

❧ Chapter One ❧

Once upon a time implies a fairy tale is about to unfold, something lush and grand and mythical, something with a happy ending. But the brothers Grimm had a twisted sense of humor and, as it turns out, “once upon a time” is actually literary gobbledygook for “impending doom.”

They weren’t called Grimm for nothing.

In tale after tale, “once upon a time” invariably precedes certain disaster. Just ask Snow White, Cinderella, or Sleeping Beauty. They’ll back me up on this. Those innocuous few words are the harbinger of cursing fairies, parental fatalities, and death marches into dark forests for the near perfect princesses. Not that I consider myself a fairy princess by any stretch of the warped imagination, or even remotely close to perfect, but like those fair, aforementioned ladies, my own story begins with “once upon a time.”

If I’d only been given a five-minute warning.

Doom comes to call for me on a warm autumn day, when the grass is still green and a slight breeze ruffles the yet-to-turn-brown leaves. No letter from the IRS arrives. No mammogram shows an area of concern. God doesn’t send a lightning bolt to strike my house. The announcement comes in the form of Darth Vader’s theme song amplified in the confines of my Volvo. The

ominous tune marches out of my cell phone with determination and self-importance, the perfect reflection of the one calling, and prickles the hairs at the base of my neck.

“Don’t answer that, Mom.”

I glance past my teenage daughter to the backseat where my purse sits. “It could be important.”

The clock on the dash glows eerily in the darkness. Who calls at 5:45 in the morning? But we both know that answer without stating the obvious.

Isabel picked the Darth Vader ringtone herself. For her grandmother. Of course, most fairy tales have the evil stepmother. My nemesis is my ex-mother-in-law.

I hesitate as the dirge repeats once more, working its way to the base of my spine and giving me a solid nudge. But my daughter’s grim look holds me back. “I’ll check my voice mail later and call *her* back then.” Already I dread dialing the number. Though the woman is only five foot two and petite as a cherry tomato, she could just as well be wearing a dark mask and cape of black macabre.

Isabel slumps back into the front passenger seat. At seventeen she seems content to be dependent on me forever as she hasn’t shown one iota of interest in obtaining her driver’s license. Kids today are different than when I was a teen bursting with the need to stretch my wings and fall out of the nest. At least her reluctance saves me the cost of insurance.

“What do you think *she* wants?” Izzie closes her eyes and tilts her head back against the headrest.

“Probably about her house finally selling.” I click the blinker light and make a right turn at the corner of our street, which winds through our neighborhood, where all the houses remain dark as everyone with sense is still snoozing. Or at least hitting their snooze button. “My advice worked, didn’t it? She’s probably calling to thank me.”

“Yeah, right.” Izzie’s voice sounds groggy still. “Can’t she wait till the sun wakes up?”

“You know Marla.”

We long ago gave up the notion of Izzie calling her father’s mother any of the usual terms of endearment—grandmother, Nana, or granny. “No, thank you,” Marla said curtly, her bow-like mouth scrunched into a firm line. “I am not about to be called that at my age! Isabel can call me by my first name.” Who was I to argue? I was barely nineteen, just a silly girl who’d jumped into a situation I was never prepared to handle.

“Yeah.” Izzie’s tone is flat and unbending. “I do.”

“Did your dad call last night?” I manage to keep my voice level and not let it spike like a crazed, bitter ex-wife, but my hands automatically clench the steering wheel. *Your dad* is my newly acquired way of referring to my ex since I’ve had to drop “honey” and “husband” and all other usual references while I avoid using the words I’ve told Isabel are unacceptable. Even though the papers were signed a year and a half ago, dissolving our marriage like a grass stain under attack from *Shout*, my teeth still clench when I say his name. I glance over at my daughter who hasn’t yet responded. She’s staring out the side window, her head bobbing, long white cords trailing down her chest to the iPod in her hand. “Izzie?”

She gives me a surly look. It often surprises me how a near perfect face—smooth complexion, startling blue eyes, and naturally pouty lips—can turn into a visage reminiscent of Medusa. Did I mention she looks like her grandmother, the one who won’t be called such? Except Isabel’s at least a head taller. My grandfather’s words (at which I rolled my eyes when I was the same too-smart-for-my-own-good age of seventeen) come back to me. *Pretty is as pretty does, Kaye*. It’s one of those sayings easily dismissed when *you’re* the pretty monster, but a truth worth clinging to wholeheartedly when you’ve hit midlife and clear skin and cellulite-free thighs are a distant memory.

Delusions start simply—where I convince myself I look good in a pair of new jeans until a friend takes a picture and captures

my backside. It's usually an accident, this picture. I'm not the primary focus, just bending over, mostly out of frame, when it's snapped. But I innately recognize the jeans when I'm tagged on Facebook or it's stuck in some computerized photo album for all eternity. That's when I see my own bulges in pixilated Technicolor. It's the same horrifying feeling of self-conscious exposure Dorian Gray experienced when he recognized his own unsightliness in his portrait.

So, why, today, do I buy into this tiny pretense—which is not based on anything but Disney reality—when I self-talk and promise myself everything is all right? Maybe it's simply a wellspring of hope erupting from a crater of despair. What if it isn't going to be all right? What if I'm only seeing things from the angle of my choosing, not with the eye of a dispassionate camera? What if it's about to get a lot worse?

If I'd accepted that bit of gray reality a few years ago, then maybe the dark truth wouldn't have hit me so hard when my world fell apart. The truth didn't set me free at all. It shattered my rose-colored glasses and gouged my eyes out.

Still, I continue to stumble foolishly forward, hands out, feeling my way in the dark, like the vision-challenged person refusing to admit she can't see a blasted thing. Yet, I cling to that lie as if it's a magical cane and believe. All is well. All is well. All is well.

My latest ill-fated belief is that I can do it all—bring home the proverbial bacon (turkey bacon, that is), fry it up in the pan (or microwave), and never ever let him forget he's a man . . .

Well, that absurd fantasy comes to a screeching halt and should be the big tip-off that I'm not being truthful to myself. Because the reality is that some other woman made *him* (my ex) feel more like a man (less like a husband). Or that's my interpretation. The woman I ultimately blame isn't Barbie (his mistress, now turned "legitimate" *girlfriend*). Still my perception is a bit off the norm for why my soufflé of a marriage collapsed, but I try

not to dwell on the past and keep stirring up that same blinding optimism.

The reason for which is Isabel. I glance over at her slumped in the passenger seat, blonde hair mussed from sleep, totally clueless about what it takes to make her life run seamlessly. She looks like she rolled straight out of bed (after I poked and prodded and then threatened). I take casual note of the blue knit shorts that reveal her long tan legs and the skimpy tank top that exposes too much of . . . well, everything. It's hard to distinguish the difference between workout and nighttime wear, especially when the teen years hit. And boy did they hit hard.

"Are those your pjs?"

She ignores my question with a roll of the eyes and a sullen sigh.

Sometimes I ache to see her back in those frilly, baby-doll nightgowns that went from the base of her neck to the tip of her toes and covered everything in between with tiny pink rosebuds. Sweet. Simple. Safe. Those were the days. When our family was whole. Before Ken (actually Cliff) went and moved into the Dream House with Barbie.

I note the green numbers glowing on the dash. "We're a couple of minutes early." I've learned the caffeinated key to opening a teen's heart as we approach the high school. "Do you want to stop by Starbucks?"

She shakes her head.

"Your dad, did you hear from him?" Cliff's promise is locked firmly in my brain. I want to make sure he holds to it.

"Oh, yeah, right, Mom. Right after *The Bachelor* chose me." She looks away, her head jerks harder in rhythm to something presumably musical, but which sounds like tiny insect chirps emanating from her earbuds.

Guilt acts like peanut butter for a mother. It can be spread on thin or glopped on thick. I prefer the crunchy variety myself, with a bit of a bite. To make it go down smoother, just sweeten it

with grape jelly platitudes. “He probably was delayed in a meeting, Iz.”

“Quit making excuses for him, Mom.” Her anger, palpable as a throbbing bass, bombards me, and I fear she will never forgive Cliff. That ol’ looking glass glares back at me.

A deep breath cannot loosen the tightening in my chest. I brake the Volvo near the double glass doors and shove the gear into Park. “I’ll pick you up after school.”

She grabs my arm. “There he is!”

“Who?” My heart lurches. Cliff? I manage to duck and shift in my seat, wishing I’d dressed up to take Izzie to swim practice instead of wearing these sweats, which have stretched along with my skin to accommodate my latest size. They’re no longer workout clothes but what I curl up in most nights to fall asleep while watching late, late night TV. I crane my neck and peer out the rearview mirror. All I can see are mostly empty parking spaces. But a pair of headlights bobs in the distance as a car turns into the parking lot.

“Don’t look!”

“Where?” I slouch down in my seat, my fingers combing my hair in a last desperate attempt to salvage my already shredded dignity.

“Coming this way!” She’s squealing. My daughter is squealing like one of the Jonas brothers just arrived. She points toward the bricked high school building next to the natatorium.

I squint toward a tall, lanky blond boy walking in a loose-limbed amble. He keys the door and swings it open. His warm-ups don’t make his frame look fuzzy and frumpy like mine but somehow accentuate his muscle tone. Not that I’m noticing. I release a pent-up sigh. At least it isn’t Cliff. I wouldn’t want him to see me dressed in old sweats with my hair just pulled in a quick ponytail and sans makeup. Great. Now I’m starting to sound like Marla. “Who is it?”

“The new coach. Cute, huh?”

That last bit makes my forehead fold into a frown. Her reaction to his appearance rivals what I imagine would happen if Michael Phelps were to show up for practice. Izzie's breathing shallows. Her eyes dilate even more. My motherly concern ratchets up a notch, but I manage a fake, unconcerned shrug. Still, I can't hold back a warning. "You know, he's way too old for you. And if you're—"

She huffs out a breath, making her bangs poof outward, then rolls those eyes, transforming her features from Anne Hathaway to Britney Spears. "That's perverted, Mom. Not for me." She grabs my arm. "For you!"

"Me?" I squeak back and pull my arm away from her. "No no no no no no."

Her mouth twists. In one smooth motion, she grabs her goggles, bag of clothes, and another tote with kickboard and flippers then practically leaps from the car. "I'll catch a ride this afternoon."

The car door slams shut before I can respond. My throat tightens, making it difficult to swallow. Her fantasy collides with my own. It's not the first time I've disappointed my daughter by not looking longingly at a "hot" guy. Her idealistic dreams of Prince Charming and happily ever after should have shattered the day her father walked out on us. Maybe, in a warped way, it's good to have those silly images destroyed early in life. Before they wreak havoc on your future.

It's why I never hid arguments Cliff and I had from Izzie. I wanted her to know relationships weren't perfect. They required work. Or maybe I should have pretended more.

Grasping at shards of hope that someone else will come along—preferably a rich Daniel Craig type—is simply as unrealistic as Jiminy Cricket transforming a puppet into a real boy. Believing in the impossible could slice through our hearts all over again. I appreciate she thinks I could get (and keep) a man like that, but suspect she's delusional. She doesn't need some hunky

guy to be her father. She needs her own. She needs the stability, security, and strength of a family.

I glance down and realize my right hand has found my left. Specifically, the blank space between my knuckles on my ring finger. I rub the spot, missing the gold ring that once occupied the place of honor. A sudden lump in my throat pushes upward and I blink back hot tears.

Shifting my gaze, I watch Izzie walk to the doorway, her long limbs loose, her stride displaying more confidence than I've ever felt, and her flip-flops snapping at her heels the way she often snaps at me these days. Ah, the joys of raising a teenager. Alone. If every potential parent experienced this thrill prior to getting pregnant, there would be no need for birth control.

A car pulls up behind me to deposit another swimmer. A glance at the dash's clock tells me I have time to go home, shower, change, then stop for café mocha and maybe a slice of pumpkin loaf from Starbucks before my early morning appointment. The growth of Altered Images over the past few months is a mixed bag. Needed income, I suppose, outweighs the negatives. As a suddenly single mom, I had to find a job, but after fifteen years of staying at home, making arts and crafts, painting and decorating rooms in a succession of houses as my ex moved up the corporate ladder and we moved into more exclusive neighborhoods, I wasn't qualified for anything other than working retail and making minimum wage. Or was I? Once Cliff left, a friend suggested I start a house staging company since I had so much experience and success selling our houses in the past—Altered Images became the phoenix from the ashes of my marriage.

Before I can shift into Drive, a flash of blue draws my attention back to the double glass doors. Izzie's walking toward me with that same determined stride I'm quite certain she inherited from Cliff's mother and beside her is the boy . . . *man* she called coach.

“No, no, no,” I whisper to no one but myself. Swallowing back the urge to step on the gas and make a fast getaway, I plaster on a fake, Dallas smile that comes too easily and hit the button to roll down the window.

“Mom”— she leans in the opening—“I wanted you to meet Coach Derrick. Coach, my mom.”

He bends down to peer in the open window. His smile is friendly. Too friendly. He sticks out a hand, which I shake quickly, then pull away.

“Nice to meet you.” I settle my hand on the gear shift.

“Isabel’s one of my top swimmers.”

“That’s nice to hear.”

“She has potential.”

Does that translate *scholarship*? “Oh, uh . . . good.”

My phone sounds off, this time with “If I Loved You,” a song from the Oscar and Hammerstein musical *Carousel*. It was a stupidly sentimental late-night download I made over a year ago. Since Cliff never calls, I haven’t had to admit to the weak moment or regret it even once. In fact, I’d actually forgotten about it.

Until this moment, when the song soars through my car like an anthem.

For a millisecond, I am frozen in place, unable to move. Cliff is calling? This early? Something must be wrong. Does he suddenly have regrets? I can’t miss this rare call.

Izzie’s eyes widen. Coach Derrick asks, “That your phone?”

I lunge over the backseat for my purse, but my phone isn’t in its usual pocket. With my backside skyward, probably showing Coach Derrick that Izzie didn’t inherit her athleticism from me, I gopher-dig down to the depths of my purse, trying to make the song stop sooner. Finally I find the phone and flip it open. “Hello? Are you there?”

“Kaye? What took you so long?”

“Hi!” I swivel and turn, righting myself in my seat, ignoring Izzie’s scowl and Coach Derrick’s raised eyebrows. I press a hand against my heart as if I can still its sudden riotous cadence.

“Thought you were—” His voice is tight. Either he cuts out or he restrains himself. “I’m here at the hospital.”

A spike of fear wedges between my diaphragm and heart. “Hospital? Which one?”

“All Saints. Can you come?”

Jolted by the fact that Cliff needs me—*me*, not Barbie—I clench the phone. “Yes, yes. Of course. I’ll be right there.”

He hangs up first, and I toss my phone on the seat next to me. “Get in the car, Iz. Your dad is in the hospital.”

The coach opens the door for Izzie but she steps back. “I’ve got practice, Mom.”

Maybe it’s for the best. Putting her and Cliff in a room together is like pouring kerosene on fire. I’ll call her, take her out of school, if this proves life-threatening. But maybe the fact that Cliff called proves he’ll be all right. Still . . .

“I’ve got to go.”

The coach slams the door closed as I shove the gear in Drive.

“I’ll call you later.” I step on the gas. The Volvo lurches forward. I’m three blocks away before I realize the window is still open. *Breathe, Kaye, breathe.*