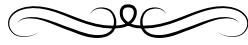


## CHAPTER ONE



*ONCE UPON A TIME, at the top of a shining tower, high above the howling beasts and swallowing darkness of the Redlands, there lived a perfect girl. Her hair was the most glorious in all of Tyme, for it was one hundred feet long, and it shone like a river of gold.*

*Her name, of course, was Rapunzel.*

**R**APUNZEL tossed the book out of the bathtub. It thudded to the carpet, and her head lolled back onto the marble bathtub rim. She stared up at her ceiling garden, where hundreds of fat, fragrant roses pushed against one another in a ring around the skylight, blooming from the soil between the stones.

“Fall down,” she said.

A breeze licked through the tower and shook the loose petals from their flowers. Soft slips of bright color showered into Rapunzel’s bath, and she sank with a sigh into the glittering bubbles. She was done with her book for tonight. The story always frightened her after sunset, even though it was all about her.

But then, all books were about her. For one thing, she was beautiful, which made the stories interesting. It also helped to be beloved, which Rapunzel was; Witch loved her so much that she gave her

whatever she asked for. Finally — and most importantly — Rapunzel was innocent. She wasn't sure what innocent meant, but she knew that she *was*, and Witch said it made her perfect.

Rapunzel wrung out the few feet of wet braid that had fallen into the bathtub and threw it out over the side. Her hair had been given its own bath yesterday and was already shining clean. It ran in a golden cord as thick as her wrist across the wide, round tower room and ended at the window, where most of it always remained, a hundred feet of braided rope wound tightly on a wheel. Whenever Witch arrived and wanted to climb up, Rapunzel turned the wooden crank and lowered her braid to the ground, nearly a hundred feet below. Witch was the only creature who had ever climbed Rapunzel's braid, and Rapunzel had no intention of ever allowing a stranger to touch it.

Especially not a prince. In one storybook after another, the relentless princes clamored for Rapunzel. They stood below and shouted up dreadful lies — about how beautiful the ground was or how fantastic their royal palaces were. They swore that Witch was evil, and they begged Rapunzel to abandon her home, but their attempts were usually in vain. In most of her books, she stayed safely atop her tower.

But sometimes she was foolish. Sometimes, her storybook self became curious enough to lower her braid and let a prince climb up or, worse, to follow a prince out of the tower and down to the ground. Those were the scariest stories. In Rapunzel's favorite book, a particularly persuasive prince lured her into a bleak wasteland that crawled with repulsive, ground-dwelling people. *Peasants*, the book called them, and they were nasty things. But in every book, no matter how terrible the danger, Rapunzel had only to call out for Witch, who rescued her and swept her straight back home.

Rapunzel sat up in her bath and gazed around the darkening tower, content. She would never be like the Rapunzel in those stories. What would be the point of leaving? She had books to read, a sea of hair to brush and braid, a balcony on which to run, and pretty gowns, jewels, and toys to entertain her. If she ever felt restless, she could play jacks for hours on end, or have Witch come up to adore and feed and play with her. Stories were all well and good in books, but she was much too clever to end up in one herself.

There was a distant thumping sound. Footsteps. Witch must be down on the ground, getting ready to climb up. Perhaps she had come to stroke Rapunzel's hair as she fell asleep. She often did that, and it was very nice. Or perhaps — Rapunzel felt a surge of real interest — Witch had brought something delicious, like a chocolate pie, or a box of sugar roses, or a bowl of biscuit pudding so thick that a spoon could stand up in it. After all, tomorrow was Rapunzel's birthday.

A loud, metallic clang made her heart jump. She looked at the glass balcony door, which stood closed. Of course it did; no one could get to the balcony except from inside the tower. The balcony circled almost all the way around, stopping on either side of the arched window where Witch always climbed through. Rapunzel looked at this window, which stood opposite the balcony door. Nothing was there.

"Witch?" she called.

There was no answer.

Quickly, Rapunzel got out of the bath. She pulled on her fluffiest robe and ran to the window. She squinted down at the ground in the falling twilight, but she did not see Witch.

Still, she had heard something. She was certain of it.

"Light!" she called.

The blue flames in her massive fireplace roared to life, casting watery shadows along the stone walls. Rapunzel shivered. It all felt very mysterious — especially the shadow shifting beyond the translucent curtains over the balcony door. The shadow was shaped like a person, and Rapunzel watched it move, amazed by its precision. It even had a gray hand, with long, distorted fingers that were reaching for the doorknob.

The silver doorknob twisted.

Rapunzel went still. It was impossible. A trick of the light.

The door opened a crack.

“Rapunzel?”

The voice was low. It did not belong to Witch. Icy fear shocked her bones and snatched the breath from her lungs.

“You in there?”

The door opened wider. With speed she didn't know she had, Rapunzel scrambled behind an armchair by the fireplace and huddled there, motionless. She couldn't hide her braid, but there was nothing to be done about it. She peeked through the narrow opening between the back of the chair and its seat.

A figure slipped into the tower.

Rapunzel bit her lips shut to keep from gasping. No one but Witch had ever come to this tower. No one. She was with a stranger.

She was with — Rapunzel realized, her terror mounting — a *prince*.

The prince stood still in the doorway, scanning the room with bright, black, slanting eyes that looked almost lidless. Black hair hung straight as a sheet to the line of his jaw. He looked tense, as though prepared to run, and his eyes moved quickly around the firelit room.

Rapunzel was overcome by an intoxicating mixture of fear and excitement. A prince had come — a *real* one. Witch had always warned her that it would happen, but none of the stories had prepared her for how it would feel. She glanced accusingly at her damp and abandoned book.

The prince narrowed calculating eyes, first at the lifelike constellations that glimmered from the indigo canopy above Rapunzel's bed and then up at her ceiling garden, where the roses rustled in the breeze that blew through the open balcony door. He peered at the mantel next, and, when Rapunzel realized what he was looking at, she remembered that there was nothing to fear. There stood her silver bell, reflected in the glass that hung above the fireplace. One ring of the bell would summon Witch.

The prince's gaze fell on a small table that sat next to the chair behind which Rapunzel hid. On the table sat a goblet, which he eyed with suspicion. Fingers twitching at his sides, he walked toward it until he stood inches from Rapunzel's hiding spot. He reached toward the gleaming goblet.

Rapunzel shot up from behind the armchair.

"Don't touch my things!" she yelled.

The prince screamed and jumped, flailing. His hand struck Rapunzel's nose, and she shouted in pain and covered it with her hands. When he finally caught his balance, he stood with his fists clenched and up in front of him.

They stared at each other for a moment, and Rapunzel was shocked to realize that the prince was short. He only came up to her nose, and he was in his boots. All the princes in her books were tall and strong and broad and dashing. She wondered what was wrong with this one.

The prince let out a heavy breath and dropped his fists to his sides. His posture relaxed, even as his expression grew sour. “Why’d you jump out at me like that?” he asked.

Rapunzel gazed at him, speechless, still holding her stinging nose.

“Well?” said the prince. “You trying to scare me to death or what?”

Rapunzel had no idea what he was talking about. In her books, princes fell to their knees, blinded by her radiance. They called her “sweetheart” and “darling” and “my love,” and they refused to leave the tower without her, claiming that they would rather die than be separated from her. Didn’t he know how he was supposed to behave? Why wasn’t he doing his part?

Rapunzel looked down at herself. She was still in her bathrobe — perhaps that was the problem. In her books, she was always beautifully dressed whenever princes came to visit. She went past the prince toward her great wardrobe, which she flung open. Was a glittery red dress appropriate for rejecting a prince? Or the shiny blue satin with the pretty white sash? Or maybe the green one with all the gossamer layers. Yes, that one was nice. Rapunzel pulled the frock from its wooden hanger and considered the effect of the vibrant green gown against her pale skin.

“What are you doing?” asked the prince.

“I’m getting ready,” she said. “Wait.”

“Wait for what?”

“For the next part,” said Rapunzel. “Where you tell me how much you love me.”

“I don’t —”

“I said *wait*,” she said. “You’re not a very good prince, you know. You don’t even have a crown, or a cloak.”

“Are you serious? I told you yesterday —”

“And your clothes are dirty,” Rapunzel pointed out, noticing his shabby outfit for the first time. “That vest looks like it hasn’t been washed for a month.”

“I’ve been traveling.”

“Yes, you’ve traveled far and wide to reach me,” said Rapunzel, nodding. “Now, don’t say anything else yet. Let me put on a gown, and then we’ll do the rest of it.”

“The rest of what?”

Rapunzel laid the green gown out on her bed and started to untie the knot of her bathrobe.

“What are you doing?” cried the prince. “Tie that back up!”

Rapunzel turned to frown at him. “But I have to take my robe off,” she said. “I can’t put my gown on over it.”

“But you can’t . . . I mean . . . I’m standing *right here*.” The prince pushed his straight black hair out of his eyes. It fell back down again at once, but it could not entirely obscure his look of panic.

Rapunzel watched him, nonplussed. “Have you gone mad?” she suggested. She had never seen anyone do that.

“No!”

“Are you dying?” She had never seen anyone do that either.

“Just get dressed,” begged the prince, and he covered his eyes with his hands. “I want to get out of here, but I need to get what I came for.”

“What, me?” Rapunzel laughed at him. “You’ll never get *me*. I’ve read all about the filthy, horrible ground and the nasty things that princes do.”

“Are you dressed yet?” he shouted.

“Yes!” cried Rapunzel, tying up her robe. “There! I don’t know why it matters so much!”

The prince uncovered his eyes and blinked. “Because it’s what people *do*,” he said.

Rapunzel bristled at his tone. “*What* people?” she retorted. “Short people with dirty clothes who climb into other people’s towers without asking?”

The prince fixed Rapunzel with eyes so black and cold that she was unable to think of further insults. “I’m not *short*,” he hissed. “You’re *enormous*. And you’re one to talk about looks when you’ve got a hundred feet of useless hair.”

Rapunzel opened her mouth so wide that the corners of it ached, but no sound came out. She didn’t care that he’d called her enormous — he was so short that he probably thought everyone was enormous.

He would *pay* for insulting her hair.

“My hair,” said Rapunzel, rage roughening her voice, “is not useless, Prince.”

“Stop calling me a —”

“It’s *glorious*, for your information, idiot.”

The prince clenched his jaw. “I’m not an —”

“Witch *needs* my hair so that she can climb up here. How else would she visit?”

“Let’s see,” said the prince. “Maybe you could throw down a rope ladder? Or get yourself some stairs? Or, if the witch is that into climbing, she could use a rope and grappling hook.”

Rapunzel didn’t know what he meant, but she wasn’t about to admit it. “Who do you think you are, telling me what to do? I can ring my bell right now and tell Witch to throw you off this tower — and she’ll do it.”



The prince snorted. “Do it yourself,” he said. “You’re big enough.”  
“Anyone would be bigger than you, *peasant*.” She spat the last word at him.

But the prince only grinned — a sharp, white grin that split his face. “You’re learning,” he said. “I am a peasant.”

“It’s an insult, peasant.”

“Not if you know the right peasants.” The prince crossed his arms. “You probably don’t even know what a peasant *is*.”

Rapunzel wanted nothing more than to shut him up. Since she didn’t know how, she snatched up the book she had thrown earlier and marched over to find its place on the shelves that were built into the long, curving wall beside her bed.

“Why haven’t you asked about the fairy?” said the prince, coming up behind her. “Or don’t you care what happened to her after I took her away?”

“What should I care about a fairy?” she asked, tucking the book away. She saw fairies flutter by every so often, ruby red and tiny, but whenever they came within a few feet of the balcony railing, they were whisked away by the wind. Witch said they were useless.

“What should you *care*?” said the prince, and he grabbed her by the shoulders when she turned. “You practically killed one,” he said. “She would’ve died if I hadn’t shown up and carried her out of here. What do you have to say about that?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Rapunzel, trying to pull away. “I’ve never touched a fairy.”

“Don’t pretend you don’t remember. It was yesterday.”

Rapunzel grabbed his wrists, but his grip on her shoulders only tightened. “Get *off*, you mad peasant,” she said. “Stop touching me!”

“Stop playing innocent.”

“I *am* innocent!” She gave him a sharp push that finally sent him flying. The prince yelped, reached out for support, and smacked his head against the stone windowsill. “Ha!” she cried.

The prince stared up at her, rubbing his head. “What did you do to the fairy?”

“Nothing!” said Rapunzel. “You’re remembering the wrong place and the wrong person, but since nothing else about you is very prince-ish, I would hardly expect —”

“I’m not the one who doesn’t remember,” snapped the prince. “And my name is Jack — and I *don’t have time*.” He pushed himself to his feet. “You *have* to tell me what you did, and you have to tell me *now*, understand? Did you feed her something? I need a piece of whatever it is so I can bring it to the fairies and they can make a cure.”

Rapunzel was beginning to think she had been right in the first place. He was mad. “You’re tiresome,” she told him. “It’s time for you to leave.”

“But if I leave without the cure, then the fairies won’t . . .” The prince exhaled. “Look. I don’t want to be here, all right? But I don’t have a choice. So *help* me, would you? What happened yesterday with the fairy?”

“Stop talking about yesterday and acting like we’ve already met!” Rapunzel clenched her fists so hard that her fingernails dug into her palms. “You’re my very first prince, so behave the way you’re supposed to!”

His black eyes flashed. “For the last time, my name is *Jack*. I come from the Violet Peaks.” He tilted his head. “Do you really not remember yesterday?”

Tears of frustration welled in Rapunzel’s eyes.

Jack looked uncomfortable. “Look, don’t cry,” he snapped. “I’ll just get what I need and get out.” He began to study the room, moving from object to object. He marched toward her bathtub and climbed the three marble steps that led to the rim.

Rapunzel rubbed her runny nose and watched him. No prince — or peasant — would journey to the top of her tower if he didn’t want to woo her. And there was no chance that she could forget things that had happened yesterday. There was only one explanation for all that Jack had said.

“You’re a liar,” she said, giving her nose a decisive wipe.

Jack had braced one heavy, dirty boot on the rim of the tub and was stretching a hand toward her ceiling garden, which he was too short to reach. He gave a disgusted sigh and glanced back at Rapunzel. “Give me one of those roses,” he said.

“This story is over,” Rapunzel replied. She walked to the fireplace, where the blue flames roared higher, beckoning. She reached toward the mantel.

“Over?” Jack asked, turning. “Wait a minute —”

Rapunzel curled her fingers around the stem of her silver bell.

“No, not again!” Jack jumped down from the bathtub rim and hurried toward her. He came near enough to grab the bell, but then hovered there, shifting from one foot to the other, his eyes darting from her fingers to her face. “Don’t,” he said. “Come on. Let me leave first, and then call your witch.”

Rapunzel smiled. In the stories, it was always very satisfying when she cried out for Witch. The princes then showed how cowardly they were, and this one was no different.

“It’s not funny!” Jack snapped.

“Did I say it was?” She gave him one last, long, disdainful look.

“You’re the worst prince who ever lived, and I’ll never go anywhere with you. Good-bye.”

She rang the bell. Jack made a noise like he had run out of air. A strong wind raced around the room. The ceiling garden whispered in a fit, showering petals as it rustled.

“Rapunzel!” a voice called outside her tower.

Rapunzel grinned.

“Rapunzel! Let down your hair to me!”

It was Witch.

Pleased with her performance, Rapunzel pranced to the window wheel and began to turn the crank. For her first time thwarting a prince, she had done beautifully.

“I can’t believe you!” Jack hissed. “She’s going to kill me — is that what you want?” He dropped to the floor to crawl toward the balcony. “Just don’t tell her I was here,” he whispered.

Satisfied, Rapunzel turned the crank faster and faster. Jack was frightened, and she was winning. “I tell Witch *everything*,” she said.

“I *know*,” Jack hissed. “That’s why she almost caught me last time.” He pried the door open with his fingers, and his voice grew muffled as he snaked out. “She caught the prince, did you know that? She probably even killed him, and all because he cut your stupid hair.”

Rapunzel tensed. “Because he what?” She put both hands to her sleek, golden head. “My *hair*? What do you mean, he cut it? *What* prince?”

But Jack didn’t answer. Rapunzel grabbed the wheel handle and gave it two final, furious cranks. When she saw her braid go taut and knew that Witch must be climbing, she raced out onto the balcony after Jack. He crouched at the railing, digging shaking fingers into the pockets of his shabby vest.

“Who dared to touch my hair? Tell me right now, you disgusting little peasant.”

“Go to Geguul,” Jack spat, yanking a small round object from one of his pockets.

Rapunzel didn’t know where Geguul was, but it sounded like another insult. “You’re not getting away, you know,” she told him. “Witch is climbing my braid. She’ll be halfway up by now. She’s very fast.”

“So am I,” said Jack as he slammed the object against the balcony stones. There was a mighty *crack*. Rapunzel shrieked and jumped back.

“Rapunzel!” It was Witch’s voice, quite close to the top of the tower. “Rapunzel, what was that? Are you hurt?”

But Rapunzel couldn’t muster her voice. She stared, rapt, at the snake-like thing that was erupting from Jack’s fist. It was the color of her hair and just as long, but slimmer and denser. Jack tossed one end over the balcony rail, and it tumbled to the dirt below. The end still in Jack’s hand shimmered. To Rapunzel’s amazement, it burst into a tripod of metal claws.

“Rapunzel!” Witch would be climbing through the window at any second. “Rapunzel, answer me!”

Jack hooked the claws onto the balcony railing, gripped the snake-like thing in both hands, vaulted over the rail, and vanished.

Rapunzel flung herself toward him. She was bewildered to see that he was already halfway down the side of the tower, dropping ten times faster than Witch ever had. He looked as though he had done this sort of thing before.

“Rapunzel!”

She heard Witch’s quick footsteps crossing the tower behind her, but her eyes were still fixed on Jack.

“Rapunzel — my darling —”

Witch pulled her away from the railing just as Jack touched the ground.

“What’s wrong?” Witch begged. “What happened? Can you speak? Are you hurt?”

Rapunzel gazed out across the moonlit clearing as Jack streaked like a shot toward the dark, forbidding forest.

Behind her, Witch jerked. Her arms closed around Rapunzel. “Who is that? Rapunzel, who is that?”

Rapunzel reached out to touch the metal claw that still hung from the balcony rail. He was dirty and short, a thief and a liar; he had spoken of dying fairies and hair-cutting princes, of peasants, and Geguul. He had insulted her hair, and climbed her tower, and he could make fantastic things grow from his fist.

“Jack,” she said.