular Tuesday afternoon, and she’s wearing her tiara. As the gate opens slowly, I see she’s wearing her favorite slate-blue gown. She holds up the hem so it doesn’t get a smidge of dirt on it. Seeing her makes my stomach start doing cartwheels.

I wave. “Hello, Mother.”

“You? You! *You!*” She’s pointing and stuttering as she takes in my frizzy, sweaty hair and dirty hands and clothes. She touches my torn skirt and cries out in horror. Jacques lets go of my arm and slowly steps away from me. He can sense a teakettle about to whistle when he sees one.

“You look lovely today, Mother! How was your luncheon with the royal court?” I ask. I curtsy clumsily.

“I left early when I heard what was happening. Get in the house this instant!” she says in a panic, grabbing my arm. “If we’re lucky, we can clean your face and hands before they get here. They’re already one chateau away!”

“How do you know they’re coming here?” I ask as Mother pulls me through the garden gate where my lady-in-waiting, Anastasia, is waiting. Her eyes widen when she sees me.

“Maybe the messenger is just on our block to give an invitation to Gretchen,” I say hopefully.

Please, please, please, let Royal Academy just be coming for Gretchen!

“Gretchen’s only eleven. You know she doesn’t go until next year!

And besides, the dove already delivered the preliminary invitation to our doorstep so you could be ready.” Mother pulls a scroll out of her pocket and hands it to me. “And you’re clearly not ready.”

As I skim the scroll, I get a sinking feeling in my chest. Yep. There’s my name right there. I keep reading. “They need me there next week?” Now my voice is shrill. “That’s not enough time! I...I...have nothing to wear.” There’s no greater travesty in Mother’s life than not having the right gown to wear, even for something as informal as a trip to the village.

Mother waves her hand around. “Of course, you have things to wear! Darling, I’ve been packing your trunk for Royal Academy all year!”

Of course she has. “But my hair and my nails—they’re a mess!” I falter.

“Done and done!” Mother ticks off each concern with a joyous laugh. “Devin, appointments for those things are made years in advance. We all know what month invites come. The *RA Insider* even gives us hints on the week invites will go out. So, of course, I have that all taken care of.” She pulls a twig out of my hair with a frown. “I’m sure they can do *something* with this bird’s nest of yours.”

My heart is pounding faster. It feels like the garden walls are closing in. I pull away. “I don’t want to go to Royal Academy.”

Mother’s jaw begins to quiver. “That’s nonsense! We’ve talked about this path for you since you were a toddler. This is your chance to move up the royal ladder! There hasn’t been a widespread plague or dragon outbreak in years, so we both know being twelfth in line for the throne will get you nowhere. Hopefully you’ll meet a prince at Royal Academy so you can rule a small province or kingdom.”

“Mother!” I sputter. I can see some of my forest friends now,

peeking through the garden gate. “You’d want a whole village to be wiped out just so I could be queen?”

My voice is louder than I intended, and I realize all the servants are looking at us. Mother’s face is crimson. She smiles at them all brightly, then turns back to me. “Don’t be silly, Devin. I was just pointing out how there is little or no chance of that happening. I’m not wishing it on anyone! What I’m trying to say is that going to RA will give you the best chance of becoming a queen.”

“Who says I even want to be a queen?” I counter. “Maybe I’m meant to do something else with my life. Look at all the good work I’ve been able to do for the creatures of Cobblestone Creek.” I motion to the fence. “I know you don’t want to admit it, but I’ve got a way with animals. I can understand them and help them.”

Mother turns me away from the servants. “Would you stop saying that?” she whispers. “You sound deranged! You cannot talk to animals!”

“I think she can,” Father says, walking up behind us. He’s dressed in his finest threads, a sash across his chest showcasing the many gold medals he’s earned as a commander in Enchantasia’s Royal Infantry. He kisses my cheek, even though it’s sweaty. “Belinda, you can’t deny she has a gift.” Mother starts to protest, but Father continues. “When we had that mice infestation in the castle last winter, Devin was able to convince them to leave by offering them shelter in one of our barns!”

“That wasn’t Devin. It was the traps we set out. They scared the mice away,” Mother says, but her voice doesn’t sound convincing. She looks at the two of us as if we’re conspiring against her. “I’ve put up with this animal nonsense long enough. It’s a lovely little hobby, Devin, but it’s not your future. Royal Academy is! Why, the best day of my life was when the RA pumpkin carriage brought me over the moat to that glorious castle.” Her eyes drift upward to the cloudless

sky, and she sighs. “And then there was the moment when time seemed to stop, when I knew I truly was a princess.” Her voice takes on a deeper tone. “I heard the cryer shout: ‘Presenting Lady Belinda Ashcroft of Enchantasia’s Cobble Creek!’ And I knew I was exactly where I belonged.” She reaches for Father’s hand. “It wasn’t long after that I met my prince. And the rest, as they say, is history. And now it’s your turn.”

Mother takes my hand in her free one. She is smiling so earnestly that for a moment I feel bad about how hard I’m fighting her.

Mother is beaming now. “Oh, Devin, you’re going to love it. Having a royal tailor on hand to make you any ballgown you want for class or parties is the best part!”

Never mind. I pull my hand away and fold my arms across my chest, ready to state my case again. Mother knows she’s lost me again. I hear horses galloping now in the distance. The trumpet sound is growing nearer too. I don’t have much time.

“Fight me all you like,” Mother finally says. “Let your official royalty profile portrait be one of you looking like this! The truth is, you don’t have a choice concerning whether you attend or not. It seems they’ve made some changes since I’ve attended.” She points to the fine print on the bottom of the scroll. “All royals of your age who are in line to rule a kingdom must attend RA. It says so right here.”

I bite my lip so hard I taste blood. The trumpets are growing louder. Suddenly, the servants open the back doors, and I see men in white with trims of gold wearing wigs and carrying official decrees marching into our garden.

“Her royal portrait!” Mother cries.

I can feel her wiping my face and trying to tame my hair, but my eyes are only on one person: my father. If anyone understands me,

it's him. He's my one hope for avoiding a future that involves Royal Academy. "Father?" I say questioningly. "Please."

I watch his expression closely. It wavers between sadness and an emotion I can't identify. He places his hands on my shoulders as Mother tries to fluff my skirt. I watch her pull the ribbon out of her own hair and try to tie it around my own.

"Devin, I tried. I really did," Father says. "But she wouldn't budge on the matter. Even after I explained your extraordinary gift. If anything, it only made her want you more."

She? "You mean Mother?" I question.

Father shakes his head as the men arrive. Two carry a box, two have trumpets, and one of the men behind the pack is already drawing my portrait. If they're surprised by my appearance, they don't say.

"Olivina," Father explains in a whisper. "Royal Academy's head-mistress." His eyes search mine. "She says she can see the future, and you, my child, are destined for great things."

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Coming October 2018