

# THE FANDOM

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## PROLOGUE

**E**XACTLY ONE WEEK from today, I will hang.

I will hang for my friends, my family, and, above all else, love. A thought that offers surprisingly little comfort when I think about the noose closing around my neck, my feet searching for solid ground, my legs flailing . . . dancing in midair.

This morning I was clueless. This morning I was at Comic-Con, inhaling the scent of hot dogs and sweat and perfume, taking in the brightly colored costumes, the flash of the cameras, the bass drums and the violins. And yesterday I was in school, stressing over some stupid English presentation and wishing I were in another world.

Be careful what you wish for, because sometimes the reality truly blows.

## CHAPTER 1

**B**EGIN TO STAND, realize my maxi skirt has stuck to my thighs, and subtly unpeel the cotton from my skin.

“Go for it,” Katie whispers.

I don’t reply. Why did I volunteer to do this stupid presentation? Public speaking: not my strong point. Let’s be honest, public *anything*: not my strong point.

“Whenever you’re ready, Violet,” Miss Thompson says.

I give the fabric one final tug and make my way to the front of the class. I suddenly feel very small, like my classmates have shrink rays attached to their eyes. Shrinking Violet. This makes me laugh—now I look unhinged as well as nervous.

Miss Thompson smiles at me from her crumbling desk. “So, Violet, tell us about your favorite novel, which is . . . ?”

“*The Gallows Dance* by Sally King,” I reply.

A collective groan from the boys in the back row. But they’re only faking disappointment. I saw them at the cinema less than a year ago when the film version came out and, as I recall, they all left with suspiciously red eyes.

I take a deep breath and begin to talk.

“*Once upon a time, there lived a race known as the humans.*”

*“The humans were smart and ambitious, but they were also greedy, a greed that extended to their ever-increasing obsession with perfection—the perfect body, mind, and life. At the turn of the twenty-second century, this obsession led to the first wave of genetically enhanced humans.”*

I leave a dramatic pause and glance around the room. I’d hoped they’d look enthralled, wide-eyed, but instead they look half-asleep.

*“The Gems. Genetically Enhanced Man. Tall, strong, good-looking, Intelligence Quotients above 130. It wasn’t long before the Gems moved to beautiful areas of countryside called the Pastures, free from disease and crime.”*

I shift my weight between my feet, sweep my hair from my eyes, and push that nagging thought that I’m making a giant fool of myself into the dark, unused part of my brain.

*“But what of the non-genetically enhanced humans? Normal men and woman like you and me. They became known as the Imperfects. The Imps. Sealed inside the old cities—London, Manchester, Paris, Moscow—rife with disease and crime, locked behind miles of snaking city walls and bombed into submission. Only the stronger and more able Imps were permitted to enter the Pastures, to serve the Gems as slaves.*

*“The word human became unspoken . . . forbidden.*

*“There were only Gems and Imps—”*

“So, I’m an Imp,” Ryan Bell interrupts from the back of the class. “Is that what you’re saying?”

Great. Just what I need—a heckler. And I wish I had the balls to point out that he must already know this, having sat through two hours of the film, Kleenex firmly clamped to nose.

“Shut it, jerkhead,” Katie says. Her red bob whips in a perfect arc as she spins around to face him. I can’t see her features, but I

know she's giving him *that* look. The one where she narrows her pea-green eyes and presses her lips together.

"There ain't nothing imperfect about me," Ryan says.

Katie makes this strange noise, halfway between a laugh and a cough.

Miss Thompson frowns. "I think what Violet is trying to say is that we're all Imps, Ryan. Unless you're a superhuman from the future—which I highly doubt."

Deep breath. Ignore the numb lips.

*"To ensure the continued subjugation of the Imps, the Gems gathered every week in great Coliseums and watched the Imps hang, an event known as the Gallows Dance. But some of the Imps refused to accept their fate, forming a group of rebels, determined to reinstate basic Imp rights. The rebel leader was called Thorn."*

I fumble with my papers and locate his picture. A printout from the film. Miss Thompson slides it from my clammy fingers and pins it to the wall. Thorn's image completely fails to capture his power, his drive. This small, he just looks like a bondage-pirate-action-man, head to toe in black leather, eye patch slung across his chiseled face.

*"Thorn hatched an elaborate plan to obtain Gem government secrets and asked his two most trusted rebels to recruit a young, female Imp."*

*"They recruited Rose."*

Rose. The heroine of this tale. Passionate, impulsive, courageous. Every day, without fail, I wish I were her. And so far, here's how I measure up . . .

Passionate: My nickname is Violet the Virgin.

Impulsive: I spent two days planning this presentation.

Courageous: My face has started to sweat.

In fact, the only thing we share is our pale skin and our taste in men.

I nod to Miss Thompson, who takes her cue and crosses to the interactive whiteboard. A YouTube clip launches into action—the opening scene of the film. The camera zooms in on Rose as she scales the outer stone wall of the Coliseum. She looks awesome, her long dark hair tumbling down her back. She reaches the crest of the wall, accompanied by a swell of violins.

The camera switches to the spectators inside the Coliseum. A crowd of Gems—their beautiful faces baying for Imp blood. Nine condemned Imps are led onto a wooden stage, the nooses placed around their necks. I know they're only moments from being freed, yet I still feel this twist of anxiety in my stomach. I steal a quick look at my classmates. They actually look concerned, absorbed. A smile pulls at the corners of my mouth.

The Gem president appears on a giant screen behind the stage and introduces the condemned Imps by their alleged crimes: theft, rape, murder. The camera swings back to Rose, her dark hair whipping before her eyes—she knows the condemned Imps are guilty only of poverty and hunger. She pulls a grenade from her belt, touches it to her lips, and then hurls it over the crowd below.

The clip ends just before the bomb goes off.

I turn back to the class, bolstered by their sudden interest.

*“While the Gems were distracted by the bomb, the rebels launched a rescue mission and saved the condemned Imps from the gallows. Rose slipped down the outer wall undetected, her worth as a rebel secured.*

*“So Thorn sent Rose on the most dangerous rebel mission to date: the Harper mission. Rose infiltrated the Harper estate deep in the Pastures and posed as a slave for the master of the house—Jeremy*

*Harper, a powerful Gem official. Rose quickly befriended Jeremy's son so she could discover classified Gem information.*

*"Jeremy's son was a Gem named Willow."*

Willow. The main reason I wish I were Rose. And even though my hands still tremble, the residue of adrenaline moving through my veins, I keep gripping his picture, holding it up for the class to see. I just can't bear the thought of a thumbtack jabbing a hole in his perfect face. I've gazed at this poster for hours, memorized every contour of those features—all caramel skin and cheekbones. I hear a couple of sighs from the girls, a couple of "hubba-hubba" noises followed by a cluster of giggles. I tuck his image back into my pile of notes, a sense of possession gnawing at me.

*"Spying and relations with a Gem: two crimes punishable by death for any Imp unfortunate enough to get caught. But Willow was kind and beautiful, and Rose soon realized that her greatest threat was the strength of her feelings for him. Unable to betray him, she fled the manor without ever revealing her true identity as a rebel. She returned to the Imp city, informing Thorn that the Harper mission was a failure—"*

"Boring," Ryan says.

"Ryan, seriously," Miss Thompson snaps. "Stop interrupting, you're seventeen now and I expect better." She turns to me and smiles. "And I think we've just reached the midway twist, the turning point, is that right, Violet?"

I nod. "Rose fled the manor to protect him, she prioritized Willow over the rebels. She chose love."

"Yes. An example of how popular, modern novels still follow the traditional plot structure . . . Carry on."

*"Willow disguised himself as an Imp and followed Rose across the city, desperate to win her back. But he was captured by the rebels and,*



*finally, he learned of Rose's initial plan to betray him. Heartbroken, held captive, all hope seemed lost.*

*"But Rose told him she truly loved him, and together they escaped from the rebels, determined to forge a new life together.*

*"Sometimes, however, love cannot conquer all.*

*"The Gem authorities tracked them down and Rose was taken to the Gallows Dance, accused of seducing an innocent Gem boy."*

Another YouTube clip. Rose at the Gallows Dance, but this time, she stands on the wooden stage at the front of the Coliseum with a noose around her neck, the crowd of Gems chanting for her blood.

"STOP!" Willow vaults onto the stage. *"My name is Willow Harper. And the Imp you're about to hang has a name. Rose. And she is the bravest, kindest person I've ever known. Imp or Gem, she is a human being. She isn't a temptress or a criminal. She is my best friend. And I love her with all my heart."* He gazes into her determined face. *"I love you, Rose."*

*"I love you, too,"* she cries back.

I know what's going to happen, of course I do, but I still feel the weight of tears on my lower lashes, this overwhelming urge to reach into that 2-D image and snip the rope.

The trapdoor beneath Rose's feet flies open. Her body drops, her legs twisting and kicking as she dances her final dance.

The clip ends. Nobody speaks.

Finally, Miss Thompson breaks the silence. "What a wonderful black moment the author created. But surely there's some sort of resolution?"

I nod, and shuffle to my last page of crumpled notes.

*"Willow cradled Rose's lifeless body, his tears falling onto her face. He berated the Gems for allowing government-sanctioned murder to*

*continue, he begged them to join him. So moved were the Gems by this tragic scene, they ripped the gallows to the ground.*

*“The Gallows Dance was finally banned.*

*“Rose’s death sparked a revolution.*

*“And the Imps and Gems called themselves humans once again.”*

The walls seem to absorb my final words, and I somehow manage to swallow even though I have no saliva in my mouth. Another silence. I wish Alice were here; she would clap and cheer and shout, “Encore,” and everyone else would join in.

I catch Katie’s eye for a moment. She winks. Not quite the public display of support I’d hoped for, but it makes me feel better all the same.

“Thank you, Violet.” Miss Thompson peers at me from over her glasses. “What a wonderful presentation.”

“Thanks, I wanted to do the book justice.”

Miss Thompson smiles. “I can tell from the amount of color you put into it. We’ll make a writer of you yet.”

I flush with pleasure. Writing has always been Alice’s thing—I’ve never dared touch it, until now. “Thanks, Miss Thompson.”

*Kiss ass. Teacher’s pet.* Hisses from the back of the class.

I slide back into my chair. Katie nudges me and whispers, “That went really well.” But I can still hear Ryan and his accomplices sniggering, the edges of their words blurring together, and my cheeks begin to feel hot and itchy again and the bastard notes won’t stop sticking to my palms. Rose wouldn’t have fallen to pieces like this. I let my hair fall in front of my face, providing a dark, wavy shield.

“So there we have it,” Miss Thompson says. “We’ve heard the plots of three very different novels, yet seen how they all follow roughly the same structure.”