

The Beginning of the Fairy Tale

Bloom Peters pulled her grubby sleeping bag up to her chin, shivered on the deflating air mattress laid on the cold floor, and wished for home.

No kindly fairy godmother came to grant her wish.

The warehouse where she spent her nights was a space that could give you nightmares, and Bloom didn't need any help in the nightmare department. There was detritus heaped in the corners of the cavernous space, and sometimes Bloom heard weird rustling coming from that direction—rustling that she'd firmly decided *not* to investigate. Moonlight sent shafts of cold illumination down through the apertures in the roof, like alien spaceships searching for an abductee.

Luckily for Bloom, her nightmares were about burning homes and not chilly warehouses. And she couldn't have nightmares if she never slept.

She sat up in her makeshift bed and reached for her notepad, using her phone to light the top page.

Bloom's list of ideas was titled *What the hell is happening to me?*

Pyrokinesis?

Mutations?

Superpowers?

Fireproof?

Under her list of ideas, she'd written the results of her experiments.

July 6th—candles—no burns.

July 8th—camping stove—no burns.

July 10th—blowtorch—no burns.

Experimenting on herself had been scary, but not as scary as the memory of her home burning. Every night, she relived the fight she'd had with her mom, and then the moment she'd woken to find her house in flames. She'd known that somehow, she'd done this. She'd charged through her burning house into her parents' bedroom to find the bed, the curtains, the whole room a seething inferno. Even the ceiling was a sea of flame. Bloom remembered her dad coughing desperately on the floor, her mom wrapped in a blanket and covered in burns. As though the fire had lunged to swallow her mom, when Bloom would never . . .

Bloom would never. Only she had.

Every night, she crept out of her nice, normal bedroom in her nice, normal, being-reconstructed-from-fire-damage home. She came here and huddled on the floor and tried

to think her way out of this. Bloom considered herself a fighter, but she was the one who'd hurt her mom. She didn't know how to fight herself.

Another rustle came, this one much louder. Bloom's head jerked up. She couldn't see much through the grime-smeared windows. If someone had seen a teenage girl sneak into the abandoned warehouse, they might get all kinds of ideas.

Bloom put down her phone and her notebook. Let them try to come at her. She'd hurt her own mother. She wouldn't hesitate to go scorched-earth on a creep. Literally.

There was another sound, an echoing footstep. Bloom's hands clenched into fists. She felt an itch in the center of each palm, like heat building.

The sound of the footstep hadn't come from the direction of the door.

Bloom spun around to see the woman.

This was no ordinary intruder.

This woman was clearly extraordinary. There was no question about that. She was tall, a middle-aged white woman in conservative clothes with an ash-blonde mane severely pinned up, dark decided eyebrows, and an air of immense dignity. Her presence seemed to transform the grubby warehouse into a stateroom.

Also, the wall behind the woman had opened into a shimmering portal of light. Just another clue that something unusual was going on.

"Bloom Peters?" said the stranger. "I'm Farah Dowling. Please try to forget my first name immediately. If you come

to my school, you won't be using it. Headmistresses don't have first names."

Bloom's first shock was fading.

"If I come . . . to your school," said Bloom. A jagged laugh erupted from her throat. "Oh, a mysterious stranger has come to tell me about her school for wizards?"

"Not wizards," said the woman.

Bloom waved this off. "Is this the part where you tell me I'm magic now?"

"You always were, Bloom," said Headmistress Dowling. "You just didn't know it yet."

That was enough. She might have mysterious powers that were out of control, the world might be going mad, but her parents hadn't raised her to listen to strange adults who approached in the dead of night with what sounded like a cult recruitment speech. Bloom snorted, abandoned her sleeping bag, and made for the door.

The woman's voice stopped her at the mouth of the warehouse.

"I know about the fire, Bloom."

Bloom trembled like a candle flame in a gust of wind. Slowly, she turned around. The woman was watching her with a steady gaze, keen but not unkind.

"Where are you going? You can't go home. You're too afraid you'll hurt your parents again."

Headmistress Dowling was right. Bloom shivered. Even in California, the nights could get cold.

Dowling moved toward Bloom, and Bloom held still, caught by a mixture of fear and hope.

“You’re looking for answers. I’m a teacher. That means I have all the answers. Or at least, I’ll tell you that I do.”

Bloom wanted to go home even more than she wanted answers, but she couldn’t find a safe path. Not on her own.

So when the woman spoke, Bloom listened.