

CHAPTER ONE

Mesmerized

“Stupid camping trip,” Bella Santini muttered as she left the campfire to go to sleep. “Stupid parents for making me go on this camping trip.” She stubbed her toe on a rock and let out a small yelp.

“Bella?” Her mother called from the fire where she was sitting with Bella’s Dad. “Are you all right?”

“Fine, Mom, Bella lied, hobbling slightly as she made her way to her little, private tent. “Stupid rock on this stupid camping trip,” she continued under her breath.

At fourteen, Bella was an ordinary-looking girl with long wavy brown hair with a red woven

hint. Her smile was quick and bright like a ray of sunshine, her skin always pale and never tanned. Bella's most noticeable thing were her eyes, an unusual shade of sea green, the lightest color in the curl of an ocean wave at the exact moment when the wave crests and the sun shines through. She lived in an ordinary house with her parents and went to an ordinary school with other ordinary children. Even her school life was ordinary, she never got in trouble, but she was never the star pupil, bringing home average, ordinary grades. But there was one subject in which Bella excelled: art. There, it didn't matter if the teacher asked the class to paint a bowl of fruit or a still portrait; Bella could capture the subject in a way that made it seem like you could reach into the painting itself and touch it. Now, with classes over, Bella had been looking forward to spending the summer inside, happily painting all day without interruptions. But on

the first day of summer, her parents had loaded her up in their car without warning, ignoring her protests, telling her they were taking a fun family trip into the wilderness.

“But I wanted to spend this time painting!”

Bella protested from the backseat of the car.

“Oh, Bella,” said her mother. “There will be plenty of time for that when you get back.”

It wasn’t fair that they were making her go on this trip. She was old enough to take care of herself! She just wanted to stay home, paint, and be with her friends. Bella thought with a sigh, remembering how upset she had been.

Her father had smiled at her from the driver’s seat.

“Sweetie, I know you had plans. But this weekend is family time, and I want you to come with an open mind—you just might like it!”

Bella rolled her eyes; she was sure this trip would be a waste of her time. Unfortunately, it

was clear; she had no choice in the matter.

Opening her tent flap, Bella crawled in, leaving her dress on, feeling too agitated to switch to pajamas. She snuggled into her sleeping bag, laying her head on the pillow. Closing her eyes, her mind whirled, thinking about all the lovely things she saw today, mixed with the irritation her parents forced her to come on this stupid camping trip. On the one hand, the trees and flowers she noticed during the car ride here had been beautiful, and she couldn't wait to paint them all. On the other hand, Bella would have to wait until she got home to paint anything since her stupid parents had neglected to pack any of her art supplies.

"Not like they listened to what I wanted to do anyway," she muttered as she fell asleep.

She was awakened in the middle of the night by a curious sound, tinkling like bells, though it sounded slightly muffled as if a soft fabric padded the bells. Putting it out of her mind, she attempted

to fall back to sleep. Several minutes later, the sound repeated. Bella ignored it, once again trying to fall back asleep. She tossed and turned, but after hearing the sound again, Bella decided to investigate. “Bells are not a usual noise expected in a forest,” she thought. Silently, she opened her tent flap, peering into the darkness. The campfire had been put out, and Bella could hear her Dad snoring like a giant bear in the next tent. Her eyes swept the forest, not seeing anything. Then out of the corner of her eye, Bella spied a flitting light, softly dancing like a leaf on the warm breeze, weaving into the row of trees to her left. A firefly! she thought as she stepped into the soft carpet of pine needles, releasing the fresh scent of pine into the air. Following the darting light, she passed through trees, weaving along on the path established by the firefly. Twisting and turning, the firefly’s path wound through the dense undergrowth of the forest. The moon

softly illuminated the way, suddenly darkening
when clouds shifted in the sky, opening again to
a soft radiance that lit her path.

Without warning, the clouds covered the
moon, and the firefly flitted around a turn, disappearing
from sight. Bella looked around in the
darkness but could not find evidence of the firefly
nor landmarks to guide her back to her tent. The
night around her was suddenly much more frightening.
How was she going to find her way back to
the camp?

“Mom? Dad? Anyone?” She called out. “Help
me! I’m lost!”

She waited, listening. But there was no reBella
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sponse. Either she was too far away, or her parents
were too sound asleep to hear her.

Bella’s stomach dropped and her breathing
became shallow, as fear crept into her senses.
Panicking slightly, she twirled around, looking

in vain for an easy way back. Bella had no idea from which direction she had come, but seeing one path slightly lit by moonlight, she followed it, hoping it was the way back to her tent. Once or twice, she stubbed her toes on protruding roots and rocks, but still, she stumbled on, hoping this path would return her to her campsite. After a long time, the trail finally opened into a meadow, and the moon reappeared from behind the clouds. And as the soft, gentle rays revealed the space before her, Bella halted and took a breath, momentarily stunned by the ethereal scene.

Under the soft moonlight, the meadow was filled with what seemed like millions of fireflies, gently dancing, weaving a web of twinkling illumination that stretched into the distance. The faraway firefly lights were dulled by a mist, twinkling like Christmas lights seen through the rain.

The soft sheen of the moon glow enhanced the lights of the fireflies. Struggling to breathe, Bella

tried to memorize the scene—a meadow filled with dancing lights—it would make a stunningly beautiful, ethereal painting. Excitement filled her as her creativity sparked. She couldn't wait to get home and paint, but she was entranced; she had to stay to watch what happened next. Bella watched as each firefly settled onto the ground, almost hidden, as they slowly lowered into the thick tufts of grass. How could insects make such a perfect circle? She wondered. Is this something they do instinctually? Like salmon or turtles returning to where they were born? She took a careful step forward to get a better look. Something was not right with the fireflies. For one thing, fireflies didn't have delicate little hands, or faces . . . or human-like bodies. Bella gasped, rubbing her eyes in disbelief. That wasn't a firefly; it couldn't be—fireflies didn't wear dresses! Nor could they dance and sing the way these creatures could! They were fairies! A whole

circle of tiny, delicate fairies, moving gracefully to a song that sounded like it was played on a dozen flutes.

The fairy closest to her was visible; a tiny heart-shaped face, green eyes that seemed to be lit from within, tumbled curls of strawberry blond that did not entirely hide her pointed ears. The fairy's iridescent wings glowed with soft colors in the moonlight as it danced with the others. Bella watched it closely, trying to memorize every beautiful feature for her canvas.

Intent on watching the beautiful creatures before her, Bella took another step forward in the grass and unintentionally broke a stick under her foot. There was a sharp CRACK as it snapped, the sound echoing like thunder around the meadow. The fairy song instantly ceased, replaced with the high-pitched screams of fear from the crowd of fairies on the ground.

One fairy, a beautiful woman with long, golden

hair and deep green eyes, wearing a stunning dress of glittering green that made her eyes glow even more, stepped forward out of the circle of fairies. As she did, she seemed to grow taller and taller and TALLER until she loomed over Bella, the size of an adult. She seized Bella's wrist.

"Human child!" She said, in a voice musical and terrible at the same time. "You have witnessed our dance and heard our song without permission! Leave now or . . ." she frowned, looking at her hand gripping Bella's wrist.

Bella looked down at her wrist. To her astonishment, it seemed as if her skin was lit from within. That portion of her arm looked just like the woman standing in front of her; it exuded a warm glow. The fairy released her, and the glow in her arm immediately faded.

The fairies in the meadow were still in a panic.

Turning away from Bella, the full-sized fairy raised her arm in an imperious fashion.

“Silence!” The noise immediately ceased.

“The human child is not an ordinary trespasser; I will deal with her as I see fit.” Turning again, she faced Bella, reaching her hand up to gently trail her finger down Bella’s cheek, stepping back in surprise when Bella’s skin became luminous wherever the fairy touched. “Can it be?” she asked—“Who . . . who are your parents?” Bella could barely speak.

“Mmmom and Dddad?” she squeaked. Fear gripped Bella as the fairy continued to scrutinize her. “Wwwhy do you ask?”

“Your skin, it glows when I touch it; you have fairy blood in you. Yet you are unknown to us. Are you from a faraway kingdom?”

“No, I live here; I mean—we—live in the city, like 100 kilometers south of this forest,” Bella said, as she wondered what this line of questioning was about.

As if sensing her nervousness, the fairy

smiled, suddenly seeming much more friendly,
and released her grip on Bella's wrist.

"I have been remiss. I have not introduced
myself. I am Cintarra, high priestess of the Seelie
Court and trusted advisor to Queen Tatiana."

Then her eyes went steely as she continued,

"Who are you, and why are you intruding on our
ceremony?"

"Bella Santini," Bella replied. She felt as if she
should curtsy, then decided against it. I wasn't
trying to be rude. I followed a firefly, but it disappeared,
and that's how I found this meadow
while trying to get back to camp. I was watching;
because I was like, this is so beautiful! The
lights were dancing! I'm gonna paint this when I
get back home. I wasn't trying to spy on you or
anything!"

"You were drawn to and inspired by beauty.
Your skin becomes luminous when touched with
magic. You are a puzzle to me; one that I must

unravel,” Turning to the gathered fairies, Cintarra commanded, “bind her, and bring her to our size with a shrinking spell—we are taking her with us.” Before Bella could react, she was surrounded by fairies, flying circles around her as they chanted a rippling staccato intonation that morphed into a sweet melody, wrapping her in sound. Bella tried to swat them away, but her body could not move. Her skin began tingling, and Bella noticed she grew smaller with each breath, shrinking steadily until she was the height of a blade of freshly mown grass. Her hands were tied behind her back by two fairies, whose drably colored outfits and old-fashioned armor seemed to indicate they were there to protect the other fairies rather than dance with them. One of them reached up and closed Bella’s eyelids while muttering another spell. Flanking her on both sides, the fairies grabbed Bella’s elbows and flew off, with Bella suspended between them.

Time has a way of changing its flow. When frightened, minutes seem to stretch; when happy, minutes seem to compress. To Bella, it seemed like they spent hours flying before landing lightly on a solid surface. Pushed forward from behind, Bella took three steps, stumbling as she moved. She felt a strange coldness as she tried to regain her balance. Bella then heard a voice emitting softly sparkling tones, sounding almost like a xylophone playing, though she still could not see anything. Chanting another lyrical spell, her jailers caused her arms to unbind and her eyes to open. Bella's heart started beating erratically as she looked around in panic. She was locked inside a jail cell, and she was subject to the whims of these strange beings!

The room was stark, with stone walls made of weathered brown blocks fitted together with crumbling mortar. The front of the room was equipped with thick metal bars. There were no

windows or doors and nothing in the room to make the occupant comfortable. The only light came from a single lamp in the ceiling that flickered like a firefly. She rubbed her arms to bring back her circulation, fearfully eyeing her jailers on the outside of her cell.

“You are a prisoner of the Seelie Court, held for trial in the city of Thessaeria,” intoned one of the jailers, “Behave, answer questions with the truth, and you will have a fair chance of returning to your world. If you choose to fight or deceive us, you will never leave.”

One of her captors waved his hand as he spoke a short spell that sounded more guttural than lyrical, changing her attire into the same drab grey fairy outfits her jailers wore. Turning away, the jailers flew off down the corridor, leaving Bella utterly alone in her dark, cold cell.

Bella was stunned. She had no idea how or why she ended up here. She never really believed

in fairies—they were just characters in stories, weren't they? To have one accuse her of having fairy blood, of being bound and carted off to jail for no reason—it was too much to believe!

How can she get out of here, be restored to her full size, and find her way home? Would she ever see her parents again? "There must be a way to get out," Bella thought, resolving that nothing would stop her.

Her breath heaving, she frantically searched her cell for any way to escape. Her fingers became chafed as she desperately probed the grooves between the stones, searching for a slight crack, indicating an entrance to a secret passage. Finding none, Bella slumped in a corner, wrapping her arms around her knees. It could only have been a few hours since she'd left the campsite, she thought as she huddled in the darkness, but it seemed like years.

...What Bella has seen is just the first shimmer of a truth that will unravel everything she thought she knew, about family, about courage, and about the light that lives inside her.

Do you long to step deeper into the Land of Everlasting Change, where love dissolves fear, every shadow hides a lesson, and even an ordinary girl can awaken her wings?

The magic is waiting for you. 🌙💜

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