

Broken Veil

Chapter 1

Blackness. The rushing, roaring current in her ears. She was moving, tumbling. A doll in a storm she had no control over. Up was down, down was right, right was backwards. Her head splashed above the waves for just a moment, not enough time to breathe. But she needed to – her lungs were screaming. She inhaled, sucking in a mouthful of river water.

The choking, her body convulsing against suffocation, only made it all the more impossible to think.

She was drowning. Dying.

And still the torrent crushed her, spun her, strangled her.

Her head broke the surface again, long enough this time that only half her mouth filled with water when she tried to breath. Her eyes flashed open, saw only the shadowed, moon-lit world. The turbulent river, trees on either side rushing past.

Then she was under water again. Tumbling. Rolling.

Dying.

A large hand grasped her. Wet and hairy.

An inhuman roar.

And the next thing she knew, she was on the river bank – coughing up dirty water, sucking in fresh, wonderful air.

Her saviour moved – her round eyes snapping up to stare at it.

Humanoid. Or, at least, bipedal. Covered from head to clawed feet in black fur. Hunched slightly, drenched from diving into the river to save her. The werewolf's glowing, orange eyes lingered on her for a few heartbeats more – the creature's expression unreadable.

Before she could think to speak, it was gone.

Darted into the tress, lost in the shadows of the forest.

In the distance, a wolf's howl.

Bell's eyes shot open.

She gasped, clutched her chest. Heart racing, sweat clinging to her skin under the blanket.

It took her a moment to calm her breathing, relax herself. Her chest throbbed. Her head, as was always the case after that particular dream, ached. The bedsheets under her were drenched, a puddle of her sweat had formed just below the nape of her neck.

Groaning, welcoming the cool air, she sat up in bed – shoved aside her blanket.

She pushed herself off the bed, taking only a moment to glance at her digital alarm clock and the four numbers it displayed. Zero, six, three, two.

Half-past six.

She wasn't supposed to be up for another hour.

"Maybe I should try sleeping some more," she said to her empty room. "Get a little more shut-eye."

But no, that wouldn't work. Not with her wet bedsheets.

Fuck, she was going to have to wash them *again*.

A worry for later.

She walked, naked, through her small apartment – headed directly for the bathroom.

In moments, she was standing in the shower, face tilted up to the flow of warm water. Basking in the sensation. Her eyes were closed, body slowly beginning to wake up. No soap yet. No sponge. Just the lovely, sleep-killing rain of hot water.

That dream. Every night, just about.

She'd had it so often, for so long, that her parents had taken her to *multiple*

therapists and psychologists because of it. And those 'experts' had claimed it was due to some form of post-traumatic stress. That, over time and with the right help – and drugs – the dream would go away.

But it wasn't just a dream. That's what none of them saw.

It was a *memory*.

The counselling didn't help, because the specialists counselling her didn't believe her. And the drugs didn't work because Bell had refused to take them – hiding them under her tongue and spitting them out the first chance she got. Thankfully, her parents couldn't force her to take them any more, not since she'd moved into her own place.

It *wasn't* a fantasy. That werewolf really *had* saved her.

She shook her head quickly, pushed the thoughts aside and got to work cleaning her body instead.

Awake an hour early.

That'd give her plenty more time to work on her special project before she had to go to work.

Raven black hair, sharp blue eyes, an angular nose and pointed chin. She was attractive, no doubt about it. And she kept herself in good shape, went for regular runs and had a gym membership. She knew how good-looking she was – it was impossible not to, with the attention guys gave her.

The few friends she'd had through high-school had always said they envied Bell for her looks.

But, for all that she knew she was attractive, for all that her estranged friends had envied her, Bell had never put much stock in her looks. It was, at most, a tool for her to use. Not the 'easy path' that so many people thought it was, but a weapon for her to utilise in her quest.

Like her job. A waitress in a small diner.

Her looks had helped her secure it. What diner *didn't* want attractive waitresses to draw in customers? She *used* it to her advantage, but it didn't *define* her.

If she had lived another life, if she hadn't gotten lost that night and ended up in the river, perhaps Bell would've used her appearance for more. Secured herself a high-paying job, or found a wealthy husband, become a model or actress. Who could say? But that wasn't who she was.

A smile here, a flirty word there.

Things that opened doors that would've been locked to others.

Like this unremarkable door in front of her.

Apartment C12.

Bell planted a charming smile on her face, raised her hand, knocked on the door and waited.

Fingers crossed, the apartment's occupant was in.

After a few moments, the door opened.

A gangly guy with a spotty face, nineteen or twenty or so. A few years younger than Bell's twenty-three. And, by the looks of him, not very popular with the ladies. Perfect.

"Hi," Bell said brightly, straightening her back and pushing out her large, tank-top clad chest in a way that wouldn't be *too* obvious. "I'm Cindy. I live a few doors down..."

She turned to the side, pointed down the corridor with its many apartment doors. Predictably, when Bell turned back to the guy, he was staring at her chest. His eyes shot up, no-doubt certain that he'd gotten away with looking. Why did guys always think that? That looking away quickly when a girl turns towards them somehow meant the girl wouldn't realise they'd been looking?

"I lost my key!" Bell smiled, raised her hand and patted the top of her head. "I know, I'm dumb! My friend is on her way, so she'll be able to let me in when she gets here. I was

just wondering if maybe..."

She took a step forward, closer to the guy.

"...I could come in and wait here for her? This hallway is kinda cold."

"Uh," the guy blushed. "Sure!"

He stepped aside, let Bell enter – and was sure to glance at her ass as she passed him.

Without hesitation, Bell strode straight across the small apartment's main room, sat herself down on the apartment's windowsill with one leg up on it – the perfect angle to see out into the alleyway below.

The spotty-faced guy was talking, saying something.

Bell cut him off with a quick glance, a friendly smile. "I'm kinda thirsty," she said, being sure to pitch her voice just right. Guys always fell for the 'girly girl', soft, high-pitched voice. "Do you have anything to drink? I'd kill for a glass of water right now."

Like a happy puppy who'd just been offered a treat, the guy disappeared through one of the four doors inside the apartment. Exit, bedroom, bathroom, and kitchen – Bell assumed.

She returned her attention to the alleyway, heart thumping.

Any minute now...

Bell's breath caught, a *real* smile splitting her lips this time.

A tall man in a black business coat stepped into the dead-end alleyway, walked down it. He looked plain enough. Dark hair, pale skin, thin beard. Wearing a regular office-worker's suit, a briefcase in one hand.

"Here you go," a guy's voice spoke right behind Bell.

She flinched, glanced quickly at the spotty-faced guy and the glass of water he was holding, then turned her attention fully on the alleyway again.

"Thanks," she said half-heartedly. "Put it down somewhere."

The guy mumbled something. Bell ignored him.

Down below, the man in the alleyway stopped, glanced behind himself to make sure he wasn't being followed. Bell leaned back slightly, ready to hide should he gaze up at the apartment windows for onlookers. But he didn't.

Instead, the man turned to an alleyway wall. He stepped towards it, tapped the brick wall five times in a specific pattern.

A rectangular segment of the wall opened. A hidden doorway.

In seconds, the man had passed through into the darkness of that doorway, closing the secret door behind himself.

"Oh look," Bell grinned, turning to the spotty-faced guy. "My friend just arrived. Sorry for troubling you!"

She hopped off the windowsill, walked briskly out of the apartment. Behind her, the guy called after her – wanting to know which apartment was hers, letting her know she could come over any time, that kind of stuff. Bell ignored him, raced away.

He'd tapped five bricks. But which five?

Bell examined the brick wall, searched it for seams or dents or grooves. But there were none. Not a single hint that there was a secret door hidden here.

"Think," Bell said, staring at the bricks. "You've got this, Bell. You're *this* close. Just... think."

The bricks were a mixture of reds and greys, all different shades. There was no uniformity. Save for a lone black brick at chest height, none of the bricks Bell saw looked remarkable in any way. And none of them gave way when pushed on.

The black brick... No, it was too clean.

If tapping on stones with their hand was required for someone to open the secret passage, those bricks would have to be dirty, right? If a dozen people or more used this

passage every day – and, from the information Bell had gathered, that was a *low* estimate – then the 'right' bricks would *have* to be dirtier than the rest.

There. Two rows directly above the black brick. One of the grey bricks there had a visible discolouration. A dirty smudge. And a row below, on either side. Two more. And two rows below the black brick, another two discoloured bricks.

Five, in the shape of a pentagon.

Which order had the man tapped them in?

Bell closed her eyes, focused.

The very top one first. She tapped it. Then bottom right. Top left. Top right. And, finally, bottom left.

The faint sound of stone cracking.

Bell's eyes shot open.

And there it was, a rectangle cut in the brick wall. The door open. Victorious grin in place, Bell stepped through the doorway, heard the wall shut seamlessly behind her.

Darkness. Absolute blackness.

Bell reached into a pocket, pulled on her phone, used it as a flash-light.

Behind her – where she'd come from – was a blank wall. On either side, walls. Ahead of her; a thin, round staircase that descended into darkness.

Only one way to go.

Veins pulsing, heart throbbing, chest aching, Bell began the descent into total darkness. One step at a time.

The staircase descended into the earth, deep into the stone beneath the city. The sounds Bell took for granted – car engines and people moving around and the general hum of activity – all of it vanished as she made her way down into the depths.

A minute of walking down passed. Two minutes. Three.

Then, just as suddenly as it'd begun, the staircase ended.

A short corridor that led to a plain, wooden door.

"Here we go," Bell whispered, creeping towards it, "let's see what's behind door number one..."

She grasped the handle, turned it, pushed it open.

Her jaw dropped open. Mind going blank.

The images before her were too much for her to process all at once.

Buildings. Lots of buildings. All of different styles and appearance. Houses that looked like they belonged in a desert or atop a mountain, or in the pages of a fairy tale. Buildings that looked like witch's huts or castles. Tree-houses, a building made from nothing but ice. Massive stone pillars reaching all the way up to the impossible cavern's ceiling, supports keeping the city above from breaking through and falling below.

And *creatures*. Tiny fairies flying around on colourful wings, people wearing robes and witch hats, a horse with wings flying through the cavern – tugging a wooden crate behind itself. Creatures right out of myth and legend.

Bell stumbled backwards, shook her head, grinned.

It was *real*.

Not just werewolves. But *everything*!

Either that, or she'd *actually* lost her mind.

Bell strode out, into the city under a city. A place that even her wildest dreams and fantasies, she wouldn't have dared imagine.

There was a glow in the corner of her vision. A beautiful blue light streaming towards her on tiny butterfly wings. No larger than a golf ball. It stopped right in front of her. And, through the glowing light, it took Bell a moment to recognise the fairy's face.

The tiny, spotty-faced guy raised the palm of its tiny hand up, blew on it.

Sparkling dust hit Bell square in the face.

And the world went black.

"Isabelle Redfield," a man's voice said. "That's the name on your ID, at least. You don't belong down here, Isabelle. So I have to ask. Why *are* you?"

Bell's eyes flicked open, took in her surroundings.

An office room with no windows, a wooden door. The walls were mostly barren, save for several filing cabinets and a bookcase. There was a desk and laptop, a candle with a blue flame. Some documents sat on the desk, and all of the items that'd been in Bell's pockets – her driver's licence included.

The man speaking to her – the only person in the room besides Bell herself – was pale skinned. Hair as black as Bell's own. He had bright blue eyes with sunken, dark eye sockets. The eyes of someone who didn't get much sleep – Bell could relate to *that*. He was wearing a black robe over a matching black business suit.

Not the man she'd seen in the alleyway. This one was clean shaven.

"My friends," she said, managing a smile, "call me Bell."

"I'm not your friend."

She wasn't tied down. Wasn't bound in any way. She could move her arms and legs freely, could stand up from the office chair she'd been placed on if she wanted. The man, sat opposite her, was staring at her face with those cold blue eyes.

"What're you doing down here?" The man asked again.

Not angry, not demanding. He simply asked with the expectation of an answer.

"Looking for werewolves," Bell shrugged, looking around the man's room – searching for any hints of the supernatural besides the candle and its blue flame.

"Implying you've encountered a werewolf before," the man said, nodding his head. "Tell me about that experience."

"So soon?" Bell smiled. "You haven't even taken me out for a drink yet. Gotta at least put some effort in if you want a girl to-"

"Answer," the man said, unmoving.

Bell's mouth clamped shut. She *felt* something tugging at her brain.

"I was..." Her mouth moved by itself. "I was saved by..."

"Don't resist it," the man advised.

"As a little girl... I..."

"Tell me."

"When I was eight," Bell breathed, the memory flashing in her mind. "My family went camping. In the woods. I wandered off one night to pee and fell into the river. A werewolf saved me."

The man nodded his head slowly.

There was something cold and distant about the understanding in his eyes.

"Please," Bell said quickly. "I needed to know I wasn't crazy. I won't tell anyone! Please don't kill me! I-"

"We're not going to hurt you," the man told her.

Bell gulped, stared at the man.

"My name is Aedamar," the man told her. "I am, to put it in terms you'll understand, a wizard. Specifically, a wizard who specialises in mind-altering magics. You've come here seeking answers. More than that, you've been so *driven* in your search for answers that it's led you to discover this place. That's the kind of drive that borders on obsession, Bell."

Obsessed. Unhinged. She'd been called those things before, definitely. Believing in werewolves? Wanting to prove they existed? It was why rumours and stories of the supernatural had led her to this city, why she'd followed tales of vanishing people to that alleyway and tracked those disappearances herself.

"So," Aedamar said. "Here's what's going to happen. You're going to ask all the questions you can think of. Everything you could possibly want to know. And I'll answer them all. You'll get your closure. Then I'll erase all knowledge of the supernatural from your

mind, and you can go on to live a healthy, normal, ordinary life.”

“No!” Bell shot to her feet. “I don’t *want* to forget! Please, I don’t-”

Think, Bell. Use your head.

“Isn’t there any way,” she said calmer, leaning forward and planting her hands on the desk, allowing this ‘wizard’ an eyeful of young, delicious cleavage. Magical men *were* still men, right? “I might convince you to let me keep my memories? I’ve searched for so long...”

“The only ones allowed to know about our world,” the wizard said, eyes drawn to Bell’s cleavage, “are those who are part of it.”

“I can become a part of it, can’t I?” Bell asked, adopting her soft, girly tone of voice. “You could teach me... I could become a wizard or a witch, couldn’t I?”

Aedamar leaned back in his chair, eyes roaming Bell’s figure.

“You have no magic potential of your own, which would usually disqualify you. But... There are *ways* to gain magical powers. Like the vampires of old.”

“I could become a vampire?” Bell asked, eyes wide.

Aedamar shook his head. “Vampires alone choose their offspring, it’s not something I could arrange. But way back, long before the Veil, the first vampire...”

Veil? What was that?

“A man without magic who ingested the blood of Fae, used *their* power as his own. Eventually used that power to transform himself.”

Drinking blood. It wasn’t exactly *appealing*, but if it meant she could be a part of this amazing, hidden world...

“I’ll do it!” Bell said.

The man looked at her, as if seeing her for the first time.

He smiled, shook his head.

“Drinking Fae blood is taboo, and regular human blood won’t do anything for you save make you sick. No, you’ll have to follow a *different* path if you wish to join our society.”

Bell felt it again, a tugging on her brain.

“How curious,” Aedamar said, standing up. “Very well, I won’t erase your memories. Not yet, at least.” His eyes once again ran over Bell’s body. “I’ll teach you magic, and help you to master it. If you listen to me and follow my instruction, you may stay here. If not, I’ll take your memories of this place and allow you to live your ordinary, mortal life. But you will be *my* responsibility. Do you understand?”

No. Bell did *not* understand. Not even slightly.

What the hell was a Fae, or a Veil? How was he going to teach her magic when he said she had no magic potential? What did being his ‘responsibility’ mean?

But she wasn’t about to start questioning things right now.

She’d just discovered a whole new world – literally!

And she’d do just about *anything* to be a part of it.

“Yes,” Bell smiled. “I understand.”