



Frozen

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An Otherworld Tale

Chelsea Clemmons

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This book is dedicated to my friends and family, without whom it would not exist.

- *My parents, Betty and David Clemmons.*
- *My Aunt Becky, the most hilarious person I know.*
- *Lauren Cadahia, who helped inspire the idea.*
- *Colby Branum, one of my very first readers, and a truly supportive friend.*
- *Tori Parnell, my best friend and greatest supporter since preschool.*
- *Christi Graham, my other best friend and supporter, who often provides me with comedic relief.*
- *The RP community, which has been a supportive safe haven for me for years.*
- *Finally, my readers, arguably the most important group of all! I love you guys. You are the reason I do what I do.*

Contents

| | |
|---------------|----|
| One | 1 |
| Two | 11 |

One

My breath froze in my chest as I bolted from the safety of a warm cab into a rainy English night. I was soaked and shivering by the time I reached the porch of my mother's modest Victorian home. I shook ice out of my coal-black waves as I pounded on the aged, peeling powder blue door and cringed when the foyer light blinked on. The door creaked open and my Mom squinted at me in sleepy confusion until she realized that I was, in reality, shivering on her doorstep. Concern clouded her classically elegant face and she snatched me inside, shoving the protesting door shut with her foot.

"Lauren, darling, what are you doing here? It's two in the morning, and I put you on a flight back to your Dad's yesterday."

I took a deep breath, bit my lip, and stared down at the roses on the worn hall rug. "I had to fly back, Mom. Dad eloped with that girl he's been dating while I was here for Christmas."

"He what?"

"Dad took his *girlfriend* Michelle to Las Vegas for

Christmas, and she talked him into getting married while they were there. She was packing for their honeymoon when Dad brought me home from the airport.”

Mom stared at my bare arms and legs, and I could tell by her expression that she was debating whether to chew me out right then, or save it for later. “You didn’t even stop to change clothes?” She batted her wild black curls back out of her face and glared up at the ceiling. She was either counting to ten or sending a few intense, exasperated thoughts heavenward. “It’s late December in England and my daughter shows up in the middle of the night wearing a tank top, shorts, and flimsy canvas sneakers! Brian, could you please bring some towels down here?”

I shrugged and hugged my torso a little tighter so my shivers wouldn’t be quite as obvious. “I was so mad I didn’t think about clothes. I didn’t even bring my suitcase. It’s still all packed up, and sitting in the middle of my bed at Dad’s. I called James to come pick me up, left a note that I was going to bed early, and snuck out when he went into his office to work. James dropped me off at the airport, and I used the credit card Dad gave me for gas to buy a plane ticket.”

Mom shook her head and her hair fell back in front of her warm, caramel-brown eyes. “Your father is likely

to have a bloody heart attack when he figures out you aren't there. That credit card will probably be history by lunchtime, too."

I lifted one of my shoulders in a halfhearted shrug. "Too bad, I guess. I almost had a stroke when I got home and found out he married Michelle. He's forty-two, and she *just* turned twenty-one! That's how they met, you know. He happened to be having a drink in the bar where she was celebrating her twenty-first birthday. She's only three years older than I am! As if that weren't bad enough, she flirts with Neal when she thinks Dad and I aren't around to see them. My father's *wife* flirts with *my* boyfriend! How disgusting is that? She's a gold-digger, and the only one who can't see it is Dad. She showed up at Grandpa Alex's funeral looking like a hooker, for God's sake! I thought Granny Betty was going to have an aneurysm before I could get Dad to make Michelle leave."

Mom stared at me in open-mouthed horror. "Your father's drinking again?"

"Not as bad as he used to. It's just an occasional thing, if you count any excuse Michelle can think of as an occasion."

For a moment, all Mom could do was shake her head. "Your father is a grown man, Lauren, although he doesn't act like it sometimes."

“Ever.” I rolled my eyes so hard it hurt.

“We can’t dictate his choices, however distasteful the ones he makes may be. We’re just going to have to figure out a way to deal with this.”

“Deal with what, Gillian?”

Mom turned around and I saw her husband, Brian, at the base of the stairs with a massive stack of fluffy pink towels in his arms. He looked like a tired, confused Santa Claus.

“Edward eloped with a twenty-one-year-old girl while Lauren was here for Christmas.”

Brian sighed, shook his head, and handed the towels to Mom. He shuffled into the kitchen and called over his shoulder. “Tea or cocoa?”

His offer coaxed a small smile out of me. “Cocoa, please.”

“Tea for me, dear.” Mom wrapped me in one of her gigantic bath sheets and we settled in at the antique kitchen table with mutual sighs. I tugged the towel tighter around me and glanced at the hand-painted kettle on the stove. It was powder blue with soft pink heart-shaped polka dots. I remembered the day Mom and I painted it together with a smile.

“I wish dad were as considerate as you are, Brian. He

never thinks about how things will affect me before he does them.”

“Your father doesn’t mean to hurt you, darling. He’s just too immature to stop and think about what he’s doing until it’s too late.”

Mom’s voice was gentle and her tired eyes told me that she knew better than anyone, although she’d never say it aloud. That only succeeded in cementing my desire not to go back to Florida. I looked down at the table, feeling her worried gaze. I couldn’t look her in the eye. If I did, I would have cried.

I took a deep breath and held it for a moment. “That’s why I’ve decided I want to move in with you and Brian. I need a more stable lifestyle than the one I’m getting living with Dad and Michelle.” I studied her expression out of the corner of my eye and a sudden wave of doubt crashed in around me.

Oh, God, what if she and Brian don’t want me to move in? Things get a little cramped while I’m here. Maybe they don’t have room for me full-time?

Brian sat our drinks down on the table and leaned back against the counter without a word.

“What about your friends? It’s your senior year. Are you sure you want to leave at this point? You only have one semester left. And what about Granny Betty?

She's the only grandparent you have left. She'd be devastated if you left right now, too. Please, don't misunderstand me. You're welcome to move in with us if that's what you really want, dear. I just want to make sure that you've really thought this through. It's a big choice to make."

"I know. I don't want to leave Granny Betty. I'd miss James, Maria, and Audrey, too. Still, I really don't think I can stand to live in that house now that Dad's married to Michelle. She hates my guts, and the feeling is pretty much mutual."

Brian stifled a yawn and patted my shoulder. "We'll figure things out, dear. In the meantime, I'm going back to bed. I have to teach an 8:00 a.m. class."

I nodded and yawned, too. "Thanks, Brian. The cocoa is fantastic."

"You're welcome. Goodnight, girls!" Mom and I watched him trudge back up the stairs, and the look on her face made me wonder why she'd ever married Dad. He and Brian were polar opposites.

"I'm so glad you found Brian, Mom. You're lucky to have found each other."

"I know." She caressed her simple silver wedding band and sipped her hot tea.

"I don't know how this happened. Grandpa Alex was

sure Michelle would get impatient and run off before Dad took the time to marry her. I wish he'd been right."

"I know, love. Drink your cocoa, take a hot shower, and get some sleep. We'll reevaluate the situation later."

I stood and leaned down to kiss her cheek. "Thanks, Mom. I love you."

"I love you, too, darling."



Mom and Brian were both at work by the time I woke. It was late afternoon, and I felt just as frustrated as I had when I showed up on their doorstep. I didn't get out of my lavender four-poster for a good fifteen minutes, and my fingers automatically traced the hand-painted doves on the headboard. Mom did them not long after she and Brian were married. I considered walking across town to Rosehaven Downs University to visit them, but I couldn't work up the energy to do anything except eat a bowl of cereal.

After about an hour of zombieish wandering, I decided to get on the computer and check in with Audrey. As I was headed for the household PC, my

cell phone started ringing. I didn't have to look at the screen to know it was Dad. My stomach squirmed as I tapped the answer option on the screen.

"Hello?" I couldn't help the chill in my voice; I knew this conversation was not going to end well.

"WHERE THE HELL ARE YOU? I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU JUST TOOK OFF!"

"I came back to Mom's."

"WHY?"

"I just couldn't deal with the fact that you randomly got married while I was out of the country, especially since you know how I feel about Michelle!"

"I don't believe you've been very fair to Michelle, Lauren. I've never seen her say a cross word to you."

"Just because you haven't seen it doesn't mean that it hasn't happened, Dad! She delights in making me miserable when you aren't around."

"I have a hard time believing that."

I considered throwing my phone out a window. "Why am I not surprised that you trust your girlfriend—who is twenty-one years younger than you are, by the way—more than you trust your own daughter?"

I hung up and refused to answer when he tried to call back. "That conversation was going nowhere but bad,"

I muttered, doing my best to ignore the guilt nagging at me as my phone continued to ring. I slumped into the well-worn leather desk chair in the study and waited for the ringing to stop. Dad gave up after twenty-five minutes. The study, with books piled on every available surface, bordered on being cramped, but I liked it anyway.

I got five offline messages from Audrey the second I signed in to my instant messenger.

OMG, Lauren, did you seriously just take off back to England after you came home? Your dad called me looking for you and sounded like he was having a panic attack.

I hope you're okay, hon. Message me as soon as you get this.

Seriously, I'm worried about you. You being offline for this long is totally unnatural.

Please let me know you're okay.

I know you're upset. Please talk to me.

She was offline, but I sent her a message anyway. Hey, 'Drey. Just wanted to let you know I'm okay...mostly. I didn't bring my laptop with me, so all I have is Mom's PC. The only thing I brought is my purse. Anyway, I love you. I'll probably be on later.

I signed back out and shuffled upstairs for another hot shower, hoping it would wash away the dull ache that was taking over my body. I stood under the spray until the hot water ran out and then went hunting in my closet for warmer clothes.

Two

I bundled up in a light gray turtleneck and my favorite coat, a purple fleece pea coat, before I set out in the direction of Rosehaven Downs University. I was halfway hoping to run into Mom or Brian on campus, but I guess my feet had other ideas because they wandered to the west of the RDU campus. I found myself in an unfamiliar but obviously low-rent, high-occupancy side of town. Shabby apartment complexes crowded on top of one another, and I started feeling claustrophobic just from looking at them. Dusk closing in did nothing to relieve the cramped feeling of the neighborhood.

I turned up an alleyway that I thought pointed in the direction of Mom's neighborhood and shuddered. Piles of trash had collected against the decrepit, graffiti-covered brick walls. I couldn't help gagging as I passed a dumpster. It smelled like rotting seafood, vomit, and other things I was too staggered to put a name to. All of a sudden, I knew it was well past time for me to leave.

I never realized before that Rosehaven Downs had such a poor, neglected, run-down side of town. It was

pitiful and frightening all at once. Alarm bells started going off in the back of my mind, and I relocated my iPod from my coat pocket to the waistband of my skinny jeans at the small of my back. I pulled my shirt and jacket back down over it with a sigh. *Even if I get mugged, I don't think they'll take the time to strip-search me.* I had never really encountered poverty head-on before, and it left a permanent mark on my mind.

The alley went on for far longer than I had anticipated and the echoes of my own footsteps raised the hairs on the back of my neck. It didn't take me long after that to realize that echoes weren't the only things chasing me. There were other footfalls, too, accompanied by lean figures in hoodies with the hoods up, so I couldn't make out their faces. I could tell they were both male, and I knew I didn't stand a chance at getting away. They were both taller than I was, and exuded strength in spite of obvious hunger.

I didn't have time to pull out my phone and call for help. I was running as fast as I could, and it was nowhere near fast enough. I started screaming seconds before a hand clamped around my arm. I started to scream louder, but a sickening crack and sudden, blinding pain in the side of my head cut it off. I reeled and went down, landing in an oily puddle from yesterday's rain. I felt hot blood pouring down

the side of my head and felt like I was going to throw up.

They must have hit me with a brick.

I tried to move, but a sudden rush of darkness swallowed everything.