

**STARS** IN HER  
**EYES**

CLARE C. MARSHALL

BOOK ONE  
THE SPARKSTONE SAGA

*Stars In Her Eyes*

Book One of the Sparkstone Saga

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Cover Illustration © Bramasta Aji

Cover Design © David Farrell

Editing by Rachel Small

Back Cover Art © Tuomas Pekkarinen (“Funerium”)

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**FAERY INK PRESS**

faeryinkpress.com

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Printed in Canada by Webcom.

**Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Marshall, Clare, author

Stars in her eyes / Clare C. Marshall. -- Offset edition.

(The sparklestone saga ; book one)

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-988110-02-8 (softcover : offset).--ISBN 978-0-9877794-8-9

(softcover : POD).--ISBN 978-0-9877794-9-6 (EPUB).--

ISBN 978-0-9919610-0-9 (Kindle)

I. Title.

PS8626.A76675S73 2017

jC813'.6

C2017-901897-3

C2017-901898-1



Other books by Clare C. Marshall:

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# 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."



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Happy reading!

*-Clare*