

CHAPTER ONE



The Forest



“Hold my hand, Sophie. We have to leave!”

It was her father’s voice. She couldn’t see him, but she knew, somehow, that his hair was disheveled and that he was wearing his tatty overcoat, the one with the hem that hung down like a ragged wing. He slipped his hand into hers, clasping it tight, and together they ran through the frozen silver forest. She knew where they were going. Always the same place — a place conjured from his stories, dreams, and memories. At the edge of the trees, they stopped. Their breath scrolled out before them and the snow fell like a heavy lace curtain. Flakes as large as moths fluttered in front of her eyes.

“Wait, Sophie,” he said. *“She’s coming. Can you see her?”*

And his words called up a young woman in a long cloak, her face hidden beneath a hood. Sophie glimpsed a tendril of dark blonde hair. It was covered with snowflakes that changed to diamonds as she watched.

“Who is she?”

She couldn't hear her father's answer, but he gripped her hand a little tighter and he sang to her . . . that lovely song whose words she had forgotten. Sophie wanted to ask her father about the woman, but now the song had become a story. He wouldn't stop telling her the story.

It was winter. It was snowing. There was a girl lost in the woods. And — Sophie felt her chest tighten with fear — *a wolf* . . .

She felt her father's hand slip out of hers.

“Don't leave me!”

But he was no longer there. And the sadness and the fear got mixed up with the snowflakes and covered everything.

“Sophie!”

No! This voice was from another place. She didn't want to answer.

She pressed her face into the pillow, trying to climb back into the forest. To hold herself in the strange dream-time, where she could taste the cold, clear air like a mixture of peppermints and diamonds . . . feel the forest all around her . . . hear the snow creak beneath her feet . . .

“Are you awake?”

Sophie sighed and moved her hand across the bed-spread as if to brush snow from it.

“I am now, Delphine.”

She tried not to sound grumpy. But the day at the New Bloomsbury College for Young Ladies had started and it would not be stopped. It was too late for dreams.

She turned onto her back and stared at the ceiling. Why did real life have to be so dull? Why did boarding school seem so . . . *beige*? She looked around at the three narrow wardrobes, three flimsy bedside cabinets, and three scratched desks and chairs, and wished for . . . something else. Something beautiful, however small. Enormous branches of cherry blossom in an agate urn . . . panels of lace at the window . . . candlelight . . . In this cramped, shabby London room, there would never be any beauty or excitement. No secret notes or espionage. No adventures.

Just school.

Delphine sat up in bed and stretched. Yellow hair flowed around her face and shoulders. She looked like a marble princess on a church tomb who had just woken up after a thousand years of restful sleep.

“What’s the weather doing?” Weather only mattered to Delphine, of course, so she could decide what to do with her hair. And Sophie’s bed was next to the window. Delphine asked the same question every morning.

Sophie sat up. For a moment she gazed at the photograph of her father on the windowsill. The picture had caught the dreamy, quizzical expression she thought she

remembered, as if he had just seen or heard something that interested him. She pulled back the curtain.

The window looked out onto a narrow street of tall houses, and she had to crane her neck to get any view of the sky. Even when it was wild with sunshine, the street was dank and depressing. Today, beads of rain drizzled down the dirty panes, so there was hardly any need to check the sky, which happened to be the normal London color — dishwater gray.

“It’s amazing how much water there is in the sky above London,” Sophie said.

“It’s been like this for four days,” Delphine replied. “Do you think the rain ever gets bored? Do you think it ever wants to do something else with itself other than fall on drab old London?”

“It rains in Paris, doesn’t it?” Sophie said.

“Of course! But even the rain in Paris is beautiful.”

“I wish it would snow,” Sophie whispered. She wondered if the dream of the winter forest would come again. Could she make it come back?

“Snow? Are you mad?” Delphine shuddered. “It ruins your shoes.”

“But that wouldn’t matter,” Sophie said. “We would wake up and everything would look so different . . . Maybe it would even *be* different. Like a fairy tale. Wouldn’t it be amazing if, just for once, it was cold enough for snow?”