

KADY
AMBROSE



ALL
THAT
SHIMMERS

SNEAK PEEK - NOT YET PROOFED



A
TWIN BIRCH HOUSE
NOVEL

Chapter One



— SEPTEMBER 1868 —

Ezra's mind popped and crackled with ideas on how he'd spend his new-found riches. It was a sultry summer night in New Hampshire's White Mountains, but the stone passage he crept through was refreshingly cool. Bent at the waist on account of the tunnel's low ceiling, he made his way through the short entrance with an empty flour sack gripped in one hand, a lantern held high in the other.

After emerging from the passageway, he straightened. A soft, pearly light that seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere bathed the wooded glen before him. The golden light from his lantern reflected off a strange dew covering the grass, trees, and bushes, making everything sparkle. Indifferent to the glen's otherworldly glitter, he bee-lined across the small clearing toward a pond near its center.

Earlier that night, his lantern had lit the wheelwright's nicely dimpled daughter leaning over that same water with a giant blue butterfly on her finger. Squashing the twinge of guilt roused by the memory, he held his light over the pond and peered past the lily pads floating on the surface. The treasure was still

there on the bottom, gleaming up at him through the crystal clear water. It was real, even if Prudence hadn't taken any notice of it.

He whistled through his teeth and hitched up his pants. Truth be told, he didn't mind not having to share the booty with her.

"Welcome back, Ezra."

He stumbled backward, almost dropping the lantern. The sound of giggling seemed to come from the pond itself, but how could that be?

"Who's there?" Sweeping the lamp right and left, he scanned the wood.

"Down here." The second girl's voice was different than the first. More giggles followed.

He swung the light back over the pond, now filled with a dozen or more comely young ladies, all standing up to their waists in the water. To his shock and delight, not one wore a stitch of clothing. They all had long hair flowing over their shoulders, covering them up pretty good though. "You . . . you're those nymphs Prudence was goin' on about."

"That's right," replied a willowy blonde with a crown of crocus blossoms.

"Where is she?" asked a redhead with white tea roses woven into her curls.

His eyes roamed from one beauty to the next. "I . . . I came back alone."

"For these?" An ebony-skinned girl with a daffodil tucked behind her ear swept her arm over the jewels and gold nuggets twinkling below the surface.

"Ye . . . yes." Collecting the booty might be a little more complicated than he'd reckoned on. "Are they . . . yours?"

"They're in our pond, but they mean nothing to us," replied a toffee-skinned brunette wearing nothing but morning glories.

They beckoned him with inviting gestures. "Come in with us. The water is warm . . . and you can take what you wish."

With eyes darting from one sweet face to the next, he determined that joining them was an excellent idea. He placed the lantern down carefully so he wouldn't lose sight of the ladies as he tore his clothes off as fast as he could. The cool air was bracing, but the water was every bit as welcoming as the naiads promised.

The nymphs surrounded him as he slipped into the pond and tilted his head back. His eyes drifted closed as he took a long, deep breath. The blossoms gave each naiad's soft hair its own special perfume.

Before long, he plumb forgot the treasure below his feet. Time faded as his body relaxed in watery pleasure. He'd never known contentment like this. Even as his head slid beneath the surface, he sensed nothing but the water sliding over his skin . . . through his skin. He was floating, drifting.

Under the water . . . part of the water . . . one with the water.

Chapter Two



— FIFTY YEARS LATER, JUNE 1918 —

Vanessa's terror was so profound it gave her a peculiar calm. As long as the children remained missing, she had to keep her seething hysteria imprisoned deep in her belly. She cupped her hands on either side of her mouth for the fifth or sixth time. "Edna! Walter!" In the fading light, even the wood's noises had changed. The rustle of leaves, soft and welcoming earlier, now sounded like the whispering of conspirators. She searched the forest clearing in an ever-widening circle. Surely her two young charges were simply hiding, playing a trick on her. Out of character for these two, perhaps, but it wouldn't be the first time pampered children had tormented a new nursemaid.

"Walter! Edna! I give up. You win!" The enormous sapphire butterfly that had lured them so far from the hotel reappeared. Forcing her gaze from the creature's extraordinary beauty, Vanessa raised her quavering voice. "Don't you want to go back and finish our picnic?"

She could already picture herself stepping off the train back in Boston. Unemployed and penniless. Or worse, still in the woods after dark, huddled under a tree all alone, encircled by wolves.

A sharp *crack* cut through the woodland noise. She froze, her gaze darting back to the butterfly, which had settled on a nearby branch and appeared to be watching her. Deepening shadows pressed the forest in closer. Something flew over her head. Goosebumps rose on her arms as she fought back tears. “Children?”

“Right here!” The voice was masculine, with a hint of forced cheer.

She spun around. A young gentleman of medium build stood between two mossy boulders—Walter and Edna in hand. They were all smiling, the little ones appearing none the worse for wear.

“Oh! Thank God.” Dizzy, she turned her back to hide the tears she could no longer contain.

“What’s wrong, Miss Perkins?” Six-year-old Edna’s genuine confusion made Vanessa’s reaction seem ridiculous. How long had they been gone, for goodness’ sakes? A few minutes?

Lifting her apron to pat her face dry, she forced a smile into her voice. “Nothing, sweetheart.” She turned to face them. “I was just a little worried when I couldn’t find you.”

“We found Avuhwy!” Three-year-old Walter gazed up at the young man with adoring eyes, clearly smitten.

Vanessa gave her head a slight shake, wincing in embarrassment. She’d let her imagination run away with her . . . again.

The “Avery” fellow pushed his spectacles up his nose as he drew near, his hand extended. “Nice to meet you.” Guilt tinged his angular face.

A spike of anger pierced her gut. Refusing to shake, she squeezed her intertwined fingers together at her waist. “I take it this little game of hide-and-seek was your idea?”

“Not at all.” He crossed his arms. “I was painting when they came upon me. I brought them back directly, I assure you.”

“Oh.” She glanced down at Edna and Walter’s innocent faces. Either he was telling the truth, or the children were extraordinary actors. “I see.” As usual, her tendency to make hasty decisions was making a fine mess of things. She extended her hand. “My apologies.”

“None required.” A smile tugged at the corner of his mouth as he uncrossed his arms and shook her hand. “As you’ve heard, I’m Avery.” He cleared his throat. “Avery Nolen.”

“Vanessa Perkins.” As her composure returned, her gaze ranged over his shaggy, light brown hair and the worn leather satchel slung over his shoulder. He seemed too relaxed to be staff . . . and too disheveled for a guest. From town, perhaps? She recalled Mrs. Wainwright mentioning a local doctor who treated the children. “Are you any relation to Dr. Nolen in the village?”

Avery’s face clouded. “He’s my father. And I take it you’re the new nursemaid.” His brows arched as though his statement was a question.

Her chin ducked as her hand flew to the white cap pinned to her hair, though there’d been no judgment in his tone. “That’s right.”

His voice lowered. “Edna tells me Miss O’Neill is serving abroad as a nurse.”

She raised her eyes. “Seems most of the families staying at the hotel have sons or staff members over there.” Biting her tongue, she refrained from asking why he wasn’t in France, fighting “Woodrow Wilson’s War.” He appeared only slightly older than her, early twenties maybe. Rare for a fit young man over twenty-one to be left behind.

“Yes.” His gaze shifted away. “So many have gone.” As he stared into the distance, there was sorrow in his big brown eyes. They were the color of dark molasses, their soft warmth at odds with the sharp edges of his nose and cheekbones. After a moment, he waved his hand, as though brushing the war itself away, and turned to the children. “Are you two going to be in the Flag Day parade?”

“Yeth.” Walter beamed, while Edna nodded in silent agreement.

“We’re just on our way back to the hotel now.” She tried to sound casual. “Would you care to accompany us, Mr. Nolen?”

“Of course.” He gestured them forward, a flush of pink creeping up his neck. “But you can call me Avery.”

“Only if you call me Vanessa, and please, you lead. I’m sure you know the way better than I do.”

First names already? Her emotional afternoon had apparently left her as gushy as a society girl.

“Happy to.” His smile was fleeting, but spectacular. A burst of sunshine piercing the clouds. “Come along, Miss Wainwright. Let’s get you to that parade.” He took Edna’s hand and led the way.

Vanessa released a deep breath as he swung the little girl’s hand. Whatever the reason, she was glad they’d dispensed with formalities. If the children were so fond of him, he must be all right.

“Up pwwease.” Walter reached for her with both hands. Her own legs were a bit shaky from all their mountain climbing. He had to be exhausted.

“Upsy-daisy.” After lifting the boy onto her hip, she gave him a quick kiss and followed after their new guide. Without a doubt, coming to Twin Birch House as the Wainwright’s nursemaid was the best thing that ever happened to her. All she could do was pray the children didn’t complain to their parents about her nearly losing them in the woods.

Chapter Three



Lachima flapped her sapphire wings gently as she settled on the hotel roof to watch Vanessa and Avery lead Edna and Walter across the emerald lawn.

What fun she'd had, flitting around the nursemaid's picnic with the Wainwright children, then leading their trio into the woods so Vanessa and Avery could meet.

As one of the three Fates, Lachima had always been responsible for every mortal's timeline between birth and death. Her two sisters determined each life's beginning and end.

But when humankind abandoned most ancient deities, their faith had also shifted away from the Fates, or "fairies," as they'd come to be known. So Lachima was limited, at least for the time being, to small interventions . . . like organizing for Vanessa Perkins to catch the eye of both Avery Nolen and a handsome hotel guest named Ned Cooper.

Content as her reduced circumstances would allow, Lachima let out a delicate butterfly sigh. Thanks to her maneuvering, it promised to be an interesting season at Twin Birch House.

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