

CLARE C. MARSHALL



STARS IN HER
EYES

BOOK ONE OF THE **SPARKSTONE** SAGA

STARS IN HER
EYES

CLARE C. MARSHALL

BOOK ONE
THE SPARKSTONE SAGA

Stars In Her Eyes

Book One of the Sparkstone Saga

Text Copyright © 2013 Clare C. Marshall

Cover Illustration © Bramasta Aji

Cover Design © David Farrell

Editing by Rachel Small

Back Cover Art © Tuomas Pekkarinen (“Funerium”)

funerium.deviantart.com

FAERY INK PRESS

faeryinkpress.com

Calgary, Alberta

clare@faeryinkpress.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any similarities to real persons or events are purely coincidental.

ISBN 978-1-988110-02-8

Other books by Clare C. Marshall:

The Violet Fox Series:

The Violet Fox

The Silver Spear

The Emerald Cloth

The Sparkstone Saga:

Stars In Her Eyes

Dreams In Her Head

Hunger In Her Bones

Darkness In Her Reach

Other Titles:

Within

PART ONE



To go home again, is that not a desire developed in the minds of intelligent, cultured beings? We who leave home at tender ages create worlds within worlds to feel an ounce of what we once felt in the arms of our mothers.

—J.G.C., from *Campbell's Multiple Verses*

PROLOGUE



The girl with the red hair comes, but she is too late.

The green serpent hides in their midst, casting long false shadows on the wall as she rears and bares her fangs.

Flashing skin and scales; the serpent and the woman are one.

The backhanded strike cracks like lightning, and her cheek stings and reddens, as if the blow were real.

Because it will be.

A gasp catches in Sunni's throat as she wakes. Her cheek is burning. There is no mark there, because everything she's seen hasn't happened yet.

Sunni throws the covers from her bare legs and pads across the cold hardwood to the bathroom. The only light comes from the shell-shaped nightlight plugged in above the vanity. A wide, teardrop-shaped mirror hangs above the sink. Sunni can't avoid her reflection forever. She grabs the plastic cup resting on the marble counter, pours herself some water, and downs it. It won't wash away anything, not really.

The mirror reveals everything. Her blonde curls are frizzled from sleep. The ponytail she'd tied before bed is almost gone, the blue elastic band barely hanging on to a tangled clump of hair strung over her left shoulder. A young woman stares back at her with bleary green eyes. The dream is still reflected in her pupils. She watches the images over and over again, knowing that no matter how much she rubs the sleep from her eyes, no matter how much time she puts between the dream and the present moment, it won't go away. It doesn't work like that. Not with these types of dreams.

Touching the mirror with gentle fingertips, Sunni leans forward, over the vanity, and presses her forehead against her reflection. While her breath fogs the mirror, the meaning of the dream becomes clear.

Two things will come to pass.

One: the girl the Collective is searching for will arrive soon.

And two: to save her friends, Sunni must die.

CHAPTER 1



“Open the trunk, please.”

Dad pops the trunk. I’m tense, even though I’ve got nothing to hide.

Well, that’s not entirely true. I just want to get my first day over with.

The toll booth guard has a slow gait, and his footfalls go *thump . . . thump . . . thump . . . thump* in something slower than three-four time. My nerves are racing, filling in the frantic notes to the waltz the guard is creating as he walks around the car to the trunk. He pushes around my instruments and my suitcases. *Don’t touch them*, I want to say. What I’m sure is the side of my harp case scrapes against what has to be my soft keyboard covering, and I flinch.

I roll down my window. “Be careful with the instruments,” I say, not wanting to come off as bitchy but at the same time not really caring. The instruments are my children.

The guard grunts something in reply and leans to look at me.

I decide I don't like this man. It's not his puggish face and the mole with a hair growing out of it on his right cheek that has set me off. It isn't that his teeth have the yellowy tinge of someone who has been smoking cigarettes for thirty-odd years. It's that he's staring at me as if I'm a waste of his time. As if he has better things to do than preside over the entrance of a top-secret university in the middle-of-nowhere Alberta. *It's not my fault that you have this job, I think. I don't want to be here either.*

Dad sticks his head out the window so that he too can make pleasant conversation. "Do you inspect everyone's trunks?"

The guard nods, then shrugs and slams the lid shut. The car shakes and Mum mutters something under her breath about the suspension.

"Is standard procedure, sir," the guard replies, but now he doesn't sound as bored as he looks. I guess he's decided we're not criminals, or maybe looking at the instruments made him think that we're worth talking to. He writes something on a yellow Post-it note, then tears it off the pad and holds it out to Dad between two sausage fingers. "Sir. Put this in your windshield and no one should give this family any trouble about parking."

He's got a strange accent I can't place. I try to hold its melody in my mind but then Mum talks and muddles my concentration. "Where's the best place to get something to eat?"

The guard looks from Mum to me. He tilts his head and appears to appraise me.

“No cafés open until noontime, ma’am,” he says.

“Oh, that’s a shame,” Dad says, because it’s barely ten in the morning. “Do you have a map of the town? Never been here before, don’t want to get lost before we deposit Ingrid, you know?”

The guard’s fat lips twitch a bit but he nods again and ventures to his toll booth a few feet away, to the left of the car. The large golden gate blocking our entry to the town of Sparkstone is closed, and the thick white concrete-and-brick walls stretch into the horizon. Sparkstone is determined to keep outsiders out. Or insiders in. I wonder what secrets it holds.

“Ask him if we have to pay a toll,” Mum hisses to Dad as she peers suspiciously at the guard, who is fumbling with papers in his portapotty-sized toll booth.

“I think he would’ve said something if there were a toll,” Dad replies.

“Well . . . Ingrid, did your acceptance package say anything about the toll booth? What about the website?” Mum twists around in her seat to look at me, panicked.

We’ve driven seven hours in total to get to this gate. Three hours from Calgary, a quick stop in Edmonton for the night, and now four hours this morning. Worth it, my parents think, because Sparkstone University is an upstanding institution that churns out graduates who apparently acquire positions in their fields of study all over the world. But I don’t have the heart to tell them the truth: that the website is just four pages

of filler text with stock images of smiling faces and charming, small-town buildings; that even though the acceptance letter is curled in my fist, I don't remember applying to any institution called Sparkstone University.

"There's some change in the dash," Dad says. "Relax. He'll tell us what we need to do. You're stressing Ingrid out enough." He glances at me in the rear-view mirror. "You okay back there?"

"Yeah," I say, crumpling the wrinkled acceptance letter some more in my hand.

The guard *thump . . . thumps* back to our car. Out of habit I glance behind us. Nope, we're not holding anyone up. We're not in the big city anymore. The prairies stretch out as far as I can see. Farmland dominates the area for several kilometres but trees appear in the distance, bunched in neat clusters near run-down farmhouses and barns. The Canadian Rockies are small lumps in the horizon. When I turn around the guard is handing Dad a cartoonish map, as if we were going into a children's amusement park instead of an elite university town.

"This should tell the family everything they want to know, sir," the guard says in his funny accent.

Mum's face is disapproving as she studies the map, but she doesn't make her concerns known. My disappointment grows. Sparkstone is not cheap, and I hadn't qualified for a student loan. My parents supposedly make too much. You'd think a top-secret university would have enough money to

create a more informative map instead of a mess of colourful blobs. Maybe Sparkstone is so top-secret that a map would compromise whatever is beyond that golden gate.

The guard is staring at me again with his round, dark eyes. Maybe it's my long curly red hair. No, it's not dyed, I generally have to tell people. Dark red is my natural colour. Or maybe the guy is just a creep and he only took this boring gate job so he could check out attractive young women attending the university. Maybe.

“Well,” Dad says, “are we allowed in?”

Remembering himself, the guard nods and then, as an afterthought, smacks the hood of the car. It's supposed to come off as good-natured but it only makes the three of us more uncomfortable. Mum laughs nervously. I count: one second, two seconds, and then the guard also laughs, but it sounds like a woodpecker against a tree.

“Let's go,” I whisper to Dad.

He inches the car forward, but the guard saunters along like a lazy hippopotamus to his cramped booth. Then he slumps down in chair and presses some buttons. Without a sound, the gate swings open from the middle. I might be imagining it, but I think the guard winks at me from behind the tinted toll booth glass.

Let me out of this car, I scream in my mind. Take me back to Calgary or send me out east to Toronto or Montreal or Halifax to some other university with my friends. But we're already past the golden gates. What could be so special that thousands

of people have elected to work and learn and *live* in the middle of nowhere?

The town spills out before us. First, it introduces itself through rows of houses and streets branching off the main road, probably leading to more suburbs. The houses look as if they've been built within the last ten years, and they sport fresh coats of paint in subdued whites and blues. The lawns are a rich green, and some houses even have small flower gardens. On the right, the further in we drive, more commercial streets appear with local mum-and-pop shops standing tall. There are even some people my age walking along the sidewalks.

"This is so cute, Ingrid, take a look," Mum says, holding up the cartoonish map and comparing it to real life outside. "Let's see. There's a bakery, a mall . . . some cafés, a pub, not that you'll need to know that, right? Grocery store . . . though your residence fees included a meal plan. Remember that woman who called yesterday, said she was from the Sparkstone registration office? Gosh, I can't remember her name. Anyway, they said that almost everything you eat is grown within Sparkstone itself. Isn't that amazing? They even have a garden on campus that students can tend!"

That phone call was the only one we'd received from Sparkstone, and Mum had drilled whoever was on the line for at least an hour with questions about the town and the university. Both my parents had been sceptical about sending me, their only child, away to a place they knew nothing about until that phone call. I guess the woman she'd talked to had alleviated

most of her fears, which is kind of a feat in and of itself.

“Sounds like you should enrol with me then,” I remark with a smirk.

“I don’t think I can afford two university tuitions. Sorry, Margaret,” Dad says.

Mum laughs and continues to study the map. Actually, she is right. The town is kind of cute. I forget the expansive ocean of green grass surrounding us beyond the wall when I see the prim white townhouses lining the roads, when the people smile and wave at our car as they walk their dogs, and when the smell of freshly baked bread wafts through the air. The bakery is on the left, and there’s a line out the door.

As we draw closer to the centre of town and pass the cafés and the pub and the mall, the buildings morph again. Tall, large, historic-looking structures made of stone make me wonder how old Sparkstone University is. *Not that old*, I think. Based on the way the city has been laid out so far, with the houses in grids like the new houses popping up in Calgary, and the commercial buildings all in one place, Sparkstone seems to have been a planned building initiative. As we approach a roundabout and drive into Sparkstone’s campus, I read the labels: MacLeod Hall, Hynes House. I search for indications of when the buildings may have been constructed, or maybe even a plaque explaining whom the buildings are named after, but find nothing.

When the guidance counsellor told me that I’d been accepted to Sparkstone University, I told her I’d never applied

to a college by that name. She'd looked at me—me, Ingrid Stanley—as if I were an idiot, her bug eyes even rounder behind her thick glasses. Sparkstone University doesn't accept *applicants*, she'd told me, me with a 98 percent average, me the valedictorian, me the soon-to-be award winner of every single plaque and bursary the high school could possibly throw at a seventeen-year-old girl with an aptitude for music, science, and humanities. Sparkstone University sends *scouts* to high schools to look for bright young students who show promise. She was smug when she'd told me this. I guess her claim to fame was that she'd talked to the Sparkstone scout for a few hours about me and my grades.

I was angry. She'd passed along my school records to Sparkstone without even consulting me. That day, facing the counsellor, I was the closest I've ever come to standing up to a teacher and telling her off. But I didn't do that. Not because I was afraid. Because I had a reputation to uphold. I never got angry at teachers. I never got seriously angry with my parents. I never raised my voice to either of them. I knew how to choose my battles, I'd tell myself, but really, I just wanted to get through high school and hurry up to the part of my life where I'd be making a difference in the world. And Sparkstone seemed like a good opportunity for someone who worked hard and cared about getting a good job. And maybe the guidance counsellor was right and Sparkstone was the kind of place where young, bright minds were collected and cultivated. I might even find some people who liked learning for fun.

So instead of protesting, I mumbled a thank-you to the counsellor. And a week later, I got the official acceptance letter in the mail. I crumple it some more in my hand as I watch some maple trees blow in a gentle breeze. A couple of students are lying in a patch of grass beside a building, reading books and probably discussing them. I catch the title on one of the covers: Plato's *Republic*.

Maybe I'm riding into something that I shouldn't be. I could still decline, make a fuss, tell my parents I've made a huge mistake and beg for them to drive seven hours back to Calgary. But if there's one thing I'm not, it's a quitter. And if there's one thing I have more than anything else, it's curiosity. So I will stand in the fire and see what this supposedly elite university for super smart people can offer, and I will fire back.

Besides, I can't go back. I have no backup plan. I applied for three other universities across the country but they all rejected my applications with polite but terse letters. Rejected me, with all of my grades and extracurriculars. I was a shoo-in for any place, my parents had always told me. And yet, it was Sparkstone that *had* to have me.

Which only made me more intrigued.

And nervous.

I tap a melody out on my shins: "If Ever You Were Mine," a Celtic ballad I'm fond of playing on the piano. I relax as the familiar notes play in my head. Mum's from Cape Breton, in Nova Scotia, and that's where my aptitude for music comes from, she says. It's thousands of miles away and she's not

really musical herself, but the music found me anyway—piano lessons since I was eight through the Royal Conservatory and yearly summer trips to the Gaelic College in Cape Breton. I started on the Celtic harp when I was eleven. It’s in the trunk, along with my keyboard. I hope the creepy guard didn’t bang them up too much with his inspection.

Dad slows the car and pulls into a small parking lot in front of one of the historic buildings. Mum and Dad are arguing about whether or not it’s the right place.

“This is what it says in the legend, Rita House, for registration,” Mum says, pointing at a grey blob on the map.

So we’re here. I suck in a deep breath. Mum notices my nerves and reaches back to squeeze my knee. “You’ll do fine, Ingrid! We’ll come in with you and make sure you’re settled.”

I smile at her. “Thanks, Mum.”

As soon as Dad cuts the engine, the front door of Rita House opens and a tall, thin woman emerges. Long silvery-blond hair runs straight down her back, but she doesn’t look a day over thirty. A warm smile lights up her flawless face as I step out of the car, and she glides towards me. She extends her arms, as if to draw me into a hug, but instead rests her hands on my shoulders.

“Hello, Ingrid,” she says, her voice like creamy honey with a hint of a foreign accent. Spanish, maybe?

Mum approaches the woman, clutching her purse tightly. “Are you . . . oh sorry, I spoke with a woman on the phone yesterday . . . I forget her name.”

“I am Ms. Grace Agailya. And yes, Mrs. Stanley, I did speak with you yesterday,” Ms. Agailya says, releasing her gentle grip on my shoulders. She shakes Mum’s hand. “Very nice to meet you.” Her pale blue gaze flits to me. “We have been looking forward to your arrival.”

She looks more like an elf than someone who works at a university, I think as I study Ms. Agailya’s frail but graceful form. Her long white skirt flutters between her legs with the calming breeze.

“Are you in charge of registration?” Dad asks as he shuts the car door.

“I am the head housemistress here at Sparkstone University,” she explains. “It’s my responsibility to keep an eye on all students and make sure they’re comfortable here. I’ll help you with whatever you need. You must be tired from your long journey.” She smiles and looks at Dad sympathetically, as if he’d pulled us and all the luggage in a rickshaw instead of having driven for seven hours. “Do you have any suitcases you need help with?”

“More than enough suitcases,” Dad mutters.

I’m not really sure it’s a good idea to let the frail-looking woman help with my heavy bags and instruments, but Dad is already unloading the trunk, and maybe it would be rude to say no to her, since she so kindly asked. I remove my harp case first because I don’t trust anyone else to carry it, while Dad points to one of my smaller bags containing notebooks and my laptop. “Uh, sure, Ms. Agailya, just grab the—”

Ms. Agailya reaches for one of the large, heavy suitcases that contains most of my clothes. I'm about to tell her to leave that one for Dad but she lifts it up as if it's full of feathers.

"I think there're some wheels on it, and a slide-out handle if you need help," I say as I yank one of the smaller suitcases from beneath the pile of stuff in the back. The wheels scrape against the pavement as I gain control of the unwieldy valise.

"I'm fine," Ms. Agailya says with a smile. "I'm stronger than I look."

"Yeah, seems like," I mutter. I wonder if there's an easier, more graceful way to lug my suitcases and instruments to where we're supposed to be. I decide that my harp is the only thing I can carry and leave the smaller suitcase for Mum and Dad to worry about.

"Come," says Ms. Agailya, gesturing to a large, three-storey Edwardian building across the street. "We'll worry about registration and such later. Let me show you to your room."

There's no parking on the other side of the road, so Mum and Dad take what they can carry and lock the door while Ms. Agailya strides across the road without looking—not that there's much traffic anyway. Crisp-white window frames encircle the blemish-free glass, but the brick finishing looks as though it's seen more than its fair share of harsh winters. Tall maple trees protect the historic building with their wide, reaching branches: three on each side, and at least four in the back.

"This is Rogers Hall," Ms. Agailya explains as I run to catch up with her. "The cafeteria is on the main level, and then above

that we have a handful of classrooms, studies, and temporary residences for guests and new students. Over there”—she thumbs behind her, where our car is parked—“is the main girls’ residence, Rita House, and the other girls’ residence, Raylene House, beside it. Across from Raylene House, to the left of Rogers Hall, is Morris House and behind Rogers Hall is Hynes House. Morris House and Hynes House are the male residences. While as an institution we are fairly liberal, we do have rather strict rules governing opposite sex visitors at inappropriate hours of the night.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem for me.” I feel lame admitting this. I only had one boyfriend in high school, and it only lasted a month. Between music lessons, studying for school, being on the student council, learning to play anything remotely nerdy on the piano, and, let’s face it, watching *Doctor Who* and reading *Star Wars* fan fiction on the Internet, I didn’t have a lot of time for a boyfriend. Or rather, guys I knew didn’t seem to have a lot of time for me.

Approaching the residence and looking up makes my move to the remote university town of Sparkstone feel so real. I’m growing up. I’m making a fresh start. Maybe, somewhere within these walls are people like me. People who will laugh and nod knowingly at my *Star Wars* and *Doctor Who* and *Battlestar Galactica* references. People who, when they want to know something, actually take the time to look it up and who read for *fun* instead of stumbling around life blindly relying on the smart kids to push them through difficult situations. I’m not going to

be the smart kid anymore. I'm going to be in a sea of them. This both terrifies and excites me. Mostly terrifies. What if I'm not smart enough to even be here? What if my acceptance here is a mistake, and I really, truly have nowhere to go?

I gulp. I guess I'll just have to fake it until I make it.

I walk ahead of Ms. Agailya and reach for the double doors. They're made of reflective steel that, unlike the brick, looks brand new. My fingers clasp the protruding handle and—

OW!

A computerized female voice speaks softly from hidden speakers. "DNA match confirmed. Blood type, O. Welcome to Sparkstone, Ingrid Louise Stanley."

CHAPTER 2



There is a red dot in the middle of my index finger. It stings like crazy. *Did the door just take my blood sample?*

“Sorry, Ingrid. I should have warned you. Standard policy,” Ms. Agailya says as she approaches the doors. “We take a blood sample from each new student for security purposes. It’s used to formulate your key card, which allows you to access your permanent residence, your classes, and the recreational facilities.”

This sounds highly illegal to me. “But how? I just touched the door. Is it going to take my parents’ blood samples too if they touch the door?”

“We have some of the most brilliant minds here at Sparkstone. The software scans each fingerprint, determines its relation to a current student, professor, or other employee, and allows him or her to enter.”

“I see.” My finger has stopped stinging, but I’m afraid to go inside. “But the voice said DNA match *confirmed*. So you must have already had my DNA on file.”

“Yes, well.” Her pale face colours. “Our scouts are quite thorough when researching potential students. But we have to make sure . . .”

“Ms. Agailya? Would you mind taking this?” Mum calls from behind the car. She sounds out of breath as she lugs one of my suitcases from the trunk.

“You may go inside, Ingrid. We’ll be right behind you,” Ms. Agailya says.

When she turns around, I bunch up the fabric of my sleeves into my right hand and open the door. No alarms sound, and the door opens easily. Maybe the security system can read my DNA through my clothes. I shudder. *Hopefully that’s the last of the creepiness in this town.*

I’m in a lobby. There’s a set of stairs immediately to my right, and a security desk to the left. It’s occupied by another tubby guard, wearing an orange construction vest, who looks just as disinterested in protecting the school as the guard at the gate. He lifts his eyes from the *Canadian Living* magazine, looks me up and down, and then gets up from his chair. He grabs a black box from the desk, tucks it and the magazine under his arm, and disappears up the stairs. I keep a careful eye on him as he ascends. The ceiling is so high on this floor that I can see part of a hallway on the second floor. There are another few steps in front of me, leading down into a reception area. I smell bacon and eggs, and my stomach growls. The cafeteria must be somewhere close by.

Out the door windows, I see Mum and Dad struggling with my suitcases. *I should go help them.*

Light footsteps descend the steps beside me and stop suddenly. “No . . . ”

I frown and turn around. Before me is a girl about my age dressed in green pyjama pants, a long T-shirt, and a white housecoat. Her curly blonde hair poofs out from her freckled, flushed face, and she’s a bit out of breath. Her gaze bores into mine; she’s staring at me as if she knows me.

“Hello,” I say, setting my harp case down carefully on the tiled floor.

The girl parts her lips to speak, but nothing comes out.

“Do you . . . do you need help?” It seems like a stupid thing to ask, but I don’t know what to make of her behaviour.

After a minute, the girl shakes her head of her intense stare and says, “Sorry. I just . . . I just woke up.” She grins, showing off the dimples on either side of her mouth. She runs her fingers through her curls to straighten them, but they just twist and frizz back as they were. “I was just makin’ sure you felt welcome. My first day, I didn’t have anyone. Well, except Misty I guess.” She laughs a little. Her voice is filled with a Texas twang. “Are you needin’ any help with your bags?”

“I think we’ve got them, thanks.” I reach for my harp case and then think better of it. “What’s your name?”

“I’m Sunni. Sunni Harris.”

She grins again, and there’s so much warmth in it that I can

almost smell fresh country grass and homemade pies and cookies.

“I’m Ingrid,” I say.

“I know.”

“You . . . know?”

Sunni bites her lip as embarrassment colours her freckled face. “Well . . . I guess, yeah, I do know. I saw your file in Ms. Agailya’s office when I was in there, and she deals a lot with . . .”

She trails off as Dad, holding a bag, opens the door and holds it open for Mum and Ms. Agailya. Mum wheels in another large suitcase while Ms. Agailya carries a small travel bag. Dad manages to slip inside before the door closes on him completely.

“Ingrid, honey, your keyboard is still in the car. I’ll go back and get it,” Dad says as he sets one of my suitcases down.

“You need any help?” I ask.

“No, I’ll be right back.”

Dad leaves and Ms. Agailya is about to go up the steps when she notices Sunni gripping the stair railing as if her legs are about to give out.

“Sunni Harris,” Ms. Agailya says, looking surprised. “You’re out here in your pyjamas. Is anything the matter?”

“Oh . . . no,” Sunni replies. She’s got a sheepish look on her face, and if I were her, I’d be embarrassed. “Just saw her comin’ in and thought I’d like to say hello, is all. I can show Ingrid to her room, if you’re busy, Ms. Agailya.”

“No, Sunni, you don’t have to worry about that. Thank

you, though. Breakfast ends in a half hour. You might want to hurry or you'll miss it."

Sunni curls her hands and sticks them in her armpits, for warmth. "I already ate, actually."

"Good. Ingrid, we shouldn't keep Sunni from her morning routine." She starts up the stairs.

Mum follows her, and I give Sunni one last smile. "It was nice to meet you."

"Yeah, same to you," Sunni says. "Look, one thing before you go." Her gaze flickers up to Mum and Ms. Agailya, who are disappearing down the second-floor hallway, and to Dad, who is inching closer to the door with my keyboard carried across his shoulder, and then settles on me again. "Don't eat the food, if you can help it."

I frown. "Is it really that bad?"

Her cheeriness has been replaced with the solemnity of someone who has seen the darker face of the world. "Yeah. There's this café down the road. Eat there, it's . . . it's still not great, but it's better than everythin' you can eat here."

I don't want to say so, but I'm pretty sure Dad already bought the meal plan. You have to, if you're going to live in residence. And if you're attending Sparkstone University, you have to live in residence.

"I'm sure I'll get along fine," I say.

Sunni's smile is grim. "You probably will, yeah."

Something in Sunni's green eyes glue me in place. There are words she can't say swirling around in her irises. A

plea: *please, listen to me.* I place a firm foot on the step. I have to go. Mum and Ms. Agailya are already out of sight and I don't want to get lost on the first day.

The door opens a crack. Dad is trying to get in with the keyboard. I hold the door as he strolls inside unsteadily, and again, refuses my offer to help. He nods a hello to Sunni on his way up the stairs.

"It was nice to meet you," I say to Sunni, lifting my hand in an awkward wave. "I'll see you later?"

"You count on it." Her smile is more genuine, more relaxed now.

I pick up my harp case and race up the stairs after my parents and Ms. Agailya. I turn around to catch a glimpse of Sunni again but she's already gone. Despite her weird preferences about the school's food, I can see her becoming my first friend. *Maybe there's a place for me here after all.*

There's a hallway off to the left, and my parents are at the end of it, waiting. The carpet floor is worn, the lights hanging on the wall are dim, and there are faint scratches on the walls, as if someone had dragged her fingernails across the panelling. I can't help but picture some poor student being pulled against her will to her room. University dorms are closets at best. I prepare myself for the worst.

"My apologies, Ingrid," Ms. Agailya says as she produces a key from her breast pocket. "My staff are not yet finished preparing your room, as we didn't know your individual tastes. This room is only temporary."

The key clicks sharply in the lock and the door opens, revealing an outdated hotel room. Flowery wallpaper, flowery bedspread, dark green carpet. It's old, but it doesn't matter because it's huge. Twice the size of my bedroom at home, at least. The bed is on the back wall and it has a circular mattress. I've never slept on a bed shaped like a circle before. Everything looks slightly used—the four-drawer, wide oak dresser over to the left by the bathroom door, the scratched, bruised nightstand to the right of the bed, and the long, heavy, off-white curtains on the back window—but nothing smells old or musty. It's antique. I don't want to touch anything for fear of breaking something.

“This is only a temporary room?” I ask in disbelief.

“Yes. Again, my apologies,” Ms. Agailya says. She hands me a spare key from her pocket. “Keep it safe. There's a charge for a replacement key if you lose it.”

I think it's strange that a high-tech school has physical keys for its doors, but if they didn't have my blood to make into a key card in the first place, I guess the key is necessary.

Dad whistles as he drops one of my suitcases onto the thick carpet. “Maybe we should get a room here. What do you say to that, Ingrid?”

“Oh, Craig, stop,” Mum says, hitting him playfully on the arm.

I flop backwards onto my new bed and immediately melt into the mattress. I don't think I've ever lain on something so comfy. Sleep will come easily for me tonight. My eyes already feel heavy. “Do I have classes today?”

“Yes. After you’re settled, we’ll go to the registrar and sort out your major.”

“Ugh,” I say, rolling over and basking in the softness of the bed. “I could fall asleep right now!”

Dad chuckles as Mum checks out the room, probably inspecting it for cleanliness. I breathe in the scent of the quilt. It smells as fresh as the day the artisan put the finishing stitches in its intricate twirling-flower design. Large room, beautiful campus—this school has money. More money than any other university in Canada, maybe in all of North America. This is luxury I could get used to.

“Ms. Agailya? Ms Agailya!”

A young man’s voice—thick with a British accent of some kind—echoes through the hallway. He scampers into the room: six-foot-one, lanky build, cropped curly dark hair. He sports a leather jacket that looks as if it’s seen more than its share of action. I sit up instantly and mind my skirt and fix my hair. Guys in leather jackets can’t be ignored, under any circumstances. He smiles at me and his eyes are kind, and fiercely green. My grin betrays my pounding heart.

His gaze slides to my harp case, lying against the wall. He jerks his thumb at it. “You’re a musician?”

The first thing out of my mouth? “I like your leather jacket.”

His grin widens. “I like your leather boots. Knee-highs?”

“Knee-high, steel-toed, real leather. Got them for my birthday. From my mum.” I’m so giddy I’m practically bouncing on the bed. “They’re my faves.”

Ms. Agailya is not impressed. “Ethan Millar. You know you’re not allowed on this floor. It’s for girls only.”

“Sorry.” He face reddens, but I’m not sorry. I don’t think he is either, because he’s still smiling like a boy whose hand has been caught in the cookie jar. He hands her a folded note. “Professor Jadore wanted me to give you this.”

Ms. Agailya’s eyes sweep quickly over the note before she refolds it and sticks it in her breast pocket. “It seems I have a matter to take care of. Mr. and Mrs. Stanley, allow me to escort you to registration and we can get you sorted there. Ingrid, your tutorial starts in half an hour—normally I’d ask you to come to the registrar’s office, but we don’t like our new students, especially late arrivals, missing their first tutorials. Perhaps, Ethan, you could show her to her tutorial room?”

“Sure.” He turns his half-smile to me again and I melt a little bit more. “Did you need to unpack first?”

“No, I guess I can do it later,” I reply. “I don’t want to be late on my first day. What about registering my major? And how do I know what classes I’m taking, if I’ve never signed up for any?”

“Maybe Ethan will be able to explain how we do things here at Sparkstone. Normally, I would, but . . .” She opens the door and gestures to Mum and Dad. “I’m sorry, but I really must be going, and Ingrid must not be late for her tutorial.”

“Who is her tutor?” Ethan asks.

“Put her with Professor Jadore for now, and we can re-evaluate once her project for this semester has been decided.

Room 216.” She clears her throat. “After my matter has been attended to, perhaps, Mr. and Mrs. Stanley, you would appreciate a tour of the grounds?”

“Well . . .” Mum is hesitant. “We’ve got to get back to the city before it gets too late.”

“Of course, of course. I’ll leave you to say your goodbyes, then.”

Ms. Agailya steps gracefully into the hallway and leaves the door ajar. This bothers me more than I let on, but before I can dwell on it, Mum is hugging me so tightly that the air is forced from my lungs.

“Whenever you need us,” she says, “just call.”

Her tears stain my cheeks. Ethan leans against the wall next to my harp. I’m embarrassed; he shouldn’t have to witness this private moment between me and my family. I stay strong because I don’t want to cry in front of a stranger, especially since the stranger is a cute guy. Finally Mum lets go and Dad comes forward, smiling thinly to conceal his pride and his fear of letting go, and hugs me goodbye. Mum and Dad are the only family I have, and I’m the only child they have. I can’t disappoint them.

“We’ll visit as soon as we can,” Mum promises, wiping her tears with her coat sleeve.

I nod. “Have a safe trip home.”

And then like that, they’re walking away from me, out the door and into the hallway. The light catches Ms. Agailya’s silvery-blue eyes and makes them shine like precious

jewels. With a last wave, they disappear from sight, leaving the door open.

I take a deep breath and let it go to dispel the anxiety and the sadness welling within my stomach.

“Um, we’d better get going,” Ethan says finally, stepping away from the wall. “You don’t want to be late for Jadore’s tutorial.”

I grab my backpack from among the scattered luggage—my laptop is in it, as well as a notebook and some pens—and follow Ethan out of my new room. “Is Professor Jadore strict or mean or something?”

Ethan grimaces. “Well . . . most of the students don’t really like her. She’s one of those people who never seems to be happy about anything.”

“Oh.” I lock the door with Ms. Agailya’s key and slip it into my skirt pocket. Together, we start down the hallway. “Will she be my only . . . tutor . . . then? What about lectures, or classes?”

He grins. “We don’t really have them.”

“What? But how—?”

“It’s almost all independent study in whatever field you choose. In the tutorials, there are small groups of six or seven or eight people and you discuss what you’re doing. They’re mixed so that no student in the same tutorial is studying the same thing.”

This isn’t what I had expected. I slow my stride. “You mean the students have to pay to go to school where they just do

independent projects and talk about them? Sounds like anyone could do that themselves.”

“True,” Ethan admits, shoving his hands into his jeans pockets. “Except that at the end of the semester, the projects are reviewed and graded by top people in your field. And usually, the best of the best projects attract attention, and it’s easy for Sparkstone grads to get jobs that way, or at the very least, opportunities they wouldn’t get otherwise.” He shrugs. “So, what are you thinking of studying?”

Music, I almost say. I massage my piano fingers. They itch to play. I had considered taking a year off to teach music or applying for a college or university where I could continue to study and learn, but my parents had strongly recommended that I choose something more “traditional” to study.

“Psychology, maybe,” I say instead. “Maybe sociology or another social science. I guess I haven’t really decided yet.”

“That’s all right. You’ve got two majors to pick. Just decide one soon and you can pick the other one later.”

“Two majors? Everyone has two majors?”

“Yeah. Sparkstone’s different than other universities.” He runs a hand through his short hair.

“You can say that again,” I mutter.

“Ahh, it’s not so bad,” Ethan says. His hand lingers over my shoulder, as if he’s about to reassure me, but he withdraws it quickly with an awkward smile. “Just as long as you’re not a procrastinator. Last semester I left my art collection to the last minute. I spent three straight days painting, drawing . . . I went

in to meet the woman evaluating my pieces and honest to God, I can't even remember how the meeting went, I was so tired. I probably looked wrecked."

He laughs at himself, and I find myself laughing too. We descend the stairs to the lobby area again. There's no sign of Sunni. *She must be on her way to class by now.* Ethan opens the door and leads me across the street, around Rita House. The grass smells as if it was mowed yesterday and reminds me of the pleasant lime-green tones of a song in E major. Some students find shelter beneath randomly placed maple trees, where they read books and type on laptops, while others like us trudge towards a brick building across the curved roundabout road. The gold-plated sign above the double-doored entrance reads *MacLeod Hall*.

"Don't you find it odd that they never explained all this?" I ask as I breathe in the brisk September air. "That it's not on their website, or brochures? That they don't advertise at the university fairs in high schools? Why wouldn't they want people to know about this beautiful little town?"

Ethan shrugs again, his leather jacket making a comforting rustling sound. "I suppose it's strange. But Sparkstone has its own way of doing things, you see. There's all this secretive business but really it's just to keep the ones who don't deserve to be here out, and those who are worthy to be here in."

I raise an eyebrow. "And who just *is* worthy of being here?"

"Well, you must know yourself, being chosen." His

half-smile is back. “The smartest, the brightest in their fields. Sparkstone handpicks them from across the world.” He points a thumb at his chest. “I’m a second-year. Was surprised last year that I got accepted to a university in Canada, without even applying, not a visa on me either. But, they got that all sorted, and here I am.”

“Where are you from exactly?” I’m terrible at discerning accents. My face heats—hopefully he doesn’t think I’m stupid for not being able to identify his accent, after going on about how only the brightest are accepted to Sparkstone.

“Outside of London. There aren’t many of us Brits here.”

I’m about to ask him more about his English heritage, and if he enjoys British science-fiction TV shows, but as soon as we step inside MacLeod Hall, I’m overcome with the feeling that I’m in high school again. A narrow lobby makes a sharp left, widens, and turns into a corridor. Lockers line the wall to my right, while floor-to-ceiling windows let in the late-morning sunlight to my left as we stroll down the hallway. A pair of double doors hides another wing and some stairs to another level. There are three classroom doors interspersed between the lockers. There’s no one else in the hallway except us—the students I saw before have been swallowed up by the classrooms—and it feels like the calm before the storm.

“Anyway, Room 216 is there,” Ethan says, pointing to the classroom door closest to us. “I have to go, or I’ll be late for my own tutorial.”

“Oh. I didn’t mean to make you late.” I clutch the straps of

my backpack, feeling silly, not knowing what to do with my hands, not knowing what this guy expects of me, wanting to disappear but stay at the same time.

Ethan starts to head down the hallway towards the exit, but his gaze remains fixed on me. “I’ll see you later then, yeah?”

“Yes, definitely!” Inside, I’m cursing myself. That sounded too eager. “I mean, yeah, that . . . that would be cool.”

He smiles and shakes his head. “It’s my accent, isn’t it. Always messes with the ladies’ heads. Makes them . . .” He trails off, and his face turns a shade as dark as my hair. “How abouts I give you a proper tour after? That is, unless you’re busy unpacking or something. I’d help with that too but I don’t think Ms. Agailya would like me on that floor again without permission.”

“I’d like that. The tour, that is.”

“All right then. I’ll meet you here after tutorial, yeah?”

“Sounds good.”

He waves goodbye. I face the classroom door. Through its tiny window, I see chairs arranged in a semicircle. There are already students in there. I should really go inside.

But . . .

I glance over my shoulder, to see if Ethan is stealing one last look at me. He’s not. The hall is empty. Oh well. It’s only the first day, and I’ve only known him for fifteen minutes. There’s no way—

I step forward and bump into someone who wasn’t there

before. Startled, I lose my balance as my feet get tripped up in something long, thin, and hard. The floor rushes up to meet me.

CHAPTER 3



My head strikes the floor and pain radiates through my body.

First thought: *At least Ethan isn't here to see me fall.*

Second thought: *I shouldn't have worn these gigantic leather boots today.*

Third thought: *Ethan did seem to like my boots though.*

I groan and climb to my feet as I wipe off my skirt and check for bruises. No major damage, except for my pride. A woman stands in my periphery. I feel her watching me, silently, unapologetically.

“I didn't see you there, sorry,” I say. I just want to get into the classroom now. Hopefully none of the students saw me fall. That would be embarrassing.

“I did not see you either,” the woman replies.

I frown. “How could you not see me when—”

Oh.

I look up at the person responsible for my fall. The six-foot-tall woman is dressed in a green business suit that brings out her

skin's copper hues, but she also carries a long, thin black cane. That's what I must have tripped over. Reflective sunglasses obscure most of her face and mirror my surprise. Guilt drives into my chest like a slippery knife.

"I'm sorry," I say, covering my mouth. "I didn't know you were . . ." It seems like a bad word to say. "*Blind.*"

"And I don't believe we've met." Her voice is a bit gravelly and contains an accent, maybe German? The woman clears her throat. "You are the new student?"

"Yes. I'm Ingrid Stanley." I stick out a hand but then think better of it. "I was just going to my tutorial."

"Room 216?" the woman asks, knocking her cane against the door. "You are in my tutorial, then. I am Professor Jadore."

I clear my throat and think about what Ethan had said about her. "Nice to meet you."

"In the future, Ingrid, I prefer my students to be on time, sitting in the tutorial room before I arrive." She taps her cane once on the floor. Through the window, I see the students inside looking out at me. I blush. "Just because I'm blind doesn't mean I don't know you aren't there."

Meekly, I nod, and then remember her condition at the last minute. "Yes, Professor."

"Good."

It's unsettling to look at her face. Something about not being able to see her eyes makes Professor Jadore a hard woman to read. I'm about to help her with the door but she finds the knob just fine. Of course, she probably does this every day! Tucking

a stray lock of hair behind my ear, I follow the professor into the classroom.

There are ten chairs in the semicircle but only eight students present. There are no desks. My attention is captured by a hand frantically waving in the air—it's Sunni. She's looking more presentable now, dressed in a turquoise shirt with fluffy sleeves and clean, dark skinny jeans. The shadows beneath her eyes persist, though they don't affect her cheery disposition. I sit down in the empty chair beside her.

I part my lips to say something to her, but she shakes her head slightly. She points at her notebook, where she's scrawled: *I had a feeling you would be here with us.*

Us? Before I can ask, Jadore's cane taps the floor twice and any chatter in the room ceases immediately. She finds her seat facing the semicircle, feeling the back of the chair to ensure its existence, and then sits. The cane rests across her lap. She curls one hand around it, as if she intends to use it to strike at any moment. "We'll keep this meeting to under a half hour, since I know you are behind on your projects. And I know some of you haven't started your projects yet."

I feel a lump in my throat. I'd forgotten this semester started almost a month ago, during the first week of August. We had no idea—the acceptance letter had been vague about the semester's start date, and unless you're already a current student, communicating with Sparkstone seems next to impossible. If Ms. Agailya hadn't called yesterday, Mum and Dad would've waited another week to drive me up here.

Each student gives Jadore an update about his or her project. The first is an Asian girl named Jia, and she's writing a paper about women and child abuse and comparing it to the treatment of women and children in ancient cultures. Next to her, a tall, muscular black guy named Wil talks about something complicated involving computer engineering and mathematics. He polishes the razor-thin frames of his glasses as Professor Jadore advises him on the finer points of a particular mathematical theory. I have no idea what Jadore's speciality is as far as academics goes but I figure that she must be well versed in a lot of different subjects to advise everyone in the room.

I'm in awe of the variety of projects happening in such a small, sleepy town. I hope that I can come up with a project that sounds half as smart as what Jadore and the other students are talking about. I have to impress them if I want to fit in.

The girl sitting between Wil and Sunni is next. She smacks her gum and plays with her stretched earlobe. Pierced septum, pierced eyebrow—I wonder if her tongue is pierced as well, and if it's even safe to chew gum with a pierced tongue. She sits with one foot perched on the seat while the other swings impatiently back and forth.

"Misty. Where are you at with your project?" Jadore asks.

Her eyes, encased in heavy mascara and shadow, flicker up in a silent challenge. They make her light skin look deathly pale. I'm not sure if she'll respond. If she weren't

chewing her gum so loudly, she might be able to get away with pretending to be absent.

“It’s comin’ along,” she says, snapping her gum again. “Doin’ more research, just like you said.”

“Good.” Jadore’s long, painted nails drum across her cane. “But I expect more of you, Misty. Your analysis of the romance languages last term was not worthy of a Sparkstone student.”

Misty shrugs. “I’ll try harder, I guess.”

“You will.”

The edge in Jadore’s voice makes it clear that her authority won’t be challenged. Beside me, Sunni stiffens. Misty ignores Jadore’s remark and pulls part of the gum from her mouth, creating a long string.

Jadore moves on. “Sunni?”

“Yes, Professor?” Sunni replies. Her voice wavers slightly.

“Tell me about your analysis of the Venus flytrap and the prey that manage to escape it. Have the beetles that escaped shown any sign of intelligence that the others did not? You were running several experiments last week. How are they progressing?”

She steals a glance at me before replying. Her cheery demeanour seems to vanish under Jadore’s scrutiny. “Actually . . . Professor . . . I spent the past few days workin’ on somethin’ else.”

Jadore tilts her head. If not for her sunglasses, I would have guessed she was looking directly at Sunni. “Something else?”

“Um . . . yes, Professor. See, while I was doin’ some research in the library a few days ago, I came across this website, and there was some information on this guy. Maybe . . . maybe it’s not important.”

“Perhaps not. But if it is pulling your attention away from your project, you must report that.”

Sunni’s fingers play with a loose thread on the stitching of her jeans. “Yes, Professor.”

“Tell me what you’ve been studying instead of the Venus flytrap, Sunni.”

Jadore’s command cannot be ignored. A pang of fear twists around my spine as Sunni answers in the smallest, mousiest voice. “Joseph G. Campbell.”

The name seems to strike a chord with Jadore. Her back straightens. “Joseph G. Campbell?”

“Yes. He’s a theoretical physicist—or was, I’m not sure if he’s still alive, and, uh, anyway, he had some interestin’ theories about”—Sunni looks to Misty and Jia for support—“um . . . somethin’ called *multiverses*.”

“I am familiar with Joseph G. Campbell’s work.” Jadore’s response is slow and deliberate. “And I know it has nothing to do with biology, or insect psychology, or any kind of psychology.”

“Yes . . . I know . . . I was just . . . I just found it interestin’, is all.”

“If everything you found interesting was included in your study, Sunni Harris, the world would not have enough paper to print and publish it. Keep your focus, and you will do well.”

Sunni leans back in her chair and plays with her fingernails.

“Yes, Professor Jadore.”

“One more question. On what website did you come across Joseph G. Campbell’s work?”

Sunni freezes. Her bright green eyes grow wide. “Well . . . uh . . . it was just a footnote on Wikipedia, for some book, that happened to be in the library.” She bites her lip, as if she’s already said too much.

“A Joseph G. Campbell book here, in our library?” Jadore raises a thin, sculpted eyebrow. “His written works are rare, out of print, and difficult to find. What treatise was it?”

“I . . . I don’t remember . . .” Sunni looks to me for help, but I’ve never even heard of this Joseph G. Campbell person.

Jia speaks up. Her voice is quiet, like Sunni’s, but carries the maturity of a wise sage. “Excuse me, Professor. I was there. I was helping Sunni that day. The book was called *Campbell’s Multiple Verses* and we only looked for it for ten minutes. It was very hard to find much information about this man online, and Sunni was just curious about him.”

“I see. So you didn’t find the book?”

“No, Professor,” Jia replies. “We went back to our respective studies.”

Jadore seems to chew on this for a moment. “Very well. Sunni, I expect a more thorough update from you tomorrow.”

“Yes, Professor,” Sunni says softly.

Jadore looks around the circle and then speaks, her tone unchanged. “Ingrid. I hope that you have gotten a sense of

what we expect here at Sparkstone. Have you any idea what you would like to study this semester?"

"Um." I clear my throat. Clear and concise, that's what Jadore seems to want in an answer. "Something to do with psychology. Or music."

"You are a musician?"

"A . . . pianist, actually. And a harpist. I have my Grade 9 piano from the Royal Conservatory, and I just passed my Grade 4 in harp, with first class honours."

This actually makes Jadore smile. "You will make a promising addition to this tutorial, I feel. I look forward to your updates."

A sigh of relief escapes me. Good. I've impressed the professor. Even Sunni is smiling at me. I won't be labelled as stupid or not smart enough, hopefully. "Thank you."

I quietly take out my notebook from my backpack and make some notes about potential majors and project ideas. After another ten minutes or so of Jadore questioning the other students, we are dismissed. Some students, like Misty, leap from their chairs and leave the room as quickly as possible. Sunni lingers, waiting for Jia and Wil. Jadore remains frozen, like a statue, and stares out the window with her blind, shaded eyes. There's nothing left for me to do, so I head for the door.

"Hey, Ingrid," Sunni says. She follows me into the hallway, with Jia and Wil not too far behind. "So you're settled in, then?"

"They gave me a temporary room, yeah," I reply. I wonder if I should ask her about the blood samples and why she told me

not to eat the food. I decide this might be too weird to mention out of the blue. “The room is pretty nice, but I’m looking forward to seeing what my actual room looks like. They say they customize it to your tastes?”

“Yeah.” Sunni bobs her head and smiles, but her eyes are saying something different again, as they were when I met her in the lobby. She touches my arm with her warm fingers. “Listen. I know what it’s like to be new and not know anyone, so if you’re needin’ help, or if you’re needin’ someone to give you a tour . . . ”

I blush. “Oh. Well, someone already offered to give me a tour.”

“Who?” she asks.

“Um, this guy named Ethan. I met him when I arrived.”

“Ethan Millar? He’s on my floor,” Wil interjects. “Nice guy.”

“He’s very cute,” Sunni adds. The sparkle is back in her eyes.

“I thought he had a girlfriend,” Jia says.

Wil shakes his head. “That girl Kimberly? No, they’re just friends.”

“How do *you* know?” Jia nudges him lightly on the arm, and a brief, awkward silence descends upon the group. Wil smiles, adjusts his glasses, and says nothing.

“I just met him. He offered to show me around,” I say, shrugging, hoping that I don’t seem *too* interested in him.

“You shouldn’t trust everyone you meet.”

I turn around. It’s Misty. I hadn’t even realized she’d been standing behind us the whole time. She bites off part of her

thumbnail, painted black, and spits it out on the floor. Her stare challenges me to react to her behaviour.

Sunni just smiles and squeezes Misty's arm. "I'm sure Ethan's fine. Besides, Ingrid can trust us."

Even Misty softens a little at Sunni's touch. I'm not sure why trust is such an important issue. I tell myself that she's just trying to make me feel welcome, but I'm getting that unsettling feeling in my stomach again, as if something is very wrong but I just don't know enough to see what it is yet.

"Here he comes," Sunni says.

I whip around, and Ethan's weaving his way through the bustling hallway. I wave and he waves back, smiling as he approaches us.

"Hey!" he says.

I hug my notebook closer to my chest. "Hey."

His eyes sweep over Sunni, Misty, Jia, and Wil, who are hovering around me. "You . . . still up for a tour?"

"Yes, definitely," I reply, maybe a little too quickly.

"I was going to stop by the greenhouse, so I'll tag along with you two, if y'all don't mind," Sunni says. "I have a key, so we could sneak a quick peek inside, if you want."

"Sure," Ethan says.

Oh. We aren't touring alone.

"Yeah, and I could get us into the tech building, up the road," Wil offers.

"The psych lab where I work isn't that exciting," Jia says quietly, with a small smile. "We could always tour it later."

“Hey, I’ve got nothing else to do this afternoon. It’s up to Ingrid what she wants to see.” There’s a sparkle in Ethan’s eye, a kindness that reaches out and touches my stomach and twists it into knots. He doesn’t seem upset that they want to join us, so I try not to let it bother me.

“Greenhouse, tech building—that all sounds good to me,” I reply. “I saw some shops down the road, maybe we could check those out sometime too?”

“The tech building is sort of near the bakery, and the café,” Wil says.

Sunni’s eyebrows rise. “We could get a bite to eat there.”

I am feeling a little hungry, and I have ten dollars cash on me. I think back to what my dad said about the meal plan, how expensive it is. *Maybe, just for today, I could go out, but I have to be careful not to make it a habit.*

Jia and Sunni quickly map out the most efficient route around campus that will hit all the highlights. Misty is playing with her phone, bored. *Why is she here if she doesn’t want to come? Maybe she’ll leave us alone.* She catches me staring. “What?” she spits.

“Nothing. I just . . .” I glance at her cell phone and reach for mine in my skirt pocket as I try to come up with an excuse. “I thought we didn’t get great reception way out here.”

She shrugs.

All right then.

Everyone else is stuffing their bags into the half-lockers. I stand awkwardly with Misty. She doesn’t have a backpack

or a notebook or anything. I shift the straps on my shoulder.

This laptop is going to be heavy to carry around campus.

Ethan steals a glance at me. “You can put your things in my locker for now, if you’d like.”

My insides leap with joy. “Sure, thanks.”

“I think there are a few lockers still available for rent,” Sunni adds as she reattaches the lock on her locker. As it clicks shut, her grip tightens on it, and she lingers there, as if caught up in another thought. Wil approaches her cautiously, but Sunni waves him away.

I wonder what that’s about.

I give my things to Ethan and he carefully puts them in his locker. “I don’t really use my locker much, since my paintings don’t fit in here, so just let me know whenever you want to use it. The combo lock is ten, twenty-four, thirty-five.”

“Thanks.” My face feels hot.

We leave MacLeod Hall and head towards the greenhouse, since it’s the closest. Sunni sticks close to me with Jia at her side. Wil walks ahead of us, hands in his pockets. He walks with his head down, because he’s so tall, I guess. Misty trails behind, still fooling around with her phone.

Ethan is on my right. I try to think of something clever to say to him, but Sunni pipes up first. She fires off a million questions: Where am I from? What do I like to do in my spare time? I tell them about my musical accomplishments and Sunni squeals with excitement.

“A musician! That’s exactly what—!” She cuts herself off with a nervous laugh. “I mean . . . that’s great.”

I blush and steal a glance at Ethan. He’s also beaming at me.

“I guess I could play for you sometime,” I say.

Sunni looks away and nods, but the sadness is in her eyes again.

“You okay, Sunni?” Misty says from behind us.

“Yeah, fine,” Sunni says, throwing Misty a wide grin that seems insincere.

“You sure?” I ask. “I mean, I don’t have to play for you, I just thought . . .”

Sunni shakes her head. “No, no, it’s not that. Just . . . don’t mind me. Just . . . have a lot on my mind right now.”

“About what Professor Jadore was talking about, your project on Joseph G. Campbell?”

Jia sucks in her breath and holds it, as if I’ve just said a bad word. Sunni looks conflicted. “I shouldn’t have mentioned that,” she says quietly. “And neither should you.”

“Why?” Ethan asks. “Joseph Campbell, as in *Hero With A Thousand Faces* Joseph Campbell? What’s so bad about him?”

“Not that Joseph Campbell. Joseph G. Campbell,” Sunni replies, her voice barely a whisper. “Just . . . I don’t know. His name isn’t that respected in academic circles, by those who actually know his name. It’s probably better y’all don’t say anythin’ about him in tutorial or anywhere else. All right?”

“Okay,” I say. I make a mental note to look him up later when I’m alone.

Ethan shrugs and reaches into his pocket. “I spend most of my time in a studio alone, so I won’t say his name to anyone. Anyone want some gum?”

“I’ll have some,” Misty says. She speeds her walk and catches up with the rest of us, holding out her palm.

“Didn’t the doctor tell you not to chew gum with your tongue piercing?” Jia asks. She looks uncomfortable.

Misty shrugs. “I’m not letting anyone tell me what to do with my body.”

Ethan punches out a piece into Misty’s hand and turns to me. “Gum?”

Usually I’m not a big gum person, but since Ethan is offering . . .

“Sure.”

He pulls out the plastic holder for the gum, revealing two pieces left in the pack. “Aw. Here, just take it. I’ve got tons back in the room.”

“Oh, thanks,” I say, pocketing the pack and mentally inscribing *likes gum* onto the list I’m compiling about him. So far *hot British accent* and *re-watch all David Tennant Doctor Who episodes to fawn over likeness* are the top two entries.

We’re almost at the greenhouse. It’s across the road from the cluster of residences, right on the roundabout, near the main street that would take us into Sparkstone’s shopping district and private suburbs. The entire building is see-through. Cultivated greenery twists its way to the top of the structure. Behind the building is a group of maple trees, which acts as

a privacy barrier between the main road and the goings-on inside the sheer greenhouse. I see two people inside, watering plants and making observations on a clipboard. I wonder how they install the blood-taking door system on a building made of wood and thick, transparent tarps.

Sunni digs out a white swipe card from her pocket. On the door, I see a mechanical black box with a pinprick of red light shining on the side.

So there is some sort of digital system to let people in and out. I know it's in the school's best interest to keep everything secure, but who's going to steal stuff from a greenhouse? This is a little ridiculous.

"We won't stay in here long," Sunni promises. "I don't wanna interrupt the others."

"What sort of plants do you grow here?" I ask.

"Oh, a bit of everything!" Sunni's eyes light up as she launches into an explanation of every flower, vegetable, and greenery she's studied and grown. Misty, who had been texting, puts her phone away and gives Sunni her undivided attention. I'm also listening, until something odd catches my attention.

Behind the greenhouse, in the array of maple trees, someone is kneeling over a large, black ventilation system. At least, I think it's a ventilation system. It seems odd, though, to have such a thing on a greenhouse. The man—dressed in a one-piece, navy-blue overalls uniform and an orange construction vest—tinkers with the mechanical system. He

hums a tune that ascends the scale in the key of A major, switches briefly to C minor, and descends the scale again in A major. The tune starts slow, in two-four time, and then speeds up to the point where all the notes seem to be hummed at once, and then just as abruptly, he slows the melody again.

I veer away from the group and peer around the greenhouse. I don't want to get too close and disturb his work, but the tune has piqued my curiosity. He happens to lift his head and wipe sweat off his brow, and that's when I recognize his face.

It's the guard from the gate.

This isn't suspicious, I tell myself as I back away slowly. The guy probably has lots of jobs around the campus.

But then I see it's not a hand holding his wrench. It's a tentacle.

I barely suffocate a scream.

"Hey, Ingrid! What are you looking at?" Ethan asks.

The rest of the group hurries towards me, except Wil. One hand rests on his temple as he stands still.

My scream wasn't quiet enough. A snarl twists the guard's face. The tentacle drops the wrench as it slithers back up his sleeve.

"What is that guy?" I ask.

I get no answer from my newfound friends. Ethan looks puzzled. Wil moves in slow motion towards us, concentrating on something else. And Jia . . . *Where is Jia? She was just here a second ago.*

I take my gaze off the man for one second. Just one. When I look back, he's barrelling towards us. Towards *me*. The hatred in his gaze is so fierce I stumble backwards—into Sunni.

“GET DOWN!” she screams, and shoves me out of the way.

I hit the walkway with a thud. My head spins and the ground rumbles. What sounds like a lion's roar echoes throughout the campus. I start to get up but Sunni holds me down and covers my eyes.

“Hey! What are you—?”

“Don't look,” she whispers in my ear. “Please. Just don't.”

“Why? I need to see. What's going on?”

I wrestle with Sunni's grip but she's stronger than she looks. The roar comes again, but this time, screams follow. Sounds of explosions and something gurgling and claws ripping through clothing—*is someone being ripped apart?*

Misty yells something but no one responds and I smell grass burning. I have to do something.

There's a cell phone in my pocket.

Even this far out on the prairies 911 must work.

“Just . . . let . . . me . . .” I throw Sunni's hand off my eyes.

Fire burns the lawn and creeps dangerously close to the greenhouse. The two people who'd been working there before are gone. The guard is also gone: in his place is a five-foot-tall lump of beige and red flesh and a large, screaming mouth with circular rows of small, dark teeth. Hundreds of tentacles writhe and squirm in the air. And Misty, she's

running towards the monster, yelling profanities, running *into* the fiery wall that surrounds the creature.

No. That's not right. The fire, it's coming *from* Misty. Her hands are shooting fire and ice, coating the greenhouse in icicles and patches of ever-burning flame.

"Is this . . . real?" I ask.

Within arm's reach, Ethan is out cold, cuts and scrapes marring his freckled face. I have to make sure he's okay. Trying to shake Sunni, I feel a sharp stabbing pain boring into my temples, and Wil is running for me, hands outstretched, and then . . . darkness.

Thank you for downloading this sample
of *Stars In Her Eyes!*



If you enjoyed this sample, please consider purchasing a copy on FaeryInkPress.com, or through select local bookstores. Faery Ink Press is a small publisher of young adult science fiction, fantasy, and horror titles, so your support means a lot!

For updates about the Sparkstone series, subscribe to the Faery Ink Press newsletter (faeryinkpress.com/newsletter). Newsletter members receive discounts and news before almost everyone else.

For more about ordering *Stars In Her Eyes*, visit:



faeryinkpress.com/books/stars-in-her-eyes

\$14.95 CAD print / \$0.99 eBook

About the Author

Clare C. Marshall grew up in rural Nova Scotia with very little television and dial-up internet, and yet she turned out okay. Her YA sci-fi novel *Dreams In Her Head* was nominated for the 2014 Creation of Stories award, and her YA fantasy novel *The Violet Fox* received an honourable mention in the 2016 Whistler Independent Book Awards. She is a full-time freelance editor, book designer, and web manager. If there's time left in the day, she devotes it to Faery Ink Press, her publishing imprint. When she's not writing or fiddling up a storm, she enjoys computer games and making silly noises at cats.



*Photo Credit:
Terence Yung*

Facebook: [Facebook.com/faeryinkpress](https://www.facebook.com/faeryinkpress)

Twitter: [@ClareMarshall13](https://twitter.com/ClareMarshall13)

Website: FaeryInkPress.com