

DREAM

FACTORY



Brad Barkley + Heather Hepler

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藏书章

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+

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DUTTON BOOKS

## **DUTTON BOOKS**

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*For my mom and dad and especially for Terry.  
Thank you for holding my hand on the tea cup ride.*

—HEATHER

*For Lucas and Alex, who still cross their fingers  
when I play the claw machine.*

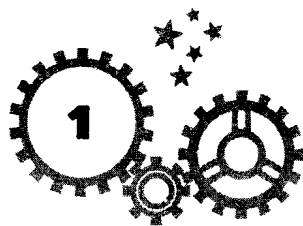
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# **D R E A M F A C T O R Y**





## *Ella*

I wasn't at all surprised when Cinderella gave me the finger.

They're supposed to stay behind the iron fencing separating the hotel from the monorail, but today there isn't any rent-a-cop blocking the way. "Just keep walking." I hear this murmured all around me, like some sort of mantra designed to carry us into the waiting train car and toward breakfast. "Don't they ever sleep?" Luke asks, pulling up even with me. "I mean, I saw that guy last night when I was coming back from the Electrical Parade." He points to a thin man leaning against the lamppost sipping from a Styrofoam cup.

"You mean Robin Hood?" I ask. Luke nods at me as he puts his hand up to block the sliding doors from closing. "He's *always* here," I say, stepping past him and onto the car.

“Do you see how he looks at Bryan?” he asks, lowering his voice.

“They all do that,” I push damp hair out of my eyes. I still haven’t acclimated to the heat. “It’s as if each of us got our own worst enemy when we signed up for this.”

“Maybe,” he says, pulling back enough to let Jesse walk through. Jesse is big, linebacker big. The perfect Friar Tuck. “But that guy acts like it’s personal, like *total* identity theft.” I sit down on the bench just behind where Luke is standing so that I can watch the crowd through the open door.

We know who they are by the signs they’re carrying. Buzz Lightyear’s simply has the words TO 401K AND BEYOND, which I think lacks creativity. Cinderella is busy talking on her cell phone. Her sign, which she has propped against the fence, reads MICKEY CAN KISS MY GLASS (SLIPPER). Captain Hook’s features the Jolly Roger with a mouse head where the skull is supposed to be. I’m pretty sure he’s the one that actually starts things.

I hear a thud against one of the windows near the back of the train car. One long *Ewww* is followed by another thud, then another. “What . . .” I begin, but I don’t finish my question. Amy comes in with a yellow streak on her face.

“Hurry!” Luke yells at the last few people now running for the tram. There are several more eggy thuds against the windows as Bryan and some guy with blond hair lunge through the door. Luke lets the door slide shut, and we listen to more thuds as we wait for the autopilot to respond to the door



I clear my throat. “Ella,” I say, “what do you want?”

She smiles. “You, right here beside me.” She squeezes my hand, leans into me. “And a hamburger.” She smiles big.

“Nice. Are those two ranked in any particular order?”

“Oh, you are definitely first. The hamburger is merely a close second.” She kisses the side of my face. “And I mean it. All that crappy food we had? I want a *real* burger, on a sour-dough roll, with real tomato. And fries.”

“I know just the place. They have the best burgers in the world, I think. Wanna go?”

“Sure. Where is it?”

“Memphis,” I tell her, and cut my eyes at her. “That’s in Tennessee.”

She laughs. “Well, I might need some Junior Mints or something to tide me over, since it’s like . . . how far away? Two days?”

“Yeah, if we take our time.”

She nods. “Let’s do that.”

I nearly miss the next exit ramp heading west. As we turn, I glance up into the rearview and try to see the fiberglass castle disappear behind us. By now the rain has stopped, and sunlight fills the car. Ella leans as we turn, one arm holding on to me, the other holding up the glass snow globe near her eyes again as the music plays. She tips it slightly so that all of the snow settles to one side of the globe. For that moment the two of them, Dale and Cinderella, dance in the bright sparkle of water, all the snow gone, nothing clouding their vision.

something Cassie said. The guy beside me uses his sleeve to wipe at the streaks of yellow slowly making their way down his cheek.

“Breakfast is bad?” the blond guys says.

I shrug. “It’s mostly just posing for pictures. That and answering questions.”

“Like what?”

“Mostly the usual. ‘What time’s the parade?’ ‘Where can we rent strollers?’ That’s the parents. It’s the kids you have to watch out for.”

“Why?”

“They want the *dirt*. Like, ‘Does Captain Hook really have a hook for a hand?’ ‘How can Ariel hold her breath for so long?’ ‘Do you really have a fairy godmother?’”

“Do you?”

“Not that I know of,” I say. “I mean, if I do, she’s keeping a really low profile.” I look past him to where Amy is making bug eyes at me. “*He’s cute*,” she mouths at me. I squint at her, which makes her smile.

“So, Ella,” he says, “I guess we’re going to be spending a lot of time together.”

“Why’s that?” I ask. I’m trying not to be rude, but I’m really not into the whole Disney Family thing that they keep talking about around here. After only a week I started to question my decision to come here, but going home early is out of the question. All this cheerful friendliness is starting to take its toll on me.

“I thought you knew,” he says. He folds the end of his shirt over onto itself, making a larger pocket. “James pulled his hamstring last night when he ran after you on the stairs.” I raise my eyebrows. I hadn’t seen James after the parade, but I thought maybe he’d just turned in early.

“So, you—”

“I went from ice-cream scooper to prince in one night.”

“That is quite a promotion,” I say. Amy is waggling her eyebrows up and down so fast that I can almost feel the breeze from where I am sitting.

“So, Ella, what do you think?” he asks. I think Amy’s eyes are going to roll out of her head if she doesn’t stop looking at me that way. “You think I have what it takes to be Prince Charming?”

I shrug, realizing that really isn’t the answer that he’s hoping for. Even on my good days I’m not that into the whole flirty thing. And today, with the heat and the smell of rotten eggs and the fact that I am going to have to break in the fourth Prince Charming in a month, I’m definitely not feeling like playful banter with someone. Even if that someone has crinkly brown eyes and curly blond hair. “Sure,” I finally manage. “I’m sure you’ll do fine.”

“You’re telling me you never made the connection?” Luke says to me out of the corner of his mouth. Mr. William “Call me Bill” Tubbs is at the front of the room giving us his daily pep talk. Today it’s peppered with lots of talk about unity

and the Disney Family, which rings kind of false considering that any day they could settle the strike and all of us would be sent home with a set of souvenir mouse ears and a free parking coupon. “How is that possible?” Luke asks. He leans back in his chair, propping up his feet on the head of his costume, which rests in front of him.

“Do you even know how much that would freak some little kid out if they could see you now?” I whisper.

“Stop changing the subject,” Luke says. “You never thought—Ella. Cinder . . . ella.”

Mr. Tubbs taps the map that is projected on the back wall, saying something about important visitors from the media.

“Why would I? My real name is Eleanor.”

Luke chokes on his coffee. “Eleanor?”

“It gets worse,” I whisper.

“How much worse could it be?”

“Gertrude.”

“Man, that’s bad.” Luke shakes his head as if I just told him I have a terminal disease. I elbow him hard, but he barely feels it through the thick fur of his costume.

“Now you,” I say.

“Oh no,” he says, holding up one paw. “I don’t tell anyone my middle name.”

“Worse than Gertrude?”

Mr. Tubbs clears his throat, making me look back at the front of the room. “Mickey will be at breakfast today.” Mr. Tubbs taps a stack of papers on the table as he talks, lining up

the edges. "Please take a copy of the schedule and try to be on time, people. Yesterday we had a fiasco at the Tea Party."

"A tea party fiasco," I whisper. Luke laughs too loudly, making Mr. Tubbs look over at us.

"So," Amy asks later, as she helps me to pin my hair up under my wig. "Who is he?"

"Who?" I ask, working my fingers into my gloves. I've been going through an average of four pairs a day. Amusement parks aren't really built for the white-glove treatment.

"The guy on the train."

"You are not going to believe this," I say, turning to check the back of my dress. Two days ago I went a whole hour with my skirt tucked into the top of my tights until one of the Merry Men told me. "He's the new Prince Charming."

"What happened to James?" Amy asks, twisting her hair up into a ponytail.

"Pulled hamstring."

"Man, how many is that? Three?"

"Four." I help Amy tug her wig down over the back of her head and adjust the headband to keep it from falling forward.

"I keep forgetting the Puker," she says, laughing.

"Yeah, who eats sushi at an amusement park?"

"At least this one's cute," she says, fluffing out her sleeves. Last week they made her carry this silk bluebird on her shoulder until a little girl got hysterical because she thought Snow White was into taxidermy.

“I don’t care what he looks like. I am so done with princes.”

“At least you *get* one,” Amy says, taking my hand and leading me toward the doors. “I get a third of a prince. I have to share mine with Ariel and Belle.”

“I thought Belle was with the Beast.” I can hear the murmuring of the crowds as the first group of characters makes its way through the doors and toward the tables.

“Ella, he isn’t always the Beast. Sometimes he’s the charming prince.”

“What’s the difference between the charming prince and Prince Charming?”

“Your guy’s *name* is Prince Charming,” she says, giving my arm a squeeze. “Capital *P* capital *C*. He’s the real deal.” We pause to allow Donald and Daisy Duck to have their own entry. “You ready?” Amy asks, giving me her best if-I-smile-any-bigger-my-face-is-going-to-split-in-two smile. We walk through the doorway and into the brightly lit restaurant, where dozens of families await. They have saved and planned and traveled and gotten up early just to meet us. To take pictures of us that will end up in a scrapbook or a photo album or a shoe box so that someday someone will take it out and say, *Hey look, there I am with Cinderella. That was the last time we went on a vacation before our parents got divorced or Mom died of cancer or Bobby ran away.* I smile at the family sitting in the first booth that I come to. Two little girls sit in between their parents. They have matching T-shirts with

swirls of pearlized ribbons and sprays of flowers, surrounding the words DISNEY PRINCESSES.

“Look who it is,” the mom says a little too shrilly. I have gotten used to this in the few weeks that I’ve been here. The too-big smiles. The too-loud laughs. The manic looks on everyone’s faces. The girls just stare at me with huge eyes, as if at any moment I might jump across the table and gobble them up. “It’s Cinderella,” the mom says, her voice hitting an octave nearly too high for human hearing. The little girls are frozen, pressed together at the back of the curving booth. I start to move on to the next table, where Goofy is entertaining a family by juggling a couple of apples and the pepper shaker, but the mom isn’t done with me yet. “Don’t you girls want a picture with Cinderella?” she asks, pulling the arm of the girl closest to her. I bend down, thinking that maybe if I make myself smaller, they won’t be so afraid. Slowly they slide out of the booth and make their way over to stand with me.

“Smile,” the dad says, waving his hand in an effort to make them step closer to me. His voice is brittle and tired. I smile as he clicks off one, then two, then three shots, turning the camera slightly with each one. The mom is pushing at her cheeks, exaggerating her own smile into something that barely resembles anything remotely happy. I look down at the girls standing quietly beside me. The older one has her arm around her little sister, who is trying to smile despite the fact that her cheeks are wet with tears.

. . .

Normally, I would have had to go through several auditions to even get a shot at being one of the fur characters, but I got Cinderella just by showing up. Management was desperate. They had sold-out Princess breakfasts, waiting lists for the Chip and Dale campfires, not to mention the thousands of people who just come to the park and mill around, cameras at the ready to “make a memory that will last a lifetime.” The union gave management until Memorial Day to meet their demands. Better work conditions, free meals, cleaner costumes, a dental plan. I took the bus to Orlando when I heard the radio ad announcing immediate open auditions for all characters.

The real reason I got the part wasn't because my hair was the right color (it's brown, not blond,) or because I could sing (not even “Happy Birthday” or “Jingle Bells”) or because I had a great audition (I tripped on my gown on the way into the room), but because I was the right size. Of the nearly two dozen other girls who showed up for the audition, I was the only one who fit into the costume without any alterations. Thinking that they were casting us for a day or two tops, keeping wardrobe changes to a minimum was a priority.

I have to admit Cinderella is a pretty plum role. Most of my day is spent hosting various meals around the resort. There's the character breakfast every morning after our real breakfast, then the Cinderella brunch at the castle, then the Princess Tea Party. In between times I have to stage the



whole running-down-the-castle-steps-and-losing-my-glass-slipper thing. I get married every afternoon at three, and then I have a break until the Electrical Parade at nine. Luckily, there's another Cinderella who does all the shows. Almost every face character has a duplicate in the performance area. Those people are the dancers and singers. Mostly all we do is smile and wave and sign autographs for people. The only thing that keeps tripping me up is the voice. Stacy, the princess handler, is in charge of making sure that we all stay in character when we're working. She keeps telling us that we have to talk more properly. "Think vaguely British." So in addition to trying not to break my neck running down stairs in heels and trying not to sweat more than a princess should, I walk around telling people that I *shan't* be at Aurora's buffet, that I *simply cawn't* believe this heat, and that I would *rawther* have a glass of water than juice. That's the other thing. Even though I go to about seven meals a day, I'm usually starving come dinnertime. Stacy made it very clear on the first day: Princesses don't eat.

I have to change into my brunch gown before heading over to the castle. "Need help?" Amy asks, stepping into the changing room. I turn and let her pull at my zipper. After the skirt-in-stocking incident last week, I've taken to wearing shorts under my gowns. Around us, girls are suiting up for the day. Jessie from *Toy Story* leans toward the mirror, using a brown eyebrow pencil to give herself freckles.