

CRIMSON IN THE VERY WRONG FAIRY TALE

by **Liz Jasper**

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SMASHWORDS EDITION

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DEDICATION

To my sisty ugler, Laura, who is awesome in every way.

Chapter One

It started innocently enough. A week before my sixteenth birthday, my mother began decorating the house with crystals. Rose quartz on top of the television, purple amethyst in the front hall, that sort of thing.

But soon no surface was safe. She sprinkled tiny gold citrines along my bookshelves. She arranged nuggets of turquoise around the fern in the bathroom. She put jade in the fridge.

Yes, *in the fridge*. I had to shove it aside to get to the orange juice.

Even more disturbing, when she thought I wasn't looking, she moved the jade back. To *exactly* the same spot.

I should have known something was very wrong. Most kids would have had an intervention with their parent at this point, but I assumed it was her way of dealing with the fact that I was turning sixteen on Saturday. She ran a yoga studio for a living so I figured it was only natural that she was trying to calm her nerves by doing weird things with crystals.

Besides, even if it killed me, I refused to pick a fight until after Saturday. I was determined to show her that I had finally learned to let serenity win out over my temper. I *needed* her to see how mature I was so that she'd let me drive to school.

I'm not against public transportation or anything. I think public transportation is great and more people should take it. I'm merely against the yellow school bus.

Todd, Hayley, and I were the only sophomores on it. Todd and Hayley are my best friends. I have no idea why their parents made *them* ride the bus—though I was eternally grateful they did. But I knew why Mom made me. She thought it was great that I got to ride back and forth to school each day surrounded by "all those nice kids." Maybe when I was in kindergarten the bus kids had been nice. Now it was a haven for dorks and weirdos and for some reason they liked to sit next to me. And talk. The sort of horrible droning that made you want to crawl out through a window at forty miles per hour just to get away from the sound of their voice.

I really needed to get off that bus.

So you can see why I bit back my protests even when Mom began putting crystals *on me* whenever I left the house. The day before my birthday I was so weighted down with the things I could hardly walk.

It was unbelievable what she'd managed to cram on me. My left arm had an orange carnelian bracelet that wound from my wrist up to my elbow, and my right sported its twin in glassy black obsidian. Around my neck she'd hung a monstrosity of brown-striped tiger's-eye and pink opals. My belt was plastered with magenta and teal agates. She'd even made me a multicolored quartz scrunchie for my hair. Lord only knows where she found a scrunchie—they'd been out of style since I was in the third grade.

I looked like a bag lady who had collided with a bucket of glitter.

As soon as I turned the corner, out of sight of the house, I took off the scrunchie—carefully. Its cheerful-looking stones had formed a death grip on my hair. I tucked it out of sight in my backpack. The rest of my crystal accessories quickly followed.

I had a strategy for getting through high school. It was the same strategy that I'd used since I'd formulated it in kindergarten: be unmemorable.

For as long as I could remember, I'd been a magnet for the fringe kids of the schoolyard. The nice kids—the boring sort that ate paste and had no friends, but were otherwise harmless—always wanted me to be their best friend. Unfortunately for them, the mean kids also seemed to gravitate to me. Usually with their fists cocked. And then the two groups would bang into each other and there'd be chaos and guess who ended up in the principal's office?

I never understood why all this trouble happened around me. It's not like I asked for it. Probably it was as simple as the fact that I was the most visible person on the playground. Even in the first grade I was taller than the other kids in my class. And when you live in Los Angeles and add freakish height to skin that never tans and coal-black hair, the bullies and delinquents of the playground are going to take one look at you and roll up their sleeves. I'd tried fighting back. Once. On my first day of kindergarten. Mom got me out of the principal's office, mopped up my bloody nose, and started me on yoga. From then on if I so much as looked crossways at a bully she doubled the lesson.

I'd worked hard since then to become socially invisible. Fading into the background is way easier than extra sun salutations, believe me. People don't hassle you if they forget you exist. The mean kids anyway. The freakishly nice ones just invite you to do charity projects that you can't say no to.

"Is that *you* clinking? I've been wondering what that sound was," Todd said as we got off the bus and started the two-block walk home Friday afternoon.

"What? Oh, that's just great. How long have you noticed?" I glared at him. He could have mentioned it earlier. Lord only knew how long I'd been making weird noises. For my own sanity around the house, I'd blocked out the various sounds my mother's crystal masterpieces made as I moved days ago.

I wondered if anyone else at school had noticed. Of course they'd noticed. Who was I kidding? I would probably be known for the rest of high school as Crimson the Clinker or something equally flattering. I'd probably hear it on the bus tomorrow. And the next day. And the next.

I *so* needed my own car.

"Hold up a sec," I said.

Todd shrugged, pulled his iPhone out of a pocket, and went back to the game he'd been playing on the bus. I slid my backpack off my shoulders and unzipped the top to retrieve the crystal hoard. The clump of freshmen walking behind us shifted formation to pass.

They all said something like "Yo!" or "Hey, man" to Todd as they went by.

Todd looked up and gave a sleepy smile that encompassed them all. "Hey," he said, and went back to his phone.

Todd was one of those people everyone thought was cool, even the teachers, and for some reason no one held that against him.

I noted that not one of the freshmen walking by said "Hey" to me.

Good.

Todd walks at a pace that would bore a snail when he's got his iPhone out, so I had plenty of time to put all my crystals back on before I got home.

I was doing a final adjustment on my scrunchie—it had a tendency to pull to one side, making me look like a deranged hippie—when I heard the faint rumble of a twin exhaust coming up our street. My hand froze in my hair.

Shay Stevens.

He was early today.

I tried to yank off the scrunchie, but the crystals tangled in my hair. In a panic, I reached for the next biggest thing, my agate-studded belt, and had it half off when I realized Todd had stopped playing with his iPhone and was staring at me.

"Is there a reason why you're stripping in your driveway?" he asked. "Do I need to leave?"

I noticed an uncomfortable breeze just below my belly button. I glanced down. The belt must have weighed ten pounds, and now that I'd unlatched it from my hips, it was heading south, taking my pants with it. I quickly tugged my pants back into place and refastened the belt.

"I'm not stripping," I told him. "I'm adjusting."

I tried stretching my shirt down to hide the belt but the material immediately bounced back up to rest at the top of my jeans. Shirts were never long enough on me.

He shook his head and went back to his game without saying another word. Todd lives next door, and we'd been best friends since we could toddle across the yard and steal each other's juice boxes. He'd dealt with worse than the prospect of seeing me covered in crystals with my pants down around my ankles, believe me.

Shay was nearly upon us. I started fumbling with the clasp of my necklace and then let my hands drop with a sigh. Who was I kidding?

When a cherry-red Corvette driven by the school quarterback and packed with cheerleaders drives up a street toward someone like me, it keeps going. In their happily mainstream world, I registered about as high as a discarded gym towel. Lower, probably. A towel had its uses.

Shay Stevens wouldn't notice me if I was wearing a neon sign. On the plus side, I could probably stare at him as much as I wanted without him ever knowing.

I risked a peek. The Corvette swerved over to my side of the street and screeched to a halt right in front of me. Shay left the engine running as he stared at me.

My mouth went dry and my knees turned to rubber. I'd fantasized about this happening a million times. Except in my fantasy, I was wearing better clothes and didn't have deranged-hippie hair. And Shay didn't have cheerleaders with him.

His gaze was oddly fuzzy, as if he was settling into a nap and all at once I realized he wasn't staring at me. He was staring at the crystals. All that glittering seemed to be putting him in some sort of trance, sort of like what they said video games did to some people.

This was definitely not part of the fantasy. My face burned with embarrassment.

Cheerleader laughter jeered from the back of the Corvette. Shay blinked and yanked his attention from my crystals to Todd.

"Duuuuude!" Shay said.

Todd looked up from his iPhone and responded with a cool-guy wave, which pretty much involved holding up a hand.

Shay grinned and did the same. A second later, he screeched back to the right side of the street in a roar of exhaust that made the cheerleaders crammed around him giggle and squeal with delight.

I closed my eyes, took a deep yogic breath, and told myself it didn't bother me. I reminded myself that I *liked* being invisible.

When I opened my eyes, Todd had gone back to his game. I glared at him.

I didn't understand how he did it. He didn't even try to be cool. He was six-three and lanky as a scarecrow. He had unremarkable, sandy-brown hair that almost always needed a cut. His face still hadn't grown into his nose, which had five freckles, all on one side. He wore an old pair of jeans that hadn't been in fashion way back when they were new, topped by the world's ugliest vintage *Return of the Jedi* T-shirt, once red, now vomit-pink from constant wear.

As if he felt the heat of my frown, he looked up. "What?" He raised his gorilla-long arms in the universal sign of confusion. He would have been a shoo-in for the basketball team if he'd had a smidgen of coordination or the remotest interest in organized sports.

It wasn't fair! "How come *you* . . . how come *I* can't—"

The slam of a car door at the curb saved me from saying something I'd have to apologize for later. We both turned as a silver BMW drove off, leaving our third musketeer, Hayley, at the curb. She had a plump frame and big red hair with curls she was always trying to tame, with little success. Today she was wearing spiked heels, which had the unfortunate effect of making her look a little like a fashionably dressed strawberry ice cream cone.

Hayley had already been sixteen for five months, but she still didn't have her license because her mom wasn't about to let her learn in the Beemer, and that was their only car.

"Good times at the dentist?" Todd asked.

"Was that Shay Stevens?" Hayley stretched up on her tiptoes to catch a last glimpse of the Corvette as it disappeared around a corner way up at the top of the hill. She sighed dramatically and fanned herself with a manicured hand. "I think he's gorgeous!"

"You and half the girls at Prep." Todd rolled his eyes. "Why can't you have more sense, like Crimson?"

"Everyone with any sense likes Shay," Hayley told him.

Hayley and I had been friends since the seventh grade when she and her mother had moved to LA from Mississippi. Both our moms had signed us up for junior cheerleader tryouts. Mine, because she thought it actually was about cheering people on. Hayley's, because she wanted Hayley to be popular. We'd both failed miserably and it had created the sort of bond that lasts forever.

"Let's go," I said, turning away from the street and the embarrassing memory of my first real encounter with Shay Stevens. "I want to finish that Bio project today." I sullenly led the way to the front door past sweet-smelling rosebushes fat with yellow blossoms, past beds of purple tulips and pink anemones that even in February hummed with bees, butterflies, and hummingbirds.

Mom and I live in a small two-story, white-stucco bungalow. It is almost identical to the house Todd lives in next door, but even when I was a kid, I had never gone to the wrong house. Every other house on the street had a ratty lawn and modern blinds. Ours was surrounded by pastel flowers year-round and the windows had shimmery light blue curtains that Mom had sewed herself.

As I stood on the whitewashed front porch and dug for my key, I realized Mom had extended her crazy crystal decorating to the outside of the house. I craned my head to see if the crystal trail wound all the way around, but I couldn't see past the daisy bushes. Todd raised his eyebrows and started to look where I was looking. I quickly opened the front door and motioned for him and Hayley to go in.

As we stood in the front room, the smell of warm chocolate hung so thick in the air you could practically taste it. The three of us hurried down the parquet hall toward the kitchen.

"My house smells like furniture polish," Hayley said in a small, sad voice.

Hayley's mother had been putting her on diets since they moved to LA. As far as I could tell, the diets never helped Hayley become any thinner (not that she needed to be, in my opinion), or made her popular (ditto); they just made her neurotic about dessert.

Hayley got to the kitchen first and stopped dead, looking like Gretel when she first caught sight of the candy-coated gingerbread house. Except there was no evil, cackling witch. Just my tiny mom, holding a piping bag and humming softly to herself as she stood on a chair she'd pulled over from the sunny breakfast nook. She and the chair were wedged against the white tile kitchen counter, upon which sat the biggest, pinkest cake I'd ever seen. It had three tiers, the smallest of which was as tall as a shoebox and wide as a manhole cover.

She'd piped at least two dozen cherry-blossom-pink icing roses around the top of the cake and was carefully spiraling a long spray of them down the side. Big fat roses, the good ones that fill your entire mouth so completely there's no room left for air and for one glorious moment you really think you're going to die of happiness.

She was so absorbed in piping petals she hadn't heard us come in.

"Oh!" Mom looked up with wide blue eyes as she realized she had an audience.

Her gaze darted to the kitchen window that faced out into the front garden and a worried frown puckered her forehead.

I followed her gaze and gasped. Squatting on the sill, blocking out most of the huge picture window was a giant amethyst crystal. It hadn't been there when I left for school that morning. I would have noticed. The scientists at NASA looking down from their satellites would have noticed.

"Crimson, honey, this was supposed to be a surprise."

"You wanted to surprise me by putting the world's biggest purple crystal in our kitchen?"

"I think she meant the cake," Hayley said. Sticking out a plump finger, she swiped a bit of frosting from the bowl and ate it. Her eyes closed in a moment of pure bliss.

Mom didn't notice. She had come over to give me a hug and now was doing a silent cataloging of the crystals I had on. She touched my scrunchied ponytail lightly and let out a breath in a satisfied sigh.

Driver's license, I reminded myself.

"Todd and Hayley came over to work on a Bio project," I said, changing the subject. It was my way of asking if it was okay, even though I knew it was. That's how Mom and I did things.

"How nice," Mom said, brightening.

And she meant it. Most parents would sigh and roll their eyes and complain that we're going to fart around instead of get any work done. But she really did think it was nice when we worked together. Sometimes I wondered about her, I really did.

Hayley was extending a whole cupped hand toward the frosting bowl when Mom stepped back in front of her. Mom was a natural blonde and beautiful in that ethereal way that doesn't ever need makeup, but that didn't mean she was dumb.

Todd, meanwhile, was scanning the room looking for something.

"What are you doing?"

"Where'd all the little mice and birds go?" he asked in a low whisper.

At my blank look, he added, "You know, her happy little helpers—Ow!"

I'd jabbed him in the side. "Would you stop? My mother is not secretly Cinderella!"

His mouth stretched into a wide grin. "Hey, if the shoe fits—"

He managed to leap aside before my elbow reconnected with his ribs.

When he's not tripping over himself to be polite to my mom, Todd insists she is too sweet and nice to be real. Over the years he's come up with sillier and sillier "explanations" that he mistakenly thinks are hilarious. His current favorite is that she's a princess escaped from a fairy tale. Before that, he was partial to a fantasy about how she'd fallen out of a 1950s-era television sitcom during a lightning storm—because the mothers in those old shows greeted their kids at the door with hugs and homemade snacks. Back when he was eight he was convinced she was Glinda the Good from *The Wizard of Oz*. We'd just watched the movie, but still.

It was annoying. So my mom likes to bake. So she's always home when I get back from school. What of it? It's not as if she doesn't work; she's the owner of Miranda's Yoga. Yes, that Miranda's Yoga. No, I haven't met J. Lo or Scarlet Johansson or any of the other A-listers. They don't actually do their yoga at the studio. Not since that one time when someone started filming me thinking I was some famous person's kid.

It's the only time I've ever seen Mom angry. She grabbed the camera out of his hands, hurled it to the ground and stamped on it until it shattered. Ever since that day, the famous people, semifamous people and even the might-be-famous-someday get taunted in their own homes. Only regular people go to the studio. The paparazzi haven't so much as driven by the place in years.

Maybe she's a *little* protective. But it's been just the two of us for a long time. My father died when I was less than a year old, when the house we lived in burned to the ground in a freak lightning storm. I don't know much more than that, because we don't talk about it. I've tried, but Mom just clams up and her mouth gets all tiny and she gets this strange little line between her brows. She reassures me he loved me and then changes the subject. And no amount of wheedling will change her mind. Believe me, I've tried.

I've never even seen a picture of my dad. Todd says that's because my aura-reading mom is so "woo woo out there" she thinks cameras steal souls. Which is typical Todd, not letting the facts get in the way of the story, or, in his case, the joke. My mom loves taking pictures. She's got thousands of me and of course Todd's managed to stick his five-freckled nose in most of them. But all the pictures and home movies start *after* we moved here. Everything, and I mean everything, we had before then went up in smoke. When we came here, we started from scratch. There isn't a plate, a cup, or a stick of furniture in the house more than fifteen years old.

Needless to say, my mom is not a big fan of fire. She doesn't burn incense or candles like some yoga practitioners. So the fact that she'd recently started lighting candles in her room in the middle of the night should have been a tip-off that all wasn't right in our world. And it wasn't just a few candles, either. She must have been lighting a hundred of them. The silvery light that beamed through the gap under her closed door had woken me from a sound sleep the past few nights.

I figured she was just doing some sort of special new meditation by candlelight, as part of that whole dealing-with-only-daughter-turning-sixteen thing.

I have no excuse for being so stupid. I mean, we have *flashlights* in case the power goes out. And though our house came with a fireplace, it's been neatly boarded up and hidden behind an enormous display case for Mom's crystal collection. The small, relatively normal collection she'd had before she started going bonkers with the things this past week. And yet, how was I to know that things were terribly wrong? Let's face it: my mother had *never* acted like the other moms.

"Would you kids like a snack? I just baked some cookies." Mom held out a plate of homemade sugar cookies shaped like animals.

Todd let out a fake gasp of horror, but so low only I could hear it. "Thumper! Flower!" His voice rose in a barely audible squeak. "And Gus Gus!"

"Only Gus Gus is from *Cinderella*," I said scathingly. "The other two are from *Bambi*." I took the plate. "Thanks, Mom. Need any help?" I eyed the frosting rose nearest my mouth, wondering if it tasted as good as it looked. "I could, um, drive us to the store if you need more frosting supplies or anything."

"Mmm hmm. I'll keep it in mind." She shifted a smidge away from Hayley so that she was between me and the cake. "Now. Off with you all. Go do your homework." She made shooing motions with her hands.

On his way out of the kitchen, Todd snatched the plate away from me and stuffed two cookies into his mouth. "Thanks, Mrs. Day," he mumbled in an awed voice between crunches. "These are *awesome*."

He may make up lame stories about her, but it's pretty clear he adores my mom. Everyone does.

I nabbed Hayley by the sleeve and led the way upstairs to my room. The second we got out of cake range, she blinked as if knocked out of a trance and launched into her usual complaining about Biology.

"I can't believe Ms. Cliff gave us so much homework. Sophomore year is so haaard."

"I know."

I hurried ahead to get to my room first in case I'd left anything embarrassing slung over the furniture. I hadn't planned on having anyone over after school and as I wasn't a morning person, there was a good chance I'd upended my dresser trying to find something to wear.

It turned out the mess wasn't so bad today. Just a discarded pair of jeans dangling over the back of my desk chair and a few shirts dumped on the pale rose carpet. My twin bed wasn't made, either, but I took care of it all by shoving the clothes on top of my pink-striped sheets and pulling the lacy white comforter up over everything, just as Hayley followed me in. Yes, I'm aware my room looks like something you'd find in Barbie's Dream House, but Mom and I had picked out all the stuff together over the years and I liked it.

Hayley plopped herself down on my freshly made bed and didn't seem to notice it was lumpy.

After the training bra incident of seventh grade, Todd knows better than to come into my room until all the rustling has stopped. He ventured in a few seconds later, cramming more cookies into his mouth.

He had taken all of two steps in when the mad crunching stopped. He stared around my room wide-eyed, mouth open. A damp cookie crumb fell out of his mouth and affixed itself to one of Princess Leia's hair buns on his shirt.

"Ewww. Todd!"

He didn't hear me. He wasn't paying much attention to where he was going, either, and tripped over a pom-pom. I'm not a cheerleader, of course. Just a volunteer member of the pep squad, because I'm not great at saying no when people ask me to do stuff like that. It was only a freebie pom-pom, with about ten wimpy strips of thin plastic, but it got Todd, and the cookie plate went flying.

Unlike most moms, mine doesn't keep the good plates hidden away in a cupboard or on display in a cabinet. She feels we should use and enjoy the pretty things. This plate was one of her favorites.

"Todd!" I lurched for the plate, but I was too far away to catch it.

It was like one of those cartoons where things slow down when the crisis happens. I saw Todd's head swivel to take in the falling plate, his mouth forming a wide O. As I reached for the plate, the sunlight streaming through the window glinted sharply off the plate, bathing my hand with a pearly, blue-white light.

Time sped back up to normal. Miraculously, the plate hadn't broken. It lay on the floor as neatly as if an invisible hand had gently placed it there. The cookies had all slid to one side and some of their little cookie animal legs were braced on the floor, but they were still pretty much on the plate.

"Jesus," Todd said.

But he wasn't looking at the plate. His astonished gaze swept slowly around my room as he took in my dresser. Then my desk, my bedside table, my bookcase . . .

I followed his gaze and gasped, too. I'd been so focused on hiding my laundry I hadn't taken much notice of the rest of my room.

Every horizontal surface was covered with crystals. White crystals. Pink crystals. Lavender crystals. There were hundreds of them. *Many* hundreds.

"What the hell happened in here?" Todd said. "Your room looks like it got attacked by druids."

"Holy cow." Hayley's eyes grew rounder than when she'd faced the three-tiered cake in the kitchen.

Mom must have added a bunch more crystals while I was at school. It was actually pretty nice to be in the midst of all that color, once you got used to it. Kind of soothing, somehow. "Oh, come on. It's not that bad."

Todd pulled his gaze from a particularly large rose quartz on my bedside table and fixed his lunchbag-brown eyes on me. "Are you kidding me?"

I shrugged and sat in my desk chair. "I always have crystals in here. So my mom brought in a few more."

"A few? There's got to be five hundred in here."

Hayley stretched out a hand to pick one up. "I love it. They're so pretty. It's probably part of your birthday present."

"Don't!"

Hayley's hand froze.

"Don't even think about it," I continued. "My mother will *know*."

Hayley giggled and rolled her eyes. But she didn't touch the crystal. Everyone knows how mothers are weird about certain things. Hayley's mom was weird about diets. Todd's mom could rant for days about how no one made decent fried chicken in California. My mom was wacky about crystals.

Todd bent down, helped himself to another fistful of cookies, and put the nearly empty plate on my desk.

"I swear," Todd said, gesturing with the tail end of a half-eaten tiger, "Your mom's turning hippie on you."

"Turning? *Turning*?" I waved a hand at the crystals. "Even before this I could have made a fortune unloading crystals on eBay, except anytime I try to move one she freaks. Besides, with my luck, she'd be the one to buy them."

Todd's face scrunched as he thought, making him look even more like the Scarecrow from *The Wizard of Oz*.

"What?" I demanded, trying to uncrum my Biology text from my overstuffed backpack. I'd probably save myself a half hour of tedious backpack organization a day if I carried two packs. I let the idea shudder through me, never to be considered again. I might as well tattoo *loser* on my forehead and be done with it.

"I'm just trying to picture Cinderella mad," Todd said.

"Would you stop it?" I got up, grabbed the cookie plate before Todd ate them all and flopped down on the bed next to Hayley. I bit into a yellow duck.

Hayley ignored our squabbling from long habit. With a capitulating sigh, she reached for a cookie. Nibbling daintily on a pink-sugared bunny, she settled comfortably back against my pillows. Her backpack, I noticed, was still zipped shut. She changed the subject without even trying to be subtle. "What are you wearing Saturday? Let me see."

Saturday was my birthday. I was having a Sweet Sixteen party. It was boy-girl and I'd decided to make it dressy.

Todd grimaced. "I thought we were here to study."

Hayley and I ignored him. I shoved the rest of the duck into my mouth and wiped my hands clean on my jeans as I crossed to my closet. After a few yanks, I got the sliding door open over the pile of sweaters on the closet floor, and pulled out my dress.

"Mom helped me pick it out last weekend." I had fallen in love with it the moment I set eyes on it. It was pale pink and had a full skirt that flowed around my knees when I turned.

Todd and Hayley went silent.

Suddenly, the dress didn't look pretty and elegant the way it had in the store. It looked frumpy and old-fashioned. "Too much?" I asked haltingly.

Hayley practically leapt up off the bed. "Of course not! Your invitation said semiformal. Where did you get this? It's goorgeous. You'll look like a Disney princess."

I frowned, unconvinced, and glanced at Todd, thinking I should get a male's perspective. He wasn't even looking at the dress. He was back to counting crystals.

"This is silk, isn't it?" Hayley said enviously, running her fingers lightly down the soft material.

"What do you think?" I demanded of Todd, holding the dress up against me.

He jerked his attention from my desk and studied me for a long moment. Then the tips of his ears went red and he turned away with a scowl and helped himself to the last of the cookies.

"How would I know if it's silk or not?" he mumbled.

Hayley let out a snort of disgust. "Why do you ask him?"

"Tell me the truth," I said to Todd, needing him to answer. "You think it's awful."

He was quiet a moment as if debating something internally and then he burst out.

"Don't they make dresses that aren't light pink or lavender or some prissy shade of yellow? How come you never wear red? I mean your name is Crimson."

"I don't know." I shrugged.

I went and hung the dress back up in my closet. It wasn't something I really thought about anymore, but it was true. I never wore red. Ever.

"If you want to wear red, why don't you?" he asked me. "What's keeping you?"

"Crimson wearing crimson." Hayley parroted. "What is she, five? Why not just slap a name tag on her that says 'Hi, my name is Crimson and I'm a dork.'"

"It's better than wearing pink all the time." Todd gave a sound of disgust and reached for another handful of cookies. His sandy brows rose in surprise when he realized he'd eaten them all.

"Hey!" I crossed to where he was lounging sideways in my desk chair, his enormous feet propped between rows of crystals on my desk. I poked a finger hard against his bony chest. "You know, you can always go home and do your Biology homework by yourself."

Todd looked down his long nose at my finger. "Ow. Why would I want to do that?" he asked, genuinely confused.

I poked his chest again.

"Hey! Knock it off!" He twisted out of reach, knocking a dozen crystals off my desk and onto the carpet.

"Todd!"

He got to his feet. "Jeez, Crimson, what's the big deal? It's just some stupid crystals. Stop being such a—"

For once I didn't back down. Instead, I clenched my hands and stepped closer. "A what? A what, Todd?"

"A doormat!" He sputtered. "Can't you have your own opinion for once? Just one thing! One! The color of your clothes. The decoration of your room. Whether or not you wear some stupid band of crystals in your hair to school. Can't you stand up for what you want in *anything*?"

For a moment I was too angry and hurt to answer. "I stand up for myself plenty!" To my disgust, my voice wobbled a fraction, robbing my words of their impact.

"No, you don't. You just agree with people so that they'll leave you alone."

The fact that he was right was like giving the sword he'd stuck in me a vicious twist. Something sleeping deep within me rose up sharply in protest. His words replayed in my mind and anger started to burn in my veins.

"Navigating high school isn't as easy for some of us as it is for you." I spat out the words daring him to say something that would push me further. Wanting him to.

Fury like I'd never felt before rocked through me. I was itching for a fight as if I'd been waiting for it my whole life.

Todd opened his mouth to say something and my right hand balled into a fist and I cocked back an arm.

"Hey, you two, knock it off." Hayley stepped between us, her face drawn with concern. She'd never had to be the peacemaker before.

She shoved Todd into my desk chair and then turned around and pushed me onto my bed. I bounced up and hit a crystal-mobile suspended from the ceiling. "Ow!" I said rubbing my head.

Hayley put the crystals back on the desk the way they'd been. "See? It's fine."

"Don't touch them," I told Todd.

"As if I would."

"Get your Bio stuff out," Hayley instructed. When neither of us moved, she raised her voice and added a dose of Southern steel, "Now!"

I glared at Todd, waiting for him say something more. He didn't. He just sat there looking at me with a funny, stunned look on his face. Then he turned to the crystals and frowned.

Later, after dinner, I stayed at the kitchen table and buried myself in my homework. I barely noticed what I was doing. I was mentally rehashing my fight with Todd.

What he'd said still stung.

I wondered if we were really such good friends as I'd always thought. Did he really see me as a spineless wimp? How long had he felt that way?

I caught myself getting worked up again and forced myself to take a breath and calm down. *Relaaax*, I told myself.

My yoga training wasn't working, just as it hadn't that afternoon during our fight. I remembered the rage I'd felt and it scared me even now. For a moment, as I yelled at Todd, everything had gone red. Literally. The air around me had gone scarlet and shimmered with my anger. Just thinking about it started making me mad again.

Mom came humming into the kitchen, looking cheerful and pretty in blue yoga pants and a white tunic. As if someone had thrown a switch, I calmed down instantly.

"It's nearly eleven thirty, sweetie. How's the homework? You almost done?"

Crossing to the stove, she picked up the daisy kettle and brought it to the sink to fill with water. She always ended the day with a cup of chamomile.

"Yeah." I'd been done for a half hour. I shoved books and papers in my pack and yanked up the zipper before things could start spilling back out.

"Good girl." She glanced around the room with a practiced eye, taking stock of the crystals. "Are you excited about your party tomorrow? Would you like some tea?"

"No." Ick. I never wanted tea. The stuff she liked tasted like grass. I pulled the bowl of leftover frosting from the fridge, grabbed a soup spoon from the utensil container on the counter next to the stove and dug in. I closed my eyes in ecstasy as the sugar and butter melted on my tongue. It tasted heavenly. Her frosting was different somehow from

other people's. It tasted like roses and lavender and sunshine. "This is what I'm talking about."

I forgot about Todd and worked on getting a head start on my birthday sugar coma. She drank her tea and we chatted about who was coming to my birthday party.

At midnight, six minutes before I turned sixteen, Mom started watching the clock. She was pretending not to, but I could tell she was. I grinned into my frosting.

At three minutes past midnight, her conversation petered out midsentence and she didn't start talking again.

Something was wrong.

Her body was tightly braced as if waiting for a hurricane to blow through the kitchen. The little hairs on her arms stood up.

The little hairs on my arms stood up, too. "Mom? Are you okay?"

She didn't answer. I don't think she even heard me. She seemed to be listening to something beyond the room.

And then it happened. Six minutes past midnight, all the alarms in the house went off in a cacophony of bells and chimes and I officially turned sixteen.

Instead of bursting into song like she usually did the exact second I turned another year older, Mom waited a ten count. Then she let out a sigh of relief that seemed to come from the very depth of her soul. Her shoulders sagged from where they'd been lodged up around her ears as if someone had cut a cord. I hadn't realized how somber she'd become lately until her smile relit the room.

"Crimson, darling. Here you are! Safe in the kitchen at sixteen!"

I frowned. "Safe" was an odd word to use.

As she launched into "Happy Birthday," the clock ticked to seven minutes past, and then eight. Her mood continued to buoy as she sang. Then, as was our tradition, she lit a single birthday candle for me to blow out. "Make a wish," she said, grinning hugely.

I wished for a car. I blew out the candle.

"Happy birthday, my darling girl." She was twinkling as if happiness was bubbling through her.

She squeezed me tight, kissed me, and held me at arm's length. "I think you've had enough frosting for one night, hon. You look all done in. Better go to sleep before you pass out."

I wasn't tired, I was exhausted. I must have finally overdone it with the frosting this year. I made a token protest, but stumbled upstairs to the cheerful sound of her humming as she tidied the kitchen.

I flicked on my bedroom light and stood in the doorway. Crystals glinted from every surface. The memory of my first real fight with Todd hung over the space like an invisible, sickening haze.

The worst part of it was that Todd had been dead right about me.

I could spin myself the pretty tale that I was easygoing, but the truth was that I went along with things because I couldn't handle conflict. *Any* conflict. Deep down, I *was* a spineless coward. I didn't even ask my own mother why she was suddenly acting like a nut and cramming crystals into every nook and cranny of our house, because I didn't want to rock the boat.

Self-disgust morphed into an anger so blistering the air around me seemed to shimmer red with heat. The cheerfully colored crystals twinkled harder around me, as if mocking my rage.

"Stop that!" I strode over to my desk, struck out my arm, and swept the lot onto the floor.

As soon as I'd done it, I realized it was what I'd longed to do from the moment Mom had started putting those damned crystals around the house. It was as if a constraining harness had been yanked off me. I felt free. I felt glorious!

Amid the tinkling crash of stones as they bounced off each other on the carpet, I heard a funny noise behind me, a soft *pop!*—like the bursting of a soap bubble. I whipped around, but there was nothing there. Of course there wasn't. What would be? I turned my back on it.

Behind me, very faintly, as if coming from somewhere deep in the walls of my room, I heard a man's laughter. It was cold and triumphant and crawled down my spine like a thousand pricks of dread.

I whipped anxiously around in a circle and the laughter broke sharply off.

All at once I grew hot and dizzy. The room tilted as I started to faint. I fell onto my bed and curled into the fetal position, clutching my stomach. Sharp pains shot through my abdomen as if something deep inside me was slowly starting to unzip.

I heard the gentle tread of Mom's footsteps coming down the hallway toward my room.

"Mommy?" I said. It came out as a soft whiny plaint, as if I were a small child.

"Are you in bed yet, honey?" She knocked on my open door and came in. "I just came to tuck you in. I—" She rushed toward me, the color draining from her face. "Crimson? What happened?" Horror filled her eyes as she took in the crystals spilling off my desk and onto the floor.

She took a halting step into the room. "Crimson! What have you done?" Falling to her knees on the carpet, she grabbed a handful of crystals. "Oh, no." Her voice was rough and broken. "Oh, no no no no!" Hands shaking, she piled crystals back onto my desk and tried to put each one back exactly where it had been.

I lay on my bed, hands clutched around my throbbing middle and gaped at her in dumbfounded confusion. For the first time in my life she hadn't stopped to comfort me when I was sick.

All she cared about these days were those darned stones.

"They're just crystals!" I cried. "Stupid, worthless crystals! They don't *mean* anything. It doesn't matter if I knock them on the floor. I could throw them all out the window! *It doesn't matter!*"

In a trick of the light, the crystals suddenly blazed red, as if their insides had caught on fire. The ruddy light danced over my mother's pale face, sharpening the hollows, making her face look gaunt. She let out a strangled cry, a helpless whimper and her face grew more strained as she moved faster and faster, frantic now to reposition the crystals. She was fumbling, dropping hunks of quartz onto the desk as if they burned her hands. But still she kept at it as if her very life depended on getting those crystals back in place.

"You have no idea." Her voice was a thin tremble of sound. "You don't understand."

"Then tell me!"

She started to mutter and argue with herself. I could catch only a few words. Something about destiny and not messing with it. She was so distraught her body shook as if she were freezing to death. Tears were streaming so fast and hard down her face that I doubted she could see what she was doing. But still she kept on working to replace each colored stone.

Something was wrong. Terribly wrong. Fighting through my pain, I pushed myself to a sitting position and swung a foot over the edge of the bed to go to her.

She jerkily hunched over the crystals, as if to protect them from me. "One more day!" The words burst angrily from her bloodless lips. Her eyes raked me with accusation. "Couldn't you have been a *good* girl for just *one more day*?"

Chapter Two

Mom slid the last hunk of pink quartz back in place among the other crystals and the bright fire that had seemed to burn inside them winked off, leaving me unsure if I'd really seen it. She sat back on her heels and hung her head. Sweat trickled down her face as if she'd been running for miles.

After a long moment, moving as if she'd aged twenty years, she forced herself to stand. Exhaustion seemed to pull on her every muscle as she turned in a slow, taut circle. Despite her fatigue, her body was tense as a bow as she watched the shadows. And waited.

I was frozen half on, half off my bed. Her fear hung thick in the air, infecting me like a virus. We were like two cowering mice waiting for an invisible cat to pounce.

All at once she let out a deep breath and it seemed even the air around us relaxed. As if she was coming out of a trance, her blue eyes softened and registered me—and then widened with dismay at what she saw. She let out a wordless sound of distress, padded the short distance over to me, and sat down next to me on the bed. She wrapped her arms around me and held me tight.

"Oh, honey. I'm sorry," she murmured, stroking my hair. "So, so sorry. I shouldn't have said that. I didn't mean it. Not the tiniest bit. I will *always* love you, with all my heart, every moment of every day *exactly* as you are."

"I love you, too, Mom." Her familiar floral scent washed over me, calming me as it always had. I tugged out of her arms and pulled myself firmly away and stood. "But you've been acting like a crazy person lately and it has to stop!"

Even though I wasn't joking, she laughed good-naturedly, a sweet tinkling sound that blew at the shadows in the room until they faded clean away. She got up on her tiptoes to pull me back for a final tight squeeze and then patted me lovingly and let me go. It made me acutely aware of how very tiny she was, compared to me. It was hard to believe someone so different could be my mother.

"All right, Crimson. Next week we'll take the minerals down. Let's leave them for the party, though, okay? They'll look festive with the decorations."

I had to admit they did look pretty—downstairs where the party would be, where there were only a few hundred of them scattered about instead of a few thousand. "Deal," I said.

"Big day tomorrow. Get some sleep." Her voice was as soothing as a lullaby.

I got under the sheets and they felt wonderfully cool against my skin. "I'm hot," I said, pushing against the comforter.

She pressed her lips to my forehead to test for fever, the way she'd done when I was a small child. I grumbled a wordless complaint, but deep down I liked it when she did that.

"Shhh. We've almost made it. Everything will be better after tomorrow. You'll see."

I wanted to ask her what she meant, but I was too wiped out to bother. She stayed there, stroking my hair off my face until I was nearly asleep. She tiptoed out and padded down the hallway. Moments later, a silvery light beamed out from under her door, brightening my room like a full moon. She was doing her crazy late-night meditating again.

"Could be worse," I muttered out of habit. But I no longer thought it was funny and I was having a hard time imagining how things could get weirder around here.

Fighting the hard pull of sleep, I pushed back the covers.

This time, I wasn't going to turn over and ignore it. This time, I was going to see for myself what the heck she was doing in there.

I had one determined foot over the edge of the bed when exhaustion overcame me like a freight train and I fell back against my pillows in a dead sleep.

The next morning dawned sunny. Birds chirped on the apple trees outside my window. The delicious smell of Mom's homemade waffles wafted up from the kitchen and I raced down.

"Happy birthday, darling!" Mom placed a heaping platter on the table and a second later Todd appeared at the door as if the smell of syrup was a homing beacon. He worked his way through three inch-thick, plate-sized waffles and about a dozen sausages. I ate two waffles that had happy faces made of blueberry eyes, a strawberry nose, and a sausage mouth. It was like any other birthday.

Except it wasn't.

Mom seemed normal. But a funny tension lingered in the air between us. She laughed like always. She smiled and teased Todd as always. But when she thought I wasn't looking, her face grew troubled.

For the first time ever, I didn't linger at the table fishing bits of leftover strawberry off the platter to mop up my leftover syrup. I plucked the sleeve of Todd's ratty sweatshirt and we moved to the living room sofa to watch movies until the carb buzz faded. Usually, this was a highlight of my birthday, as it was practically the only time of year I could get Todd to watch romantic comedies with me (instead of *Star Wars*—again), but for once I didn't enjoy it. The feeling of waiting—for something—grew. Eventually it was time to start getting ready for my party and I kicked Todd out with relief.

Mom started to follow me upstairs to help. The strain had built in the air like a charge before an electrical storm.

"I'm sixteen," I snapped. "I'm perfectly capable of dressing myself."

"Of course you are, darling." She kissed my cheek. "Call if you need anything."

I marched up to my room and slammed the door, but it didn't make me feel better. I shoved aside the feeling of unease and headed for the shower. I was going to have a *great* birthday even if it killed me.

An hour before my party I started to panic. I wasn't even close to ready. My room looked like it had been run through by a rogue tornado and then hit with an exploding

disco ball. There were shoes on my bed, clothes and makeup all over the floor, and those ridiculous crystals everywhere else. I was still in my robe because I'd stuck a toe through my tights and the nail polish repair still wasn't dry. My left fake eyelash strip wouldn't stay on and the right one wouldn't come off.

But that was nothing compared to my hair. My curling iron had died after curling only half of my hair, leaving me looking like a yeti with bedhead.

"Crimson, honey, are you almost ready?" Mom called up from downstairs.

"Stop asking that!"

She has never understood about bad hair days because she's never had one. Her hair is blond and shiny with a slight wave so it always has body. My hair is black as coal, thick as a horse's tail, and straight as a ruler.

I tested the section of hair I was working on. I'd been holding it in the iron for the last five minutes and it finally felt warmed through. I held my breath and pressed the release lever. A shiny black curl tumbled past my shoulders . . . and kept on tumbling until it lay dead flat halfway down my back.

"Do you need any help?" Mom called up.

What I needed was to be left alone so that I could finish getting ready. "Stop rushing me!" I yelled back. I grabbed the hank and rewrapped it tight enough to make my eyes sting. "It's barely five o' clock!"

There was a pause. "It's half past, honey!"

"What?" I got to my feet and spun in a panicked circle. "Crap! Crap! Crap!" There was no way I would be ready in time.

This whole day had gone wrong from the start. I should have known better than to try to have good hair. I don't know what I'd been thinking. The iron *never* stayed hot enough to do my whole head. And now I would forever be immortalized in a million photos as a half-curled, half-straight-haired, one-eyelashed freak in a too-frilly, too-pink monstrosity of a dress!

"Crimson?"

"I'm getting ready as fast as I can!" I yelled it so loud the crystals around my room rattled.

A red flash haloed my hand holding the curling iron and a sharp pain seared my skull.

I yelped and dropped the iron. Instead of tangling in my hair and banging against my face, it fell straight to the floor.

Slowly, I reached a hand around to the back of my head. It wasn't still wrapped around my hair because the hair was gone. The singed ends of what remained stuck out about an inch from my scalp.

"Oh my God." I breathed the words and probed the area with trembling fingers. Was anything . . . oozing?

I was so worried about the damage to my head that I didn't really think about the fact that the same curling iron that had set fire to my head was now sitting on a bunch of papers on my floor. The smoke soon alerted me. "Fire!" I screamed, jumping back as the small flame caught another paper and the fire blazed higher. "*Fire!*"

I grabbed a stale glass of water off my bedside table and dumped it on the fire. It went out.

It took me a moment to realize the rapid pounding I heard wasn't the sound of my heart beating but my mother's footsteps as she raced upstairs. I'd never heard her make that much noise or move that fast.

"Crimson?" Mom rocketed into my room. Her face was flushed and she was breathing fast, as if she'd run up ten flights of stairs instead of one. "What happened? Do I smell smoke?"

"I burnt my hair—" I started to turn around so she could see, but she grasped my arms in an iron grip and yanked me back around to face her.

"Are you all right? How did the fire start? How?" Her sky-blue eyes bored anxiously into mine.

My hair must be worse than I'd thought. Tears filled my eyes. This sort of thing wasn't supposed to happen on your birthday. I was so upset I could barely get the words out. "Curling . . . i-i-iron." I sniffed and pointed at my hair.

"Oh." Her shoulders dropped in relief.

I gaped at her. *Oh?* That was all she had to say? *Oh?* It looked like I'd let a blindfolded three-year-old style my hair!

Mom closed her eyes and inhaled a breath that seemed to go on forever. Then she let it out. She automatically replaced some crystals that had fallen off my bookshelf in the commotion and sagged onto my bed. She sat like that for a long moment, as if it were *her* hair that was hopeless. And then she breathed deeply, her blue eyes went from stormy to serene and she perked back up to her usual self. She shifted aside some shoes and gave the section of comforter next to her a pat. I collapsed down next to her onto the bed.

She pulled my hands gently into hers. "Why don't we take some deep calming breaths together?"

Instantly I felt calmness begin to roll over me like a gentle ocean wave. Then I tugged my hands out of hers. "Are you kidding me? Mom! My birthday has gone wrong from the start! It doesn't feel right. You and I fought and we *never* fight!"

Her lips pursed with regret and she pulled me toward her. "My poor baby, I'm so sorry. I guess haven't been myself lately, have I?"

I pushed her away. "No, you haven't! Everything's been awful. And my friends are going to be here any minute and my hair is *burnt*."

"Crimson—"

"I don't have time to 'reach my inner peaceful self!'"

She said seriously, "Honey, you've always got time for your inner self. It's not your outside that matters—"

"Mom!"

She smiled and her blue eyes twinkled. The tension in me gave a bit.

"Don't worry, honey. I figured you'd be rushed and changed the invitations to six thirty. And you know how your friends are. I doubt anyone will get here before seven. You have plenty of time."

"My hair's not going to grow back in an hour," I whined. "Like it's not bad enough that I'm too tall and too pale and my hair is ugly and black—"

"You're beautiful," she said. As if it were a fact.

"I'm a freak!"

She got gently to her feet and without a word started fixing my hair. As her hands smoothed and twisted the damaged strands into a sleek updo, she said, softly, "Your true friends love you for who you are."

"You were homeschooled as a child, weren't you?"

She laughed and passed me a compact from the jumble on the floor so I could check out the back of my hair in the vanity.

"See? All better."

It was. It looked gorgeous and the burned patch was completely hidden. I felt horrible for yelling at her. I don't know what was wrong with me, lately, either. I grabbed a tissue and swiped at a tear. "Thanks, Mom."

Her face sparkled with joy and the whole room seemed to brighten. For a moment, I saw her as Todd always described her and I half expected bluebirds to fly in at her command and help me finish getting ready.

"Of course, honey. I'll leave you to it, shall I?"

As she was leaving, she stopped in the doorway as if she were going to say something else. I thought I saw that worried little frown creep back onto her face, but I'm sure I imagined it.

She flicked one last glance once around the room, as if taking a quick survey of the crystals, and then left. I pretended I didn't see it.

Ten minutes later I swirled out of my room in my new dress. I felt excited about my birthday for the first time that day. The curling iron incident was behind me. Turning sixteen was going to be the dawn of a wonderful embarrassment-free era for me. I could almost feel things changing, as if something hot were flowing through me. My fingertips even tingled with it.

"Mom?"

Where was she?

I made it all the way down the stairs to the living room without tripping once in my new heels. I stopped and my mouth dropped open.

Our living room was small, but the sliding glass door along the far wall made it seem like it extended into the back flower garden. Like most of the house, it was comfortable without being fussy. It had simple cream-colored couches and a mango-wood coffee table. A floral rug softened the hardwood floors.

Usually.

Today our living room looked like a party store had thrown up on it. The ceiling was invisible behind all the lilac, pink, and yellow balloons and streamers. Someone—Hayley, no doubt—had strung up a giant, butcher paper banner that said *Happy Birthday Sweet Sixteen, Crimson!!!* The sloppy paint job on "Birthday" was pure Todd.

Mom bustled out of the kitchen and down the short hallway into the living room holding my three-tiered birthday cake. It seemed to have grown larger and pinker overnight. The top layer towered a full three feet over her head, but she carried it as if weighed nothing at all. I resolved to do more yoga. All those downward-facing dogs clearly paid off.

Mom put the cake down on a pink, cloth-covered card table, which immediately sagged under the weight. She turned toward me.

Her face beamed with delight. "Oh, Crimson, you look beautiful. Just beautiful." She pressed her hands to her chest and sighed.

Then she whipped a camera out of her pocket and the flash went off in my face. "Got a candid," she said happily as I blinked to regain my vision. "Now. Stand in front of the banner."

She took pictures of me in front of the cake next and then made me go back up to the top of the stairs and walk back down again. That part was fun. My dress floated up a bit when I went down stairs so it was like being Scarlett O'Hara. But Mom could take pictures for days if not taken firmly in hand. I finally got her to put down her camera by telling her I needed a birthday hug.

"Of course! Always!" She hugged me so tightly I swear I heard bones crack.

She let me go reluctantly, as if she was afraid I'd disappear. "Look at you," she sighed and swiped at a tear. "My precious baby girl. You're all grown up now." Her voice went very soft. "My little princess."

For a long moment she didn't say anything else. She had a faraway look in her eyes. Then she said, "I remember when you were playing dress-up, wrapping curtains around yourself for a ball gown." A small, sad smile curled her lips. Then she let out a gurgle of laughter and added, "And you made poor Todd wear one, too."

"Jeez, Mom—"

All of a sudden, that funny little wrinkle I'd seen so much of in the past few days came back to rest between her eyebrows. She sat on the couch and patted the cushion next to her. "Sit down, Crimson."

"I'll wrinkle my dress."

She smiled gently and looked up at me with serene blue eyes the color of noontime on a sunny day.

I sat.

"Crimson, you've grown into a lovely, accomplished young woman."

"Why do I sense a 'but' coming?"

She chuckled like I knew she would, yet her eyes remained unusually serious. "You are my beautiful, beautiful girl, Crimson. But it is the person you have become that makes me so proud to be your mother."

She placed a hand lightly over my heart.

"It's what's inside you that is most important. It is everything. You have a good heart, Crimson. It's the choices you make—"

"That determine who you are," I finished with her.

I'd heard it a million times. I would have rolled my eyes if it hadn't been for the very real concern that one of my fake eyelash strips would get loose and reattach itself to my eyebrow. Did she have to do this now? What the heck was she worried about? That I was going to wake up one morning and forget who I was?

"Mom, just because I've turned sixteen doesn't mean I'm going to start driving around the neighborhood 'looking for trouble' or stop doing my homework or anything."

"Honey—"

The doorbell rang. I practically bounded up off the couch. The deep and meaningful conversation about what it meant to be sixteen and practically an adult could wait until tomorrow. Right now I wanted to hang out with my friends and eat my weight in cake. Maybe more. "I'll get it!"

I teetered and skidded down the parquet hall on my heels, excited for my party to start. I felt like I'd waited forever for this night and for once in my life I was actually

looking forward to being the center of attention. Everything was perfect. Nothing could possibly ruin it.

And then I opened the door and nothing was ever the same again.

CRIMSON IN THE VERY WRONG FAIRY TALE...coming August 2012