

L.L. STARLING.

Between



ILLUSTRATED BY REBECCA MORSE

BOOK 1 OF THE CHRONICLES OF BETWEEN

BETWEEN

A MODERN FAIRY TALE FOR THE DISCERNING DEVIANT

L. L. STARLING

Illustrated by

REBECCA MORSE

WICKED FABLES PRESS

Between

Book 1 of The Chronicles of Between

Copyright © 2020 L. L. Starling

Published by Wicked Fables Press

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, or stored in a retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by United States of America copyright law. For permissions requests contact:

Wicked Fables Press

733 Struck St.

45296

Madison, WI, 53711

wickedfablespress@gmail.com

First Edition: October 2020

ISBN (ebook) 978-1-7332448-3-1 ISBN (paperback) 978-1-7332448-8-6

Publisher's Note: This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are a product of the author's imagination. Locales and public names are sometimes used for atmospheric purposes but are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual people, living or dead, or to businesses, companies, events, institutions, or locales is completely coincidental and not intended by the author.

Cover design by Louisa Gallie. Cover design copyright © 2020 Louisa Gallie.

Interior illustrations by Rebecca Morse. Interior illustrations copyright © 2020 Rebecca Morse.

The Marks (composed of alchemy and rune elements) designed by L. L. Starling and illustrated by Alexandra Godwin & Melissa Findley.

Chapter heading art copyright © 2016 Annie Sauvage.

*To Peter, my very own wizard from Wisconsin, who makes lovely things
happen.*

To my Mother, who is still the most magical person I've ever met.

CONTENTS

I. The Witches of Old Middleton

Prologue

1. Once upon a time ...
2. The Charmingly Suspicious Village of Old Middleton
3. Where the Monsters are Small and Have Designated Nap Times
4. Where the Truth is Decidedly Overrated
5. The Secrets of Stardust and Brimstone
6. Dreams of Hills and Hill-Men
7. The Curse of the Double-Penny Well Wish
8. Here There Be Monsters
9. The Consequences of Jogging with Monsters
10. The Witches of Old Middleton
11. Of Portals and Well-Dressed Kings

12. The King of Her (Terrible, Frozen, But Thankfully Wolf-free) Dreams

13. Dastardly and Dank

14. The King and the Kindergarten Teacher

15. Where Chivalry Dies A Terrible, Terrible Death

16. The Mail Truck of Doom

17. The Perils of Mirrors and Mist

18. The Educational Value of Dragons

19. The Contract

20. Gateways and Goodbyes

Epilogue

II. The Wretchedly Melodramatic Tale of the Shadow King

Prologue

1. The Shadow King Awakens

2. An Intricate Matter

3. Four Dark Wizards and a Radish

4. An Almost Typical Crossing

5. When Dreams Come True
6. To Catch a Dreamer
7. The True Queen of Between
8. The Administrative Aftermath
9. The Jolly Monarchs of the Lower Kingdoms
10. A Small Spot of Treason
11. Beware of Kingdoms Bearing Gifts
12. A Wretchedly Melodramatic State of Affairs
13. Step Two of The Revised Queen Plan
14. The Spy and The Bind
15. Fit for a Queen
16. The Red Book and the White Rug
17. Awaiting the Queen

Epilogue

Coming Soon

Thank You

Acknowledgments

About the Author

PART I



THE WITCHES OF OLD MIDDLETON

**OR: HOW SASHA'S LIFE WAS TURNED UPSIDE DOWN BY ACCEPTING THE
WRONG JOB**

PROLOGUE



SOMETIME IN THE PAST (TUESDAY, OCTOBER 30TH TO BE SPECIFIC...JUST BEFORE LUNCH).

Sasha Pierce stared at the mangy unicorn swaying drunkenly beside her car and sighed. When she had informed her friends and loved ones that she planned to take a teaching position in Old Middleton—a village cradled deep in the woods of Wisconsin—they warned her that the place was bound to be a little old-fashioned (“Quaint,” said one, with a knowing smirk); a little isolated (“Just imagine the peace and quiet!” said another, with forced cheer); and exceptionally dull (“You can brush up on your quilting ... and your jam-making ... and your alcoholism,” said another still, with a sympathetic pat on Sasha’s shoulder).

Regrettably, no one had warned Sasha that Old Middleton was a supernatural hotspot—a gateway between this world and several fairy tale realms. If they had done so, then the unicorn trying to head-butt Sasha’s car in the school parking lot would not have been so unexpected.

Nor would the goblins—currently being chased around the Old Middleton Elementary School playground by a small mob of first graders wielding safety scissors—have come as quite a shock.

And the brownies—who were gleefully stealing shoes and leaving irate, barefoot children in their wake—would have been as unremarkable as the oak leaves scattered around Sasha’s boots.

But no warning, no matter how well-meant, could have truly prepared Sasha for the sorcerer, who lounged indolently on a branch high in the village’s oldest oak tree while his creatures wreaked havoc on her workplace. Dressed in sinister black armor and a showy cloak comprised entirely of shadows, the sorcerer watched the chaos unfold below him with a smile on his infuriatingly handsome face—the kind of smile typically worn by pyromaniacs skipping toward a fireworks factory with a flaming torch in each hand.

Unfortunately, that smile was soon directed at Sasha.

“Fine,” she said wearily to the man in black. “You win. I’ll do it. Just call off your unicorn—that car cost me a fortune.”



Fairy Tale Chaos at Old Middleton Elementary

ONCE UPON A TIME ...



ONE WEEK AND TWO DAYS EARLIER (WHEN SASHA'S LIFE WAS RELATIVELY NORMAL AND CONTAINED 100% FEWER DRUNK UNICORNS)

e are lost. And doomed.”

Sasha gripped the steering wheel a little more firmly and tried to peer through the torrential rain buffeting her windshield. In this weather, it was hard to determine whether the blurry shape that had suddenly appeared in front of her was another vehicle or if she had veered off the road entirely and was now hurtling toward a tree.

Her passenger’s announcement was doing nothing to increase their chances of survival.

“Not helpful, Lyla,” Sasha said sternly as she slowed the car and squinted ahead. “Besides, ‘doomed’ is a little extreme, don’t you think?” Much to Sasha’s joy, the blurry shape appeared to have taillights and was now well ahead of her. She gave the accelerator a tentative prod.

Lyla, however, was not as jolly. She smoothed the roadmap out across her lap and studied it yet again. “I thought it was rather accurate. Let me spell it out.” She held up her hand and began to count off the doom indicators on her fingers. “One—we’re in a torrential storm, that could quickly turn into a Biblical-grade flood. Two—we’re in a car without heating—”

“W” Sasha groaned. “For the hundredth time—I can’t put on the heating because it steams up the windshield. Do you want me to crash into another vehicle?”

“Does that other vehicle have heating?” Lyla pointedly pulled down the sleeves of her cream-colored sweater. “As I was saying—we are in a car without heating. If the flood doesn’t kill us, we’ll freeze to death, leaving some passing hitchhiker to find our popsicle-like corpses.”

“Thanks for that morbid visual,” Sasha said dryly.

Lyla ignored her. “Three—we have no cell phone coverage, so not only are we stuck using prehistoric methods of navigation”—she scowled down at the map—“but we can’t call for help or, more importantly, pizza and wine. Four—we’re in the middle of nowhere, which means no one can hear our cries of distress. Five—we’re trying to find a village that we’ve never been to before and we’ll probably want to leave it as soon as we arrive. And six—it’s almost midnight, the time when doom is most likely to occur. See?” Lyla wiggled her fingers in Sasha’s peripheral vision. “*Doomed.*”

Sasha disregarded the wiggling fingers and carefully maneuvered the car around a fallen branch. “Glass half-empty, Lyla. Our car is wet, but we’re dry. We’re wearing warm clothes, so we aren’t cold. We aren’t lost, we’re just temporarily displaced ... in what is probably Wisconsin. And there’s still at least an hour until midnight. We’re definitely not *doomed.*”

Lyla gave her friend a stern look. “Catastrophes make you unforgivably perky.” She sniffed and began to pull her long hair into a ponytail. “What you fail to realize is that *this* is how most horror films start; two attractive, single

women—one of whom is blonde ...” She paused to wrap a tie around her hair, giving it a decisive shake.

Sasha laughed. “We both know that you’re a redhead.”

Lyla waved her hand dismissively. “Stop putting facts into my story. As I was saying, two attractive, single women—one of whom is *currently* a blonde—are driving along a dark highway during a storm. Any minute now, our car will break down, and we will be besieged by Midwest serial-killers.”

“Or farmers.”

“Farmers *are* serial killers, except their victims are more cow-like. Or chicken-like. Or vegetable-like.”

Sasha rolled her eyes. “Instead of planning our gruesome deaths, could you please try to figure out where we are? I feel as though I’m just driving around randomly here.” She spared a glance at the gas station map in Lyla’s lap. “You have a master’s degree—navigating a map should be child’s play.”

“I have a master’s in *psychology*, not cartography. The skills aren’t transferable ... unless you want me to probe the map about its deep-seated anxiety issues.” Lyla sighed in frustration and looked back down at the well-creased map. “I have no idea where we are. I’m not even sure if we’re still in the United States. The last time I looked, we entered Wisconsin and were never seen again. We are in the midst of an Ordeal.”

“We are not in the midst of ‘an Ordeal.’ This is just a temporary setback. Stop being such a pessimist.”

“I’m not a pessimist. I’m a realist, and so are you. And, in this situation, it is realistic to assume that something is about to happen to us.”

Sasha eased her little red sports car around a corner, careful to leave plenty of space between herself and the vehicle in front. “I’m beginning to suspect that you *want* something to happen to us.”

Lyla shrugged. “Nothing death or dismemberment related. I *do* want something fun to happen to us, but that’s doubtful given that we’re heading toward a village in *Wisconsin*.”

“Cheer up! It could be one of those fun villages that have a dark and terrible secret. Or one where everyone is part of a nudist cult.”