



THE

GLASS

WHEEL



ANNA

CACKLER

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CHAPTER I

“AURORA, PLEASE,” CAEL SAID, HIS HANDS RAISED IN A HELPLESS GESTURE. Grime accentuated the creases in his hands, callused from working the flax day in and day out. “This feeling you have for me, it’s not real.”

“Don’t you dare tell me what I’m feeling, Cael!” I shouted. “As if you’re some expert!”

“Aurora...” He ducked as my wine glass hurled through the air at his head. It shattered on the wall behind him, splattering glass shards and deep purple droplets all over him.

Cael stared at me, at a loss. Our farm hand – no. My farm hand. The one I’d been daydreaming about for years. He stood near the door, beautiful, rugged, and impossible. How could things have turned out so wrong?

He tried again. “Your father wouldn’t have wanted...”

“Don’t talk about my father! You don’t know what he would have wanted.” I pointed toward the door with a shaking finger. “You want to leave so badly, then go!”

When he still didn’t move toward the door, I jabbed with my finger and screamed again. “Get out, Cael!”

This time, he didn't hesitate. He grabbed his cap and coat off the hook and slammed the door behind him. A few white snowflakes fluttered in as he left.

The empty house closed in around me. My anger filled it up. Anger, confusion, grief, rejection. It vibrated through my body and into the house around me. The lamplight glowed too brightly. The fire burned too hot. The buzzing in my ears drowned out the silence.

I careened from one corner to the next. To the bed. *No, can't sleep.* To the spinning wheel. *No, can't spin. Can't sit.* To the sideboard. *No, can't eat.* I raised the half full bottle of wine to my lips, but the memory of Cael's wine-soaked breath nauseated me. I shrieked and threw the bottle to the ground, where the contents gurgled out onto the woolen rug. The purple stain spread like blood over the simple striped pattern, and that made me even angrier.

I couldn't breathe. I couldn't think. Couldn't stand to look at my spinning wheel or my bed or my ruined rug. I crammed my feet into my boots and stumbled out the front door and onto the frigid porch. The cold air brought instant relief. It smacked into my skin and brought back a little clarity. For a second, I could think again.

Breathe Aurora. Just breathe!

I glanced back at the warm lamplight spilling out of my front door. The house where my father died. The place where Cael had wrapped me up in his arms and kissed me – then pushed me away.

I staggered down the front steps, away from the life I should have had and out into the thickly falling snow. It already dusted the yard and coated the roofs of the various buildings around the house – the main barn, various sheds, and the coop. The fields stretched out to the south, nearly purple in the early twilight.

My farm. My entire world, all visible from where I stood in our front yard. The boundaries of my life came closing in just like the

walls of my house. I had to get out, had to get away.

My feet took me toward the dusky tree line on the eastern border of our property, the snow crunching under my boots. I stumbled past the sturdy elms and oaks, past the little creek that fed our irrigation system, and toward the great boulder I used to lay on and day-dream when I was a little girl.

Maybe it was the gathering snow, or my desperation, or the angry tears that blinded me, but the boulder wasn't where it should have been. I paused, turning this way and that. Maybe I had gone a little too far north. I veered to the right and continued on, but all the landmarks I expected never appeared.

The snow fell in heavy swaths through the bare tree limbs, reflecting the last of the twilight so that everything stood out in sharp detail.

I stopped again and turned a complete circle. These were the right trees, I was sure of it. Elms, oaks, hickories. Towering sycamores and squat little dogwoods. All naked for the winter. Sleeping, silent. The snow rustled down, encasing everything in peaceful stillness.

These were definitely the right trees. And yet...

"Why do you cry?"

I whirled around with a choking gasp. "Who's there?"

My eyes darted from tree to tree, peering through the snowfall. The last of the evening sun, diffused through the heavy clouds, bounced off of everything, illuminating each branch and twig in the semi-darkness.

Nothing. There was no one.

"'Tis only I," said the voice again, smooth and cool as ice.

Four long fingers appeared around a hickory tree about ten feet away. They wrapped around the rough bark slowly, laying down

one at a time with graceful precision. And then, from behind the same tree appeared a face.

At first glance, it appeared to be the face of a young woman. Smooth complexion, long delicate nose, pert mouth. Her flowing hair was only a few shades darker than her ice-white skin, pulled back into an efficient braid that would have looked boring on anyone else.

And yet, something about that face set my heart racing. My palms began to sweat, despite the biting cold.

As the figure came fully into view, that unknown uneasiness solidified into fact. She was too tall. Impossibly tall. She towered at least ten feet high, with long, narrow proportions. Her sheer, sleeveless dress showed off her lean figure in every incredible detail. It hung about her in tatters – ripped, torn, and worn through to almost nothing.

Not human. Not human.

I backed up a step.

This was not human, but one of the Old Kind. A creature of magic, long gone. And yet here one stood, right in front of me in my own woods.

“I’ve gone mad,” I breathed, taking another step backward.

The creature smiled kindly down at me. “No, child. You are not mad.”

“What are you?” I asked in a shaking voice.

She bowed her head in greeting. “I am called the Weaver. What is your name?”

I couldn’t take my eyes off her. “Aurora.”

She extended one long hand toward me. “Come Aurora, and tell me why you cry.”

Every instinct screamed at me to run. All my life I'd heard warnings about the Old Kind, crones, sibyls, unnatural children, and witches. "*Beware, beware!*" they all said. "*Run!*"

And yet, my feet stayed planted in the slowly gathering snow. What did I possibly have left to lose?

"My father –" I choked on the word. It had been a month since I'd lost him, but I still had a hard time saying it. "My father... died. And the man who I thought... Well, he left me, too."

The Weaver frowned in compassion. "Poor little thing," she said. "That is very hard."

I nodded.

She held out her hand to me again, and this time I took it. Her skin was pleasantly warm against my fingers. But this time, when my instincts screamed "*Run!*" the warmth of her hand smothered the fear like a familiar blanket. All pain fled. All sadness. And in its wake came relief. For the first time in more than a month, I felt okay.

Blissful emptiness.

The Weaver's hand became an anchor, and all the uncertainties melted away. I let myself revel in the fact that – for right now – I didn't have to be sad anymore. Deep down, I knew she must be bewitching me, but I didn't care.

"You live on that farm, there?" The Weaver pointed with her free hand, and between the trees, my farm materialized, snow blanketed and familiar.

"Yes. We grow flax."

"You're a spinner," The Weaver confirmed.

"How did you know?"

"I have been watching you, little Aurora," The Weaver said. "Your sadness has been calling to me. I wish to help you. And maybe you can help me, too."

“How?”

The Weaver held out the tattered folds of her dress. Where the layers gathered the thickest, a faint glow could be seen coming from the thin material.

“My cloak is very old,” she said. “The time has come to make a new one. But I need thread.”

“Can you not spin it yourself?” I asked.

She shook her head sadly. “No. Only human hands can spin the thread for my cloak. It is the balance of my magic, that I must rely on the kindness of man. I will pay for your work by granting a wish. Perhaps I can make your man come back to you. The handsome worker.”

“No,” I said sharply. “No. Love is given freely. I will not ask you to force him.”

She bowed her head. “You are very wise, child.”

An image of my father’s ledger books flashed through my mind. All the plans he had for us. The weaving house, the extra fields. Our visit to the sea. Bounty he would never get to see. This was my chance to fulfill his dream. “Money,” I said. “Riches. I want to be wealthy.”

The Weaver smiled, sending a tingle down my spine. She released the folds of her dress and turned her hand over, revealing several ingots of shining gold the size of plum stones in her palm. “Very well,” she said. “I will provide you with my own wheel for one year and one day. And for every fifty yards of thread you spin on it, I will pay you an ingot of pure gold. You may have these now, to seal the bargain. Free and clear.”

She extended the fistful of gold toward me, but I hesitated. She still held my hand gently, warmth and safety radiating from her

touch. The snow fell on my exposed skin like gentle brushes, no trace of cold at all.

Somewhere deep down, where my body remembered I stood in the snow with no cloak, with a magical creature trying to bargain with me, I heard my father's voice. *"Go home, Aurora."*

And Cale's voice, too. *"Go home, Aurora. Go spin your flax, and in the spring, I'll help you hire someone new to work the fields for you."*

"Time flies like the wheel, Aurora."

No. Not this time. Everyone had left me. They didn't get to tell me what to do anymore. This time, I decided. And it was time for the wheel to stop. Time for me to break away from this crushing sadness. This was my way out.

"A year and a day?"

The Weaver nodded, her smile growing.

I extended my hand, and she poured the heavy gold into my palm. Five lumpy ingots. More than I could earn in a year from selling my linen. I stared at them, amazed.

"Why your wheel?" I asked, slipping them into my pocket. "Why can't I use my own?"

"It is a special wheel. It will help you produce finer thread than any human is capable of. I need the very best to weave my cloak." The Weaver ran her hand over her tattered dress longingly. A shimmer followed in the wake of her hand, the last traces of an old magic nearly worn out.

My eyes followed the shimmer as it rippled through the fabric. It glowed like the moonlight on the snow, like starlight in a cloudless sky. Like the gold in my pocket.

"When shall I start?" I asked.

But only silence met my words. I looked up at the empty, snowy forest around me. The Weaver had gone, just as swiftly as she had

arrived. No footprints marred the snow, and my hand had gone cold once more. I examined the tree she had stood next to and the snow on the ground. Nothing.

“A dream,” I breathed. “Only a dream.” I was exhausted. Or drunk. Maybe both. Too much wine, too much confusion.

I turned to my left, and there stood my farm. Only a few trees stood between me and the south field. I had gotten so turned around. I’d only dreamed of getting lost and meeting one of the Old Kind in the woods. I’d just gone a little ways south. The snow could be so disorienting.

My shoulders slouched, and I tucked my cold hands into my pockets. But when the fingers of my right hand brushed something warm and hard inside, I jerked my hands back out. Tentatively, I drew out the shining gold ingots.

They were real. Right there, in my hands, The Weaver’s gold shone in the twilight.

With a jolt of anticipation, I clutched the gold in one hand and ran toward the house. I threw the door open without bothering to kick the snow off my boots and went straight to my wine-soaked rug. The sweet, acrid smell hit my nostrils, but I no longer cared about the stain or the mess. My eyes fell on the spinning wheel that stood in the center of the room.

The Weaver’s wheel was made entirely of glass. The treadle, the wheel, the flier, all of it perfectly clear, beautifully blown glass. Not a bubble or imperfection anywhere. The legs and distaff looked like pristine icicles freshly plucked from the eaves. The wheel, with its delicate spindles, shone in the lamplight, casting shadows and glimmers all around the room.

I moved toward it, unsure. The Weaver had said it was special. This must have been what she meant. The wheel was utterly beauti-

ful. Delicate, clear, other-worldly. I touched it with the barest fingertip, expecting it to be cold as ice. Cold enough to bite.

But it was cool, only. Unremarkable. Slick and perfect. I ran my fingers down the knobs of the distaff, then turned the flier experimentally. It spun easily, dragging the main wheel around a tenth of a circle. The refracted lamplight swung around the room in perfect time with the wheel.

My fingers traveled downward over the mother-of-all, to the table. There, stored on delicate spindles, sat four empty bobbins waiting to be filled. All of it, perfect glass.

Judging by The Weaver's tattered dress, I'd have to spin my finest thread. Doing a few quick sums in my head, I judged I could earn at least two of the Weaver's gold ingots per day. After a year and a day, that would be...

By all the gods in heaven. Even if I only spun a few days a week, after this year I'd never have to work again. I could build my father's fabric empire, or I could do something else. Anything. I could travel, or buy a fancy house in Valheid, or stay here and do nothing at all. I could go south and spend the rest of my life sea bathing and eating crabs with lemon, just like my father and I always dreamed.

With shaking hands, I ran to the storage closet at the back of the house and selected a strick of flax from the topmost bag. I spread it out on the worktable in a delicate fan. I gently removed the glass distaff from its socket and dressed it with the prepared flax, tying it all up with a long, blue ribbon with a pattern of roses.

Then I lit all the lamps I had, dragged my father's chair – no. My chair. I dragged my chair over to the glass wheel, and inserted the first bobbin into the flier. I tied a new leader onto it, attached my first strands of flax, and began treading.

Treadle, treadle. Draft, twist. Shhh!

The fiber snaked away from the distaff and toward the wheel, guided by my expert hands. And as it slid past my fingers, it happened. That beautiful glow, the shine of moonlight on snow, infused the fiber. It glowed twenty times brighter than the Weaver's old cloak. Full of life, joy, and spirit. Fresh, new magic.

It slipped around the guide hooks and began wrapping around the bobbin in a luminous filament, finer and smoother than I thought I could produce. Too perfect, too beautiful. The Weaver had been right. This glass wheel did make all the difference. I'd never be able to spin like this on my father's – on my – wheel.

I spun for several hours, entranced by how easy it was. Even when the odd snarl came off the distaff, as soon as it passed through my fingers, it smoothed out into a perfect, glistening thread. I didn't have to stop or adjust, didn't have to wet my fingers and correct. It just worked. I fell into an easy pattern, eyes on the window as snow fell in steady drifts.

CHAPTER 2

MY FATHER TAUGHT ME TO SPIN WHEN I WAS FIVE YEARS OLD, AND I FELL in love with it.

“You have to hold the fiber tight, Aurora,” he said in his low, smooth voice, “but not too tight. You must strike the right balance so that the fibers can draft out of the supply and twist together at the same time.”

“How?” I asked.

“That’s not something I can teach you, sweetheart. You have to learn that on your own. It’s something you feel in your hands.”

I watched in fascination as the yellow-gray flax slipped between his fingers in an endless, delicate stream from his distaff to the bobbin, each long fiber catching the next so that they could all twist up into a thread as fine as a cobweb.

“Just like every spinner has unique hands, we all find our own balance. Just the right tension and hold. Just the right method for our thread.”

“Can I try?” I asked, already reaching for the thread.

My father laughed. His feet stilled on the treadles, and the wheel slowed to a heavy stop. I took his place on the padded chair, but my

feet couldn't reach the treadles. He swapped out his chair and gave me a low stool to sit on instead.

"You'll grow into the big chair," he said.

I began pumping the treadles, one for each foot, left right left right, and the wheel resumed its great circle. The drive band swung around the wheel and looped around the much smaller flier and bobbin, which spun at ten times the rate of the wheel. It whipped through the air, creating the telltale *shhhhh!!* sound that I had been listening to all my short life.

"Feed it more fiber," my father said. "Before you add too much twist. Like this."

He showed me how to pull a few fibers at a time from the supply on the distaff and direct the twist up the new thread just so. How to allow the wheel to take up the thread once enough twist had been added.

The new thread disappeared into the orifice at the end of the flier, fed through the guide hook, and wrapped around the bobbin for storage. The wheel ate up the thread like a hungry thing, always sucking, always pulling the fibers from the distaff like a long noodle. It didn't care that my thread was fat, lumpy, and full of snarls. It didn't care that it came with an uneven twist, sometimes loose enough to nearly fall apart, sometimes so tight that it kinked up on itself.

The wheel was always greedy, always pulling.

Left right, left right. Treadle, treadle. Draft. Twist. *Shhh!*

I glowered at the lumpy thread winding onto the bobbin, but my father only laughed again, his beard twitching with mirth. "You will find your balance, Aurora. It will take time. You will spin many stricks of flax before you can produce good linen. Just think of it. With us both spinning, we will double our profits. And you'll have a

real future, Aurora. Enough money to do anything we like. We can go to the seaside someday. What do you think of that? They say there's merfolk living in the water."

I stared up at him in wonder. "Do you think that's true? About the merfolk?"

"Believe everything you hear about the Old Kind, Aurora," he said seriously. "That way you'll never be caught unawares."

"When can we go?" I asked.

He laughed again and squeezed my shoulder. "One thing at a time. First, learn to spin. And once you've spun fifty stricks, then we can start selling your thread."

"But that will take forever!" I cried.

He tucked a strand of my light brown hair behind my ear. "Time flies like the wheel, Aurora."



I SUCKED IN A BREATH AND SAT UP IN MY CHAIR. DARKNESS FILLED THE room, with only the dim light of one guttering lamp struggling to stay lit as it burned low. Adrenaline crept into my fingers and toes, leaving an empty feeling in my core.

It must have been a dream. My father was dead and gone for over a month. And nothing would ever bring him back.

I shook my head to clear the fog. My eyes fell on the thin stream of glowing thread on the glass bobbin before me, and I stroked the gold ingots in my pocket.

Nothing could bring my father back, but maybe I could make his dreams come true anyway.

CHAPTER 3

ABOUT TWO WEEKS AFTER I BEGAN SPINNING FOR THE WEAVER, MARIAH came striding up my laneway. Short and blunt, Mariah was the local doctor and our family's oldest friend. I saw her from the window as I sat spinning, and instantly went into a panic. She would never approve of a deal with one of the Old Kind. She wouldn't understand.

I scampered to the table and snatched up three skeins of glowing, linen thread and threw them into the cupboard. Then I ran to the bed and hastily draped a sheet over the glass wheel, careful to remove the fragile distaff and lay it on the ground first. The dense linen completely obscured the glowing thread on the bobbin just as the heavy *thunk thunk!* of Mariah's snow-covered boots against the lintel rang through the house.

"Hello, my dear," Mariah said as she strode inside. "I just wanted to check on you, see how things were going."

"Hello, Mariah," I said, still breathing hard. "How are you?"

She stared at me, eyes narrowed at my lost breath. Then her eyes darted to the lumpy object hidden under my sheet by the window where my father's wheel usually sat. "What are you doing? What's that?"

She strode forward, one hand extended to uncover the wheel, but I stepped in front of her, causing her to stop short.

"It's just a project I'm working on," I said.

"May I see?"

"No."

She glanced over at my father's wheel, which now stood by the back wall. She had no way of knowing that the flax on it was nearly two months old now. I hadn't touched it since the day we'd buried him.

"Have you been working?" she asked.

"Yes," I answered truthfully. "Probably too much." I shook out my hands, trying to ease the low ache that never quite went away anymore.

"You shouldn't be alone like this," Mariah said. "Not every day. Have you considered taking a boarder? Maybe Cael could..."

"No!" I said sharply.

Mariah cut her eyes at me, then finished her sentence with grim judgment. "...could help you fix up your father's room to make it ready to rent."

I shifted my weight, unable to meet her eye. Why wouldn't she just leave? The glass wheel called to me, the flax ready to go. I needed to get her out of here.

"What is going on with you two, by the way?" Mariah asked. "I noticed plenty of sideways glances when we were doing the scutching. It was rather hot in the barn as the two of you beat the ever loving shit out of that flax to release the fibers. And I'm not talking about the weather."

"Mariah!"

She ignored me and powered on. "You're welcome for that, by the way. I'm not a farmer, you know. I'm a doctor."

"Everyone's a farmer here," I said. "You just don't sell your crops."

"No, I eat them!" she said stoutly. "And sometimes I bring them to you. And sometimes I help you scutch your flax. What is wrong with you, Aurora? Is it your father?"

I sniffed heavily. I hadn't thought of my father once in the last two weeks. All I could think of was the glass wheel. I should be spinning right now. I shook out my hands again, stretching them forward, backward, bending my wrists as far as they would go to ease the soreness.

"What's wrong with your hands?" she asked.

"Nothing," I said, relaxing my arms. "Like I said, I've been spinning too much."

"You need to take care of yourself, girl," she said. "I'll bring you some tinctures to help with the pain tomorrow."

"I just need time, Mariah," I said. I took her by the arm in as comforting a way as I could. "I'm fine. You don't need to worry about me."

She let me guide her to the door. Her usually sharp expression softened to worry and compassion, her mouth turned down at the corners. "Aurora..."

"I'm fine, Mariah. I promise. Thank you for stopping by."

And I shut the door in her face. A pang of guilt made my heart skip. I'd just sent Mariah away, my father's oldest friend. *My* oldest friend. I'd just kicked her out of my house.

But as the knock of her boots moved away from the door and down the steps, followed by the crunch of snow, I felt only relief. I moved to the cupboard and pulled out the three shining skeins of linen. These I laid out gently on the table so that I could see them from my chair.

And then I carefully uncovered the glass wheel and replaced the distaff in its socket. Then I sat down and resumed spinning.

CHAPTER 4

“AURORA?”

I jumped, sucking in a harsh breath of surprise. Morning sun streamed in through the sheer curtains and the open door. I looked around at the house, clean and tidy as usual.

It was the morning after my father’s funeral, and Cael stood near the front door, his hat in his hands. I hadn’t even heard him come in. He was taller than most, and lean and strong from working in the fields his whole life. His dark eyes always hit me first, more than his size or his demeanor. Eyes like coals ready to light at the first spark.

I sat up a little straighter on my father’s chair – no, on my chair. I had fallen asleep at the window, my feet on the treadles of the spinning wheel. I pulled my long braid around and began undoing it. I’d never thought much of my hair, mouse brown and boring. But my father had loved it. “Like dark flax,” he used to say.

“Did you sleep at all?” Cael asked.

I’d never seen his hands so empty. He usually had a plow or a scythe. A simple wool cap felt so small in his hands. So insignificant.

I scrubbed at my eyes and sat up a little straighter, rebraiding my hair. My back groaned in complaint at having slept in an upright chair. “A bit.”

"We need to talk about the farm," Cael said. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other and the floorboard creaked under his bulk. He was such a big man, arms thick as tree trunks after years of working in the fields.

My heart clenched at his words. The farm. All I had left. The wheel never stopped, not even for death. I nodded rapidly. "Yes. I suppose so."

"Autumn is nearly gone," Cael went on wringing his cap between his hands. "The harvest has been soaked and dried, but it still needs scutching before it gets too cold to work outside. It should only take me a month to get through it all on my own."

I continued nodding as he rattled off the chores. I couldn't stop staring at the way he manhandled his cap. Twisting, folding, turning, over and over and over again.

"What's wrong?" I asked suddenly.

His hands froze and he caught my eye. His eyebrows gathered in a tight bundle on his sun darkened brow, dirt collected in the creases of his skin. His mouth pulled downward into a tight frown.

"What's bothering you, Cael?" I said again, a bit more strongly this time. My heart picked up its pace, sending adrenaline all through my body.

Whatever was on his mind, not now. Not today. Not the day after I buried my father. Please, just say everything's fine and go start scutching the flax. Come in for lunch like every other day.

"Aurora," he said, his voice low, but he couldn't continue.

I closed my eyes to brace myself. "Just say it."

"I won't be back for the sowing come spring."

For the second time in two days, the wheel stopped. Everything stopped. His words echoed in my mind again and again. *I won't be back. I won't be back.*

"I've been saving up these past two years," he continued, shifting his weight again. "Last week I bought the field behind my house, and your father gave me a bag of seed to start working it. My own field, Aurora. My own –" his voice broke off, and silence fell between us. Smothering, aching silence.

"You can have this farm," I found myself saying. "You can have these fields. I don't want them."

He shook his head over my words. "No. This is your farm, Aurora."

"I don't want it."

"Then sell it," he said.

"I'll sell it to you."

"I can't afford it."

"I don't want it!" I said again, my voice growing more and more frantic. "I can't do it alone! I don't want it!"

Cael took three steps forward and pulled me out of the chair. I tripped over my father's wheel, and he caught me in his strong hands. His arms went around me, and for half a second, I froze.

Cael was touching me. He was holding me. At most I'd only ever brushed his fingers when passing him a plate or a tool. I'd day-dreamed of how his chest would feel, the warmth and the solidity of it. Of feeling his heartbeat under my cheek and smelling the sun on his clothes.

What a cruel twist of fate that this should be the time it finally happened. That the moment would be rooted in grief and loneliness and pain.

"You're not alone, Aurora," he said, his voice rumbling through my skin.

I nodded vaguely. He was right. I knew that. Cael only lived about twenty minutes away by foot, and Mariah only ten minutes in

the opposite direction. I had friends in town, contacts in the auction house, and several dozen acquaintances that would undoubtedly lend a hand if I asked. I'd lived in Barano my entire life. One could never truly be alone in a small farming town.

But even so, the ache remained. The emptiness, the loneliness.

My fingers clutched around wads of his shirt, and the tears came. Great, wracking sobs that sent spasms through my whole body. I had been crying for days, it felt like, but not like this. Not this upturning of the world.

"Shh," he said gently. "You're not alone."

After a few minutes, when breath came easier and my face relaxed a little, I stepped away. He let his arms fall to his sides, his wool cap held casually in one hand. No more wringing and twisting.

"My father didn't love spinning like I do," I said with a throaty voice. "Flax was his mother's trade, and he grew up with it. To him, it was just a job. A way to make money. And with prices rising these past couple of years, he really thought we'd make it big, finally."

"Your father loved this farm," Cael said.

"Of course he did," I replied. "This was his home. These were his fields."

"It wasn't just a job to him," Cael insisted.

"Look," I said, moving toward the desk on the far wall. I pulled a heavy, leather ledger toward me, the page already open to the latest date. I ran my hands over the neat columns and rows filled with my father's handwriting. "He obsessed over these books. Every night, he sat for hours going over them, talking about our future, about our profits."

"Hours?" Cael asked, but I ignored him.

"He hoped to buy two more fields next year, and two more the year after that. To employ not only field hands, but spinners, too.

And he talked about building a workhouse for weaving. He had such big plans. We wanted to visit the seaside." With a bitter frown, I snapped the ledger shut. I wouldn't have to open it again until Cael finished scutching this year's harvest. Not until his last day on the farm.

"You don't have to do any of that," Cael said. "You don't even have to think about what to do right now. You have a huge harvest, plenty to prep and spin and sell. You can hire someone in the spring. I'll help you." He stepped closer and put a hand on my arm.

I jumped at his touch. His face swam into focus before me.

He squeezed my arm. "Are you alright?" he asked.

Darkness closed in until the entire house dimmed to the light of a single lamp and a few skeins of glowing thread. The glass wheel glimmered in the faint light, calling to me. *Come! Spin!*

I turned on the spot, but Cael had gone. No, he'd never been there at all. I'd kicked him out weeks ago.

I rubbed my chest over my heart, trying to push away the ache.

"You're not alone."

Yes, Cael. I was alone.

CHAPTER 5

MARIAH CAME BACK EVERY WEEK AFTER THAT. I'D SEE HER COMING FROM my window, and I'd run to hide away the evidence of what I was doing. Then I'd get rid of her as fast as I could before she could comment on the state of my house, which grew steadily worse as the project wore on.

After about a month, I stopped resting and simply resumed spinning after the housework was done. Then, a few weeks after that, I started doing only the bare minimum around the house so I could get back to the wheel as quickly as possible. I cleaned just enough dishes so that I could eat again and ignored the growing clutter completely.

Every moment I spent spinning was a moment I didn't have to think about the ache in my chest. And every strick spun meant more gold. More success. This would be the only opportunity I'd ever get in my entire life to make money like this. I couldn't waste even a single minute.

And if ever I started to doubt my logic, I'd simply get out the five gold nuggets the Weaver had given me. I laid them out on the windowsill in an orderly row and let their shine fill me with renewed purpose.

Mariah eyed the towers of dishes, the haphazard piles of clothes and tools and rubbish. But I'd always shoo her out again like an angry goose before she could start in on me. After a while, tired of hearing her scolding and worrying about the state of me and my house, I stopped answering the door when she knocked. And after that, she stopped knocking altogether. She simply came, dropped off a milk crate of fresh bread and smoked pork, then turned around and left again.

Weeks turned to months, and I barely noticed. All I could think about was the glass wheel and the steadily growing pile of glowing linen thread. I emptied the contents of my wardrobe out into the corner, and instead used the shelves to store the thread in orderly rows. I twisted them into tidy hanks to prevent tangling, and laid them side by side.

I liked to stare at the thread. Something about it eased the ache in my arms. It brought a little light back into the darkness that crowded in at the corners. They were beautiful, glowing with life and vitality.

The Weaver would be pleased. Her new cloak would be glorious.



CAEL CAME BACK IN SPRING, JUST LIKE HE'D PROMISED. I SAW HIM FROM my window, trudging up through the last of the muddy snow. He was as broad as I remembered, just as rugged and strong. The sight of him triggered a pang of longing that I had entirely forgotten about.

I froze at the glass wheel, unsure of what to do. I had fallen into an easy routine with Mariah. I didn't have to speak to her at all. She didn't even try anymore. But Cael would be different. As deter-

mined as Mariah was, she could be held back. Cael? He didn't take no for an answer.

In a panic, I ran to hide the wheel the way I used to do with Mariah. I laid the distaff on the ground to keep it safe, then draped my sheet over the whole thing. I closed the doors of my wardrobe, hiding the glow of the finished linen, then moved toward the kitchen and began nervously straightening up.

Not that it would do any good. I needed several hours of dedicated scrubbing to get this place in order.

Cael paused at the threshold, fresh, spring air blowing in around him. He stared around at my house, which I realized was in shambles.

"Hello Cael," I said without turning around. I stretched out my arm to relieve the aching that had crept up from my hands toward my shoulders. Even my ankles had started complaining from all the treading, but it would all be worth it when the Weaver bought my linen.

"Hello again, Aurora," he answered. "I'm just stopping by to see how you're doing. It'll be time for the sowing soon. Have you started looking for a new field hand?"

"Oh, uh," I hesitated, reaching for another dish. "No, not yet. I will soon."

"Aurora," he said.

I stayed facing the sink, dipping my rag into the water and scrubbing the old beans off of a plate. "Yes?"

"Why won't you turn around?"

I put down my dishes and turned to face him with a pleasant smile. I wiped my hands on my apron and shrugged. "I'm just doing the dishes."

Cael gasped when he saw me. "Aurora, what's happened? Are you sick?"

I frowned. "No. Just a little sore. I've been spinning." I rolled my shoulders.

"Have you been eating?"

"Of course!" I gestured at the piles of dishes around me. But he couldn't know that these dishes were weeks old. I had taken to eating the cold, unseasoned vegetables directly out of the canning jars. It was faster, and I could get back to work.

He narrowed his eyes at me, taking in my jutting collar bone and the way my shirt hung off of me at least two sizes too big. I hadn't noticed these things until I saw the way he looked at me. I must have grown very thin over the past few months.

"Mariah's worried about you," Cale said. He ran his hand through his dark hair, looking around. "And now I can see why. I was giving you space after our argument, but that may have been a mistake. I shouldn't have left you alone for so long. I'm so sorry."

"You didn't give me space," I said, hackles rising. "I told you to leave."

He stared at me in shock at my outburst. "Aurora, what is wrong? Wait... what is that?" He moved toward the window, his boots clunking across the wood floor.

Horror dropped my stomach to the floor. The gold. I had left the Weaver's gold ingots laid out on the window sill where I could stare at them as I spun. I darted after him, more sluggish than I used to be. Maybe I'd been sitting too long. I'd grown weak. I should really take time to eat. I couldn't spin if I wasted away to nothing.

"Is this gold?" Cael picked up one of the ingots and turned it over in his grubby palm, but I was right behind him. I snatched it away from him and scooped up the rest.

“Gods, Aurora. You’re cold as ice!” He grasped after my hands to feel my skin again, but I lurched away, clutching the gold to my body.

His expression darkened to confusion and dread. “Aurora, what is going on here? Where did you get that gold? Why aren’t you eating?”

And then, before I could answer or move or act in any way, his eyes fell on the lumpy shape under my sheet. And with zero hesitation, he snatched it off.

“No!” I cried. But my hands were full of gold, and I couldn’t stop him.

He whipped the sheet away, and the glass wheel shimmered in the morning sunlight streaming in through the window. The bobbin was already mostly full with shining thread.

Cael backed up two steps and stared at it, his mouth open. “What is going on here?”

I dropped the gold, which clattered to the floor. I grabbed Cael by the shirt and pushed him toward the door.

“Aurora!”

“Get out, Cael. I don’t need you to check up on me.”

He pushed against my hands, but I clung on with determination, steering him out.

“What is that wheel? Where did you get it from?”

“Get out!”

“Aurora!”

I slammed the door in his face and locked it. He pounded on it in protest. “Aurora! Talk to me!”

I leaned my head against the door jam, eyes closed, and begged him silently to go away.

“Aurora!”

Go away! I need to spin!

"Aurora, I'm sorry, okay?" he called through the door. "I'm sorry I pushed you away. I shouldn't have done that. Just talk to me!"

My heart thumped with that half remembered longing from before. An old memory of Cael at the far side of the field of golden flax, his hat in his hand, staring at a rose-colored sunset. I used to day-dream about him. What had that feeling been? I used to know.

"I'm alright, Cael," I said.

Silence met this statement, except for a single thump against the door. Maybe his head hitting it in defeat.

"I'll eat. I promise."

"What is that wheel, Aurora?"

"I know what I'm doing. Go home. Plant your field."

He growled in frustration, and his boots scraped across the porch as he spun away. I watched him from the window as he strode away down the lane. But when he reached the road, he turned right instead of left.

He was going to Mariah's, I'd bet my left shoe. They'd both be back tomorrow. Maybe even tonight. I glanced at the glass wheel, jealous that someone else knew about it now. It was mine. My own. The linen that came off it was a part of me.

I opened the wardrobe and sighed as the glow of the thread hit me. The aches in my body eased immediately. I had completed seventy-two hanks of linen thread. Seventy-two in five months. If I worked hard, I could finish another hundred before my year was up. The sight of it filling up my wardrobe would be glorious. I could see it in my mind's eye, and the image brought a little smile to my chapped lips.

I no longer cared about the gold. I just wanted to spin.

“You can’t spin if the healer and the farmer interfere,” said a familiar, melodious voice. It whispered up the back of my neck.

I whirled around to find the house empty. But I felt her. The warmth, the peace. I could feel her hand on my shoulder.

“Is that you, Weaver?” I asked in a tremulous whisper.

“It is I,” the voice responded. “I have been keeping watch over you, my child. Haven’t you felt me?”

As she said the words, they became true in my head. Yes, she had been there all along, just out of sight. She had been keeping me safe and focused on my task.

“What should I do?” I asked.

“Shut the house,” the Weaver responded confidently. “We have work to do. They cannot interfere.”

The smile melted into determination. Yes, I’d shut up the house. I was a grown woman. They couldn’t come into my house if I didn’t want them to.

So I went around to every window and pulled the shutters to, latching them securely. I only left my spinning window open, which I could shut the moment someone started down my lane. Then I barred the front door with an upright chair, just in case the lock failed.

Once that was done, I honored my promise to Cael and lit the stove. I took the time to cook up a real pork pie that would last me a few days at least.

I felt much better with a full stomach. When I turned back to the main room, the Weaver’s long face melted out of the darkness in the far corner. She was lighter than I remembered, like mist in the morning sun. She’d faded to almost nothing in the months since I saw her last.

She smiled kindly at me, as if she'd been there the whole time and I simply hadn't noticed.

"Hello," I said with an excited smile.

"Hello, child," she responded.

"Do you like the thread?" I asked, gesturing to the wardrobe.

"It is perfect, thank you," she said.

She held out her long hand to me, and I hurried to take it. The second her skin touched mine, all the ache and uncertainty faded to nothing. Blissful nothing. I knelt before her, holding her hand tightly in my own.

The Weaver smiled again and stroked my hair. "We have work to do."

"Yes," I said.

I returned to the glass wheel with fresh determination and a clean conscience. I placed the distaff in its socket, wet my fingers in the bowl, and began treadling. The fibers slid through my fingers as easily as ever, trailing golden magic onto the bobbin, and I sighed in relief.

The Weaver nodded her approval and settled back into her corner, almost disappearing in the shadows.

CHAPTER 6

“IT WAS AN EXCELLENT END-OF-SEASON DINNER!” MARIAH ANNOUNCED.

“Yes, thank you for letting me join you,” Cael said.

“Of course!” I said. “You earned it. We couldn’t have gotten the scutching done without you.”

Mariah wrapped herself up in her heavy shawl and hugged me tight. “I wish your father could have been here, but he’d be proud of you, my dear. Are you sure you’ll be alright alone tonight, love?”

I gave her my best smile and waved the half-empty bottle of wine at her. “Don’t worry about me. I’ve got company.”

She laughed, for a moment sounding like the person she was before my father died – someone who didn’t have to force her smiles. She patted my arm and opened the door. A blast of cold wind pushed in around her. “Don’t you keep her up too late, boy,” she called over her shoulder to Cael. “It’s already started snowing. You should get home, too.”

“I’m coming, Mariah,” Cael said in a patient tone.

She cast him one disbelieving look and pulled the door shut behind her.

Cael and I stood in the empty house, the silence beating in around us. I twisted my fingers together around the neck of the wine

bottle.

Finally, I could bear the quiet no longer. "Thank you for all your help this season."

Cael nodded away my thanks. "In the spring, let me know when you're ready to hire a new field hand. I'll help you find someone. Show them how things run around here."

"Okay. I will."

He nodded again, eyebrows furrowed just like that day three weeks ago when he'd told me he was leaving. Then he took a step forward, hands up as if to reach for me. "I had a plan, Aurora," he said in fervent tones.

"What?"

"I had a plan. I *have* a plan. To make something of myself, to prove to myself that I can stand on my own two feet."

"Okay?" I said, unsure.

"When you grow up like I did in the workhouse," he pressed on, his eyes darting around the floor at my feet. "When you're beat down and told you're nothing day after day, it gets easy to believe it. But your father, he took me in. He gave me work, taught me a trade. I owe it to him – to myself – to make something that is my own."

"I know, Cael."

He closed the last of the distance between us, actually taking my hand in his. I stared at our hands in shock.

"So you understand?" he asked. "It breaks my heart to leave you here like this. You weren't supposed to be here alone. Your father... But I have to do this. I have to go, Aurora."

It took several long seconds for his words to find meaning, but with understanding came the slow burn of hope.

"What are you saying?" I asked.

"Aurora," he breathed.

I tightened my grip on his hand. "Speak plain, Cael," I said. "Don't make me guess or assume. What are you saying to me?"

He took another step closer, his chest heaving in and out as he searched for words. "I care about you, Aurora," he said. "I –"

But that was all the confirmation I needed. I leaned up on my toes and kissed him. He sucked in a breath of surprise, but after a second's hesitation, his fingers threaded into my hair, and he kissed me back.

I put everything into that kiss. My daydreams as I watched him in the pink glow of a sunset in the flax fields. The happiness I used to have before my father died. My hope for a little light, a little love.

And as he wrapped me up in his arms, pressed me close against his body, and kissed me with all he had, I thought for a few seconds that I might get it. That this might be it. The light and happiness that I had lost in the past few weeks. It swelled in my chest like an ember that finally caught the dry tinder and burst into flame.

But then Cael stopped the kiss and held me away from him, breathing hard.

I stared up at him, confused. "What is it?" I asked.

"It's too soon," he said.

"Too soon?" I said.

"Your father just died. You're not thinking straight."

"What does my father have to do with how I feel about you?" I asked.

He shook his head. "You're grieving. You're lonely."

I grabbed the front of his shirt in both hands. "I've wanted this for years," I said, and I leaned up to kiss him again.

But he leaned away, and the fire in my chest fizzled.

"I have a plan, Aurora."

“What, for your farm?” I asked, even more confused. He put my hands away from him, and the ember went out completely.

“I have to make something of myself. I have to do this on my own.”

“Do what on your own? Live alone? Why?” The ember turned to ice in my chest, jagged, painful, and cold.

“You don’t understand what it was like for me growing up,” he said. “I need this, Aurora. I need to build something for myself. Where I don’t owe anybody anything.”

“You owe my father,” I spat.

“I earned everything your father gave me,” Cael shot back, his voice cold.

I shrank away half a step. My heart pounded in my chest with an anger that I didn’t know how to quantify. It vibrated in my fingers, took away my breath, drew up my top lip. It took away all reason, all caution.

“Aurora, please,” Cael said, his hands raised in a helpless gesture. “This feeling you have for me, it’s not real.”

“Don’t you dare tell me what I’m feeling, Cael!” I shouted. “As if you’re some expert!”

“Aurora...” He ducked as my wine glass hurled through the air at his head. It shattered on the wall behind him, splattering glass shards and deep purple droplets all over him.

Cael stared at me, at a loss. “Your father wouldn’t have wanted...”

“Don’t talk about my father! You don’t know what he would have wanted.” I pointed toward the door with a shaking finger. “You want to leave so badly, then go!”

When he still didn’t move toward the door, I jabbed with my finger and screamed again. “Get out, Cael!”

This time, he didn't hesitate. He grabbed his cap and coat off the hook and slammed the door behind him.

CHAPTER 7

REALITY CAME BACK SLOWLY. THE MEMORIES WERE GROWING MORE FAD-
ed, almost as thin as the Weaver was when I first met her. I shifted
my weight in my chair and heaved my feet back onto the glass
treadles.

Cael did come back the next day, just like he said. I slammed the
shutters closed the second he turned down my lane and ran to the
door to wait for his knock.

“Let me in, Aurora,” he said.

I glanced at the Weaver once, and though she said nothing, I un-
derstood what she wanted me to do. “No.”

“Where did you get that wheel?”

“It doesn’t matter! Go home, Cael!”

He came again the next day.

“I wish you’d let me in,” he said, his deep voice muffled through
the door. “I wish you’d let me help you.”

“I don’t need help,” I said.

He came again the next day, and the day after that. He didn’t care
that I never unlocked the door or that I refused to answer his
questions.

After a while, he stopped asking about the wheel. "Are you eating properly?"

"Yes." That was a lie. I never made a second pork pie after I finished the first, but maybe it was time I did. I'd gone back to eating cold veg out of the can with a couple of baked eggs. My joints were so stiff, not just in my arms and legs, but everywhere. Cael was right. I needed to eat. Why did I keep forgetting?

He let out a heavy sigh. "I'll come back tomorrow. I hope you'll let me in."

I never did. All I could think about was spinning on the glass wheel and the warm touch of the Weaver's hand on my shoulder.

Every day, the Weaver grew a little more tangible. Sometimes I turned around to find her at the wardrobe, dwarfing the room with her incredible height. She ran her translucent fingers over the glowing thread and sighed with delight.

During the day, she disappeared altogether, as if the light made her truly invisible. But I could feel her nearby, and her presence kept me focused on the task at hand.

But I was grateful to Cael, though. He came to the door every single day, forcing me to get up out of the chair. And once he left, I'd usually cook something since I was up anyway.

But then I'd sit back down and pick up the flax once more.

One day, a trickle of sweat ran down my brow. I wiped it away and stared at the moisture in awe. Was I hot?

I looked out the window at the overgrown field. Summer had come without me noticing. That field should be a sea of pale blue flax flowers, but I never hired someone to plant it. Not that it mattered. I never needed to spin again after this year. I could sell the whole place and let someone else farm it. I'd go south to the real

ocean just like Father had always talked about. Maybe see how it compared to a flax field in summer.

A small smile crept up the corner of my mouth, and I kept spinning.

But the problem with my constant spinning wasn't my aching body, my lack of sleep, or my steadily degrading living situation. It was the fact that I ran out of flax far sooner than I could have anticipated. One day in high summer, I went to the storage closet to get a new strick, but found only cobwebs. I reached into the dark corners and even got a stool to check the highest shelf in a panic, but nothing. It was all used up. I had spun every last fiber that we'd harvested the year before.

I leaned back against the wall, my chest heaving breath in and out, in and out.

Just breathe, Aurora!

But I couldn't. I had to spin. I needed flax.

I looked for the Weaver in the darkest corners of the house. "Are you there?" I asked the empty room, but only silence met me. Of course she didn't answer. It was full daylight.

I had to get flax. And with the Weaver unable to help me, I had to help myself. My first thought was the market in Barano. It was the wrong season for it, but one could reliably find at least a few stricks for sale somewhere. I could be there and back in under two hours.

I ran to the pile in the corner and dug out my cleanest shirt and pants, changed as fast as I could, and hauled on my boots. But I only made it about halfway down the laneway before the panic set in. My heart pounded against my ribs and I couldn't catch my breath. It was like drowning in molasses. I fell to my hands and knees, gaping and gasping. The gravel dug into my skin, but I barely felt it.

I crawled back toward the house, and with every agonizing inch, breath came a little easier. Soon I was able to scramble up to my feet and get back inside the comforting cave that my house had become. I went straight to the wardrobe and opened it.

The glow of more than a hundred hanks of linen thread hit me like the sun after a storm. I sucked in a deep breath and laid my face directly against the nearest stack, soaking in their warmth.

After a while, I settled down on the floor, staring up at my thread in despair. I was out of flax. I couldn't go buy more. Cael would never enable me by getting it for me. If he saw me now, there's no telling what he'd do.

I twirled my fingers through the end of my tattered braid, wearing a hot spot into my fingers where it traveled the same path over and over. What was I going to do?

Later, when the sun dipped low in the west, the Weaver reappeared. "What troubles you, child?"

I scrambled to my feet and ran to her, taking her hand frantically. I closed my eyes and sank to the floor in relief. "I ran out of flax," I admitted. "I can't spin anymore."

The Weaver stroked my tangled hair, and I leaned into her touch. "Do not fret."

"But I need to spin! I have to! I can't get into town. Why can't I leave the house?"

"You are connected to the thread," she said, drawing a hank near. She held it up to me and I stroked it lovingly. "It is a part of you. You cannot divide yourself by leaving."

This made perfect sense, but fear threatened to come in at the corners. The thread was a part of me? I could never leave the house? What would happen when the Weaver took the thread away?

But I clung to her hand, and I banished the fear away. That was another problem for another day. The Weaver would never let me come to harm. I focused on the heavenly emptiness that her touch gave me, and I forgot to fear.

“What do I do?”

The Weaver stroked my hair, running my ratty braid through her hand from root to tip. “It does not matter what you spin,” she said, catching my eye meaningfully. “It only matters that you spin.”

She held up my braid.

I stared at the braid in my hands, like dark, thin flax fibers. My father had always said my hair shone like flax. Maybe, just maybe it would be close enough? If the Weaver said so, it must be true.

With aching hands, I undid my braid and finger combed through the length of it, pulling out a good amount of loose strands. These I took to the wheel, and after a steadying breath, began treadeling.

The hairs spun up together just like flax, and with a gasp of delight, they began to glow as they passed through my fingers. The smooth, perfect thread wound onto the bobbin, identical to real linen.

“It worked!” I said, and the Weaver smiled in response.

Then, without hesitation, I ran to my dresser, dug through the scattered contents on top, and found my comb in the debris. I combed my hair hastily, careful not to lose a single loose strand, and then took my sheers and cut it right off close to my scalp.

The heavy strands fell into my hands, shining despite the weeks of accumulated dirt. It felt like the silkiest flax I’d ever handled. I went straight to the table and dressed my distaff with it.

My hair spun up beautifully. Once I’d spun all three singles and plied them together, I compared the hair yarn to the linen in the closet. Identical.

But of course that had only taken two days. I still had months to go before our deal was up and I had no more hair left to spin.

“It doesn’t matter what I spin?” I asked the Weaver.

“It does not matter,” she confirmed, her voice a whisper in the dark.

My house was a treasure trove of fiber. Curtains, bedsheets, clothes, washrags. I cut it all into strips, which took a frustrating amount of time, but it was worth it. I attached it to the leader on the glass wheel, and as the fraying fabric strips passed through my fingers and onto the wheel, it became a perfect, glowing thread. Fine, shining filament, strong and beautiful as the best linen.

I relaxed into my chair, the wheel turning steadily on, and I spun every last scrap of fiber in my house.

CHAPTER 8

AND SO THE LAST OF SUMMER PASSED AWAY IN A BLUR OF SHREDDING, spinning, washing, and drying. I took to spending nights on the floor in front of my wardrobe, staring at my golden hoard between fleeting hours of fitful sleep. I ran out of canned food, and I'd never bothered to plant a new garden in the spring. I relied on the weekly baskets that Mariah still sat on my front porch and the steady supply of eggs that my chickens gave every afternoon.

But I didn't care so much. I didn't get hungry anymore. I only ate because Cael came by every day, sat on my porch with his back against my door, and talked to me through the wood. I sat on the other side, listening in silence as he told me about the progress in his new fields, about the good prices he expected at the market in a few weeks, about the pair of goats he'd bought from someone traveling through to the capital.

The more time I spent eating and sleeping, the less time I had for spinning. And so I stopped eating and sleeping, and just spun. My only company was the Weaver, and my only balm was her calming touch. My body ached and groaned, but I ignored it. It felt like it belonged to someone else now. It belonged to the thread in the wardrobe.

Then one fall night, as I sat spinning in the light of the thread, my leg cramped. Usually I would just take a break, stretch my ankle, and get back to work in a few minutes, but this was unlike any cramp I'd ever had.

It started with an ache, which I ignored. But then came stabbing pains, like someone cut into my leg with a knife.

I yanked up my skirt, expecting to see a wound, blood, anything. But everything was as it should be. Smooth, fair skin from ankle to knee. It wasn't even red.

"Weaver!" I cried. "What's happening?"

"There is a sibyl in the village," the Weaver said, melting back into the darkness. "She is injured, but she will move on soon. You need not worry. But I cannot stay while she is nearby."

A sibyl, or a mindwalker, as we called them in this part of the world. A telepath and a mind reader. One heard of them from time to time, but I'd only ever seen them in passing. They mostly kept to themselves.

I rubbed my calf furiously, trying and failing to ease the phantom pain. "Help me!"

"I cannot."

"Weaver!"

But she had completely disappeared. I couldn't feel her at all. She'd abandoned me. All because of some mindwalker passing through the village.

The pain continued. Horrible, breath-stealing agony that radiated from my leg up into my trunk like fire. I cried out in pain, scrabbling at my leg desperately. I snatched down a hank of glowing thread and pressed it against my calf, but it didn't help. I threw it aside and ran for the front door. I hopped to the well in the yard and hauled on the rope.

“Come on, come on!” I said through gritted teeth, but my arms were weak and it took every ounce of effort I had in me to get the half-full bucket up.

I splashed the cold water on my leg, desperate for relief, but nothing. The phantom pain continued. Nothing I did helped.

So I hobbled back inside, whimpering, clutching at my leg, to lay down in my nest of blankets in front of the wardrobe. I curled up, gripping my calf as tight as I could, and cried.

An hour later, the pain stopped as suddenly as it began. I sat up and examined my leg, but no mark marred the smooth skin. I looked around at the house. With the Weaver gone, my head cleared for the first time in a long time, and I saw the state of the place.

My bed was stripped and shredded, my clothes entirely ruined, my curtains all gone. Dirty dishes had been piled up for so long, even the flies had abandoned them. I’d dragged in a huge mound of straw when I’d run out of fabric to spin, and it skittered here and there with barn mice.

With the shutters closed and the lamps all cold, the place was a dismal cave. The only light came from the wardrobe and the magical thread stored inside.

What had happened? How had I let things get this bad? I should have stopped when I ran out of flax. I had long since spun enough to be wealthier than any queen. Why did I keep going? When was the last time I ate?

I hauled myself onto shaking legs, shocked at how thin I’d become. How long since I’d gathered eggs? I started to move toward the kitchen, determined to wash something finally, but fatigue hit me hard. How long since I’d slept? I couldn’t recall.

I collapsed back onto the floor, dragging a torn blanket over myself, and passed out.

CHAPTER 9

“AURORA, WAKE UP.”

Someone shook my shoulder. I rolled away, grumbling, “Sleeping.”

“It’s time to get up.” Mariah’s voice. How had she gotten in?

She shook me again, and this time I opened my eyes.

Her haggard face swam into view. Her usually tidy hair was askew this morning, with the gray streak spilling out in a wind-blown tangle like she’d been running her hands through it obsessively.

“How did you get in here?” I asked, giving voice to the one thought that my foggy brain could hold onto.

“Your front door was open.” She hooked a thumb at the door. My muddy footprints from the night before led a direct path to where I lay sprawled out on the floor. I must have left it open after I’d gone to the well to ease the pain in my leg.

“And as surprising as that is,” she continued in a deadpan tone, “I’m more shocked by the huge pile of glowing thread you’ve got in your wardrobe. And the weird glass spinning wheel you’ve got by the window. And the huge mound of straw you’ve filled up the house with. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say there was something

strange going on here. And what in god's name did you do to your hair?"

I glared in response to her sarcasm, and flopped back down on the floor.

"I don't think so," she said, grabbing me by the arm. "You're going to get up, and we're going to have a chat. But not here. It stinks. The front porch."

She pulled me up and led me outside, and I didn't have the strength to stop her. She sat me down on the bench by the front door and pulled her usual milk crate of food closer. She passed me a pitcher of goat's milk and a crock of grits, and I proceeded to eat directly from the containers.

She raised an eyebrow at me. "Well that's manners if ever I saw them," she said with a sniff.

I ignored her and tipped the pitcher up to drink heavily.

Once I'd eaten, Mariah sat staring at me in silence, one eyebrow still raised in expectation. "Talk," she said.

And finally, the fight went out of me. I didn't have the energy or the desire to push back anymore. So I leaned back against the bench, and I talked.

I told her about the argument Cael and I had, about getting lost in the woods and meeting the Weaver. I told her about the deal we'd made and finding the glass wheel in my house when I got home. I told her about my growing obsession with the thread, and about Cael coming every day to talk to me through the door when I wouldn't let him in.

"I didn't realize how bad it got," I said, finally. "I was so excited when I found the wheel would spin anything, and that I could keep going. I just couldn't stop."

I sucked in a heavy breath and fell silent, staring down at my grubby hands. Had I been spinning with dirt and grease all over my hands? My father would be horrified.

“So what are you going to do now?” she asked.

I shrugged. “Keep spinning.”

“Aurora...”

“Why not?” I asked. “What difference does it make at this point? I’ve already come this far. Why not keep going?”

“Why not?” she repeated, incredulous. “Because you’re going to kill yourself if you keep going like this. What if I hadn’t been bringing you food all this time? I almost stopped, you know.”

“No you didn’t,” I said with a scowl.

“Don’t sass me, girl!”

I crossed my arms and stared out over the overgrown field. We both fell into mutinous silence.

Finally, Mariah spoke low, troubled. Like she was scared to speak at all.

“Last night—” she hesitated, then tried again. “Last night a man brought a teenage girl to my house with her leg all torn up.”

I glanced at her, then averted my eyes to stare at the dead petunias in the pot by the porch rail. The memory of the phantom pain from the night before sent shivers down my spine. I remembered the Weaver’s words from the night before. *There is a sibyl in town. She is injured.*

“It was bad, all infected and swollen,” Mariah continued. “He sent everyone else away and convinced me to clean it up. Said if I didn’t, she’d die. He was right of course. The girl had a bad fever already.”

“He had to talk you into saving her?” I asked, confused. Mariah had been a local doctor for decades. She’d never turned anyone

away in all the time I'd known her.

Mariah kicked her toe through the dead leaves that I'd never bothered to sweep off the porch. "She was one of them. A mindwalker."

I clenched the edge of the bench in sudden alarm. A mindwalker? That confirmed it. The Weaver had been afraid of Mariah's mindwalker. The pain hadn't been mine at all. It had been sent from her.

"I almost didn't do it," she said. "I almost turned her away, but when I looked at her, it made me think of you. Here alone, suffering. How I'd left you here so long. How I've been enabling... whatever this is." She waved vaguely at the house behind us. "Of course I had no idea what was really going on here. I thought you were simply depressed."

"I was," I said. And with shuddering clarity, I realized that's exactly what had been going on the past year.

"Come home with me, Aurora," she said. "Right now. Lock up the house and let's go. We'll send Cael back for the chickens tomorrow. Come with me and don't look back."

I sighed heavily. Wouldn't that be nice? All this could be over. I'd already earned enough gold to last me a lifetime. I didn't have to spin another inch of thread for the rest of my life if I didn't want to.

For one shining instant, I thought maybe I could get up and leave all this behind. Never look at this damned house again.

But then I remembered why I had resorted to cutting off my own hair when I ran out of flax. The pounding heart, the loss of breath. The wheel wouldn't let me leave.

"I can't."

"Of course you can," she said, turning toward me. "Just get up and start walking."

“It’s time for you to go home, Mariah,” I said, standing up and shaking out my skirt.

“Come with me!”

“I can’t!”

“Well, I know better than to waste time trying to help someone who refuses to help themselves.” She stood abruptly and marched down the steps, then turned back with a staid expression. “The offer stands. Come stay with me whenever you like. But I won’t be bringing you any more food. Come or stay, it’s up to you.”

I clenched my teeth and watched her steady progress down my lane.

No more food. Only eggs left, and the hens would stop laying long before my year was up. I couldn’t leave the house to buy supplies. I couldn’t get help from Cael without letting him in. Mariah was cutting me off.

I watched Mariah until she reached the road, turned south, and disappeared behind a stand of elm trees

All this for a bit of gold. This isn’t what my father wanted.

CHAPTER 10

I WENT BACK INTO THE HOUSE AND GLARED AT THE WHEEL, SHINING DULLY in the light of the one open window. The thread on it glowed like the morning sun, spun out of old moldy straw from the barn.

“Why do you hover, Aurora?” the Weaver asked from her dark corner. She cradled several hanks of thread in her arms as usual, illuminating her face from the underside and distorting her fair features into a grim mask.

“You’re back,” I said.

“The sibyl has moved on.”

I nodded my understanding.

“There is work to be done,” she said.

“Don’t you think this is enough thread?” I asked, gesturing at the wardrobe.

“The more you spin, the more gold you will earn,” she said. “Was that not your wish?”

“Yes, but...” I trailed off, looking around at my ruined house. “I think I’ve earned enough. And this is more than enough thread to make a cloak. It’s enough to make three cloaks.”

The Weaver unfolded herself from her corner. “You wish to go home with the healer.”

"I want this to be over."

"Our contract was for one year and one day," the Weaver reminded me gently. She took my arm, and warmth spread through me. My joints eased, my shoulders relaxed. She guided me toward the wheel. "We still have two months to go. You've come this far."

I sat down in the chair, my thoughts pleasantly vacant and warm. My sore hands reached for more straw and my feet landed on the treadles like clubs.

Wait, no. This wasn't right. I had been saying something. Who had I been talking to before?

"Someone was here?" I asked, turning to look up at the Weaver.

"No one was here," she assured me, guiding my hands back to the straw. "Only you and I."

"Right," I breathed, but though I managed to pick up a handful of straw, I let it rest in my lap as confusion took over. What was that taste on my tongue? Heavy, creamy, smooth. Goat's milk. I didn't have goats. Where had I gotten milk?

Come home with me.

"Mariah was here," I said, rising up off the chair.

The Weaver put a hand on my shoulder and pushed me back down firmly. "The healer is gone now. It's time to work."

"But..." I began.

"But nothing, Aurora!" the Weaver said in a commanding tone.

I shrank away from her and turned obediently toward the wheel, clutching the straw in my lap. She was right. It was time to work. I had come this far and survived. The Weaver would help me, just like I was helping her.

Then I looked up and saw Cael coming down the road toward my lane. He was so small from this distance, so far away. He would

come and sit on my porch and talk to me through the front door as usual. A few moments of happiness.

But I'd left the front door open after Mariah had left. He wouldn't sit outside. He'd come right in. He'd probably touch me, hold me. I ran my fingers over my own hand, remembering the way it had felt nearly a year ago when he'd kissed me. Had it really been that long?

Maybe Mariah was right. It was time to stop all this. It was time to remember what it felt like to want him.

I almost glanced toward the open door, but forced myself to turn back to the wheel instead. If the Weaver realized I'd left it open, she'd remind me to shut it. She'd *make* me shut it. But she kept her focus solely on the wheel and the hanks of thread in her arms.

He reached my lane and turned toward the house, his eyes on his feet. Still so far away, but getting closer with every step.

With a rush of determination, I hauled myself to my feet. The straw tumbled out of my lap and onto the floor.

"Aurora!" the Weaver said in shock. She reached for my shoulder once more.

I stumbled away from her. By all the gods, what was I supposed to do now? I couldn't make her leave. I couldn't make her do anything. She had complete control. She was going to make me spin until I died. Mariah had been right about all of it. That gods damned glass wheel was going to be the death of me.

"No," I said.

She stepped closer, bent awkwardly to avoid hitting her head on the ceiling. "Aurora, my dear," she said in placating tones.

"No!" I repeated. Cael was halfway up the lane, now.

The Weaver followed my glance, then darted her ice white eyes at the open door. "I see," she said. "You think the farmer will save

you.”

“I don’t need saving,” I said. I gripped the back of my chair, maneuvering to keep it between myself and her. “I’ve completed our bargain. When the time is up, you will purchase my thread at the cost of one gold ingot per fifty yards. But I’m done spinning, Weaver. I’m done.”

Her face distorted into something altogether ugly. A snarl peeled up her lip, exposing blindingly white, elongated teeth. Her eyes shone in the darkness, throwing the sunlight back at me like a cat in the dark.

“You’re not done until you’ve spun every last bit of life you have, child,” she hissed. She reached for me again, lunging with innate speed and grace. Her fingers brushed my shoulder as I lurched to one side, sending a wisp of her blissful emptiness through me.

I stumbled, gasping, desperate to hold onto what was real.

Mariah. Cael. Father. A flax field in spring. A rosy sunset. Mariah. Cael. Father.

“Cael!” I cried out. I backed toward the window, away from the Weaver, dragging the chair with me. It scraped across the floor, catching on the pile of straw.

“Aurora?” he called from the yard.

Running footsteps clunked up the stairs and across the porch. Cael appeared framed in the doorway, shocked at the display before him. The destroyed house, the moldy straw, the glowing thread. But the most imposing image by far was the impossibly tall Weaver in her sheer, barely-there dress. He stared up in wonder at her, mouth ajar.

“By all the gods,” he breathed.

A vicious smile spread across the Weaver’s beautiful face. “Ah. The farmer,” she said. “We meet at last.”

It happened in slow motion. She extended her hand toward Cael, who was too shocked to move away. And though he'd seen how far I'd fallen over the past year, he couldn't know what her touch would do to him. I'd always welcomed the emptiness, the bliss of not caring. But Cael didn't deserve that.

The Weaver couldn't be allowed to touch him. Not ever. But there was nothing I could do to stop her. Nothing at all. Her long fingers stretched toward him, too fast. Too close.

In a burst of madness, I tried to lift my father's heavy chair. But I had grown too weak. I had given all my life to that damned thread, and I had become a ghost of myself.

The Weaver's fingers wrapped around Cael's arm, and he stared up at her, eyes blank. Peaceful. Empty.

"No!" I screamed, my voice paper thin. With a grunt of fury and frustration, I pushed the chair over, just hoping it was heavy enough to do the job on its own.

The chair tipped up on two legs, teetered for a second or two, then toppled over. Its back smashed into the glass wheel, shattering it into a million shining pieces. The bits of glass scattered across the floor, mixing with the straw and sparkling across the dingy floor. The distaff hit a second later, shattering likewise and sending glass shards everywhere.

"What have you done!" the Weaver cried, releasing Cael. Her hands hovered over the ruins of her wheel for a few seconds before she staggered, breathless to the wardrobe.

All the light had gone out of the thread. Every single hank had reverted to mundane, ordinary linen, recycled fabric, hair, and straw. The Weaver clutched it to her chest, grasping and grabbing as much as she could. But it did nothing for her. All the magic was gone.

"What have you done?" she repeated on a sob.

I jumped when a warm hand grabbed my arm, but it was only Cael.

“Let’s go, Aurora,” he said under his breath.

I nodded, backing away from the sobbing Weaver. As we watched, she grew paler and thinner, until she was almost as transparent as her dress.

“What have you done?” she asked again.

I stepped in glass immediately, stumbling against Cael with a gasp of pain. He picked me up and marched me out of the house, his boots crunching through the remains of the glass wheel.

As he carried me out, I stole one last glance at the Weaver. She met my eyes, tears pooling in the corners. She mouthed, “What have you done?” one last time, though I couldn’t hear her properly. She faded to the barest outline, then disappeared. The hanks of plain thread fell to the floor in a heap.

She was gone.

CHAPTER II

A WEEK LATER, MARIAH, CAEL, AND I WENT TO THE GRAVEYARD TO VISIT my father. I stood between them, my hand held firmly in Cael's, and breathed in the fresh air.

After a few days of good food and rest at Mariah's house, I felt more like myself than I had in a long, long time.

"I'm sure breaking that wheel didn't hurt, either," Mariah said in a dry tone when I mentioned it.

I grimaced. "Yes, probably so."

I knelt down and brushed away some fallen leaves that had covered my father's stone.

"He'd be right proud of you, you know," Mariah said. "Not many could have scrapped with one of the Old Kind and lived to tell about it."

I stood up with a heavy sigh and slipped my hand back into Cael's. He pressed my fingers against his mouth and kissed them.

"So have you decided what you're going to do next?" Cael asked.

"Not yet," I said. "I can't go back to that house any time soon. Maybe I will sell it after all."

I fingered the five gold ingots in my pocket. The Weaver had never paid for the thread I'd spun for her, but she'd given me these five

free and clear. With them, and with the money from selling my farm, I could do anything at all.

Mariah patted me on the arm. "You stay with me as long as you like. My house has been empty for far too long."

"Thank you." I looked between them, a small smile on my face. It felt like going home, standing here with these two. Mariah, with her practical frown and gray-streaked, dark hair, and Cael with his broad shoulders and heavy eyes. These two had never given up on me, and it was time I made the most of that gift.

"Do you mind giving me a minute?" I asked.

"Of course, dear," Mariah said. "We'll be just down at the gate."

"Take as long as you need," Cael said.

Once alone, I sat down in the grass in front of my father's stone. I ran my fingers over his name, reveling in the ache that sat in the pit of my heart. I had gone so long without feeling anything at all, it was a relief to finally feel this pain.

What would he say now? Would he congratulate me for defeating the Weaver? Would he admonish me for getting caught in her trap in the first place? Would he say anything at all?

Yes, he would say something. He'd put one arm around me and squeeze me tight against his side. Then he'd kiss me on top of the head and say, "Time flies like the wheel, Aurora."

"Time flies like the wheel," I whispered back with a small smile, and a single tear slid down my cheek. I kissed my fingers and pressed them against his stone.

I sniffed hard, wiped under my eye, and started down the hill after Mariah and Cael.

"You done already, child?" Mariah asked as I approached.

I went straight to Cael's side and leaned into his warmth. He put his arm around my shoulders and squeezed.

“Yes,” I said, smiling up at him. “Let’s go home.”

The End

AFTERWORD

I hope you enjoyed reading *The Glass Wheel* as much as I enjoyed writing it. This story is my love letter to spinning, which is a favorite hobby of mine. I never understood why so many main characters in historical fiction hate spinning, because I've always loved it. *The Glass Wheel* is my answer to those stories. It is for the quiet ones, who find peace in repetitive activities and in creating beautiful things.

To find bonus material for *The Glass Wheel* and sneak peaks at upcoming books, visit my website: annacackler.com. Subscribers to my newsletter will receive all of my short stories as they are completed.

I am also on [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#), so click like and follow to stay in touch! I'd love to hear from you.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many thanks to those who helped me get this story done! Kim Meeks and Cassie Swindon, thank you for reading the early drafts. I wouldn't have been able to do this without you.

And as always, thank you Kevin for all the unfailing support. Thanks love!

ALSO BY ANNA CACKLER

COMING SOON:

[Little Owl](#)

Adult | Fantasy, Romance | Word count ~118k

No listening in. No coercion. No lies. When danger advances, Gwen must decide how much of a monster she's willing to become in order to save the people she loves.



FREE SHORT STORIES:

[Waking Up the Giants](#)

Adult | Fantasy | Word count ~13.5 k

Eoghan is certain the old legends about the Giants are just stories from his childhood. But when they find the fabled Clarion, he begins to believe the impossible.

His job is to get Nora safely to the peak. But if the Giants are real, it may be safer to go back down.



[The Dragon's Wife](#)

Adult | Fantasy | Word count ~1500

Calliope is a cave spirit who dreams of becoming human. When a small boy called Arlo seeks sanctuary in her dim caverns, she may finally find the key to success.

If an Owl could become human, then so could I.



[The List - A Table Five Prequel](#)

Adult | Romance, Comedy | Word Count ~5k

Mae Norris is in a rut. After catching her boyfriend cheating, she's back home with her parents, working in their bookstore, and unsure how to start over.

But when a sexy stranger catches her eye, she decides it's high time to sort herself out. Now to work up the nerve to speak to him...



AVAILABLE NOW:

[Table Five](#)

Adult Contemporary | Erotica, Comedy | Word count ~51.5k

Mae Norris has a plan. Actually, what she has is a to-do list. She has been loyal to the wrong man her whole life, and now she's ready to find out what she's been missing.

First on the list: Have sex with a stranger.



[The Ordinary Life of Emily P. Bates](#)

Young Adult | Romance, Comedy | Word count ~76k

Emily just wants to keep her head down and get through her junior year without failing calculus, but instead she finds herself dropped head first in the deep end of the dating pool.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I love to read and write romance, humor, and fantasy — in that order! My favorite books are those that feature a satisfying and healthy romance between realistic characters.

I have a degree in writing from the University of Central Arkansas. At the time, a Creative Writing degree was not available, but I consider that to be a blessing in disguise. Not only did I study storytelling, but I also dove deep into the worlds of audience, technical writing, non-fiction, and academic writing. And though my writing education has continued over the years in the school of life, I will be forever grateful for that solid foundation I received in the writing community at UCA.

Though I grew up in Arkansas and Oklahoma, I currently live in Puerto Rico, where it never gets cold! My family and I love going to the beach year-round, where I soak up the sun and inspiration.

But as little as I like winter, I admit I miss the crisp air from time to time. That's why I chose to set Table Five in a chilly Arkansas November.

I have a wide range of hobbies, including crochet, spinning thread, cross stitch, painting, home improvement, cake decorating, and piano. I like to incorporate these passions into my writing to add depth and detail.

