Chandler Flowers

CRWR 305

September 22,2023

Second Story Draft

The Storyteller's Parlor

"Mom! Mom! We're going to be late to the library!"

Alana's piercing voice rang through my ears as I rose up from the couch. I groaned, too tired from a night shift to deal with her antics. I had completely forgotten about my promise to Alana, an occurrence that has been happening too many times recently.

"Alright, sweetie! Give me 5 minutes and we'll be on our way." I said in the cheeriest voice I could muster.

I threw on an outfit that looked presentable enough and applied my makeup to impress the other mothers that were going to be there. Alana and I walked out to the sunlight which blinded my eyes and soon we were on our way to the town library. Alana sang to the pop songs on the radio while I glanced at my phone to see another email from my boss. I sighed to myself, but it was unfortunately loud enough for Alana to hear.

"What's wrong, Mommy?" said Alana.

"It's nothing, Alana. Just something from work." I said.

"Am I staying with Uncle Sebastian tonight?" asked Alana.

"...I don't know, sweetie." I said honestly.

"...Ok." said Alana.

She went back to silence as the radio continued to play. 6 year olds were smarter than most adults gave them credit for, I had noticed, so it would be better not to lie. At least that's

what I told myself to make myself feel better. In reality, I wish I could lie to Alana, so I could be the mother that she could brag about to her friends, instead of the single mother that the other mothers whisper about. I held back my tears as I pulled into the parking lot of the library.

In the town of Wildgrove, there was no place like the town library. It was a place where mothers would bring their children to read stories and to socialize over some brownies and hot tea that someone had brought. But there was no event more popular than the Storyteller's Parlor. The Storyteller, or more accurately the librarian of the library, was an older gentleman named Sebastian. He was in his late 50s, with light brown hair, hazel eyes, and fair skin. Sebastian always dressed in a short sleeved button up shirt and jeans while casually working, but he always dressed into character depending on which story he read next. Today's story was Rapunzel, so Sebastian was sitting in his rocking chair in a purple dress and painted nails. The mothers were sitting behind a table of brownies, chocolate chip cookies, coffee, and tea, gossiping about who knows what. I told Alana to go have a seat on the rug while I went over to the mothers, who immediately went silent when I approached.

"Ah, Juliet. Long time no see. We've thought than you had forgotten." said Mrs.Betancourt.

"Hello, Grace. I apologize for that." I said politely.

"I see you've once again forgotten to bring something. We've been contacting you about this." said Mrs.Alexandre.

Rage boiled through me, but I continued to smile.

"Things have been busy at work. I'll bring something next time, Rachel." I said.

"That's what you said last time. Are you sure you can keep your promises?" said Mrs.Ismelda.

I remained silent at that question. Mrs.Yolanda, who had been finishing off her fourth brownie, changed the topic.

“Sebastian is in an interesting outfit today, don’t you think girls?” said Mrs.Yolanda.

“Yes, you would think that he’d choose to be the prince, but he had to put on that hideous dress. Does he not have any shame?” said Mrs.Betancourt after sipping her coffee.

“Come on, I don’t think it's that bad. Let him wear what he wants.” I said.

“Of course that’s what you think, *Ms*.Juliet.” said Mrs.Ismelda

The mothers all laughed heartily while my phone rang. I stepped outside of the library to take it.

“Hello?” I said.

“Juliet, we need you at the bar this instant! There’s a huge football game tonight and we’re strapped.” said Enrique, the head chef.

“Is there no one else who can cover? I have no one who can take Alana.” I said.

“Well, figure it out. You’ll get overtime pay if you take it tonight.” said Enrique

“...Fine.” I said.

I hung up the phone and went to talk to Sebastian. Even with all of the children crowding around him, his hazel eyes still looked at me.

“Hello, Juliet. How are you today?” said Sebastian.

“I’m alright. Listen, I need your help with-” I said.

“Let me guess. Alana is staying over again.” said Sebastian.

“..I’m really sorry to bother you again.” I said guiltily.

“It’s ok. I know how much you need to work for Alana. I’m always willing to help you.” said Sebastian.

“Thank you again.” I said

I turned around and noticed Alana was standing right behind me.

“Sweetie, I–” I said.

“I know, Mommy. I’m going with Uncle Sebastian.” said Alana

“Thank you so much sweetie. I love you.” I said.

“...I love you too, Mommy.” said Alana.

I hugged Alana tightly, putting all of the love I could muster into it. I just hoped that she knew, knew that I didn’t want to leave her. Knew that if I could, I would spend every day with her and not have to go to the diner. Knew that after losing her father, that I promised to protect and care for her, even if it cost me my life.

I let go of Alana and went out the door. As I left, I could hear Sebastian talking to the kids.

“Mr.Storyteller, why couldn't Rapunzel leave the tower herself?”asked Melanie.

“Good question. Its because sometimes, you can get trapped in a situation where it's too scary to ask for help, even from people that you really know. Even if you forget today's story, my friends, I want you to remember this: Never be afraid to ask for help.” finished Sebastian.

Enrique’s bar was loud and busier than usual, so Enrique’s desperation made a lot more sense. I was practically running to tables along with Roxanne and Miles, two other waiters, and everyone was drunk and screaming at the football game. Finally, when things calmed down a bit, I took a break and Miles brought me some chicken wings.

“Thank you.” I said as I took a greedy bite.

“So, Alana is staying at my grandpa’s place again?” asked Miles.

“How did you know?” I asked him.

“He called me earlier. Listen, me and my grandpa are really worried about you. This is the third time this month you had to call in a favor from us. We don’t mind it, of course, but are you sure you’re ok, Juliet?” asked Miles.

“Yeah, its just between working at the hospital and this, I’ve been running on fumes recently.” I said.

“Juliet, you need help. You can’t keep working like this.” said Miles.

“I have to for Alana’s sake. Saving for college, getting her school supplies, and everything in between. I just have to do this.” I said.

“No, you have to rest. Please, Juliet…” started Miles.

“Stop pretending to care.” I said without thinking.

“Excuse me?” said Miles with a tinge of anger.

“You don’t have the right to tell me what I can or cannot do. You don’t know ANYTHING ABOUT ME!” I said.

Miles had never looked more scared in his life, but I didn’t care at that moment. I stood up and suddenly everything was woozy. The lights and noise of the bar were disorienting. Before I could say or do anything, I hit the ground and everything went black.

I woke up in the same hospital. Kara, a new doctor, was in front of me. Her expression was laced with pity.

“Juliet, are you ok? How do you feel?” said Kara.

“What happened?” I asked.

“You passed out at work. Miles drove you to the hospital.” said Kara.

“Shit. How long has it been?” I asked.

“It's morning,”said Kara.

“What about Alana? Is she ok?” I asked desperately.

“Your visitor here can tell you about that.” said Kara.

The door opened and Miles and Sebastian stepped in, Alana holding one of Sebastian’s hands. Sebastian carried flowers in one hand and a bag of food in the other. He wore a smile as he placed these things on the desk next to my bed. Alana let go of him and ran towards me with tears in her eyes.

“Mommy! What’s wrong? Are you ok?” she asked.

“I’m ok, sweetie. I just fell down at work. I’ll be home soon, I promise.” I said while stroking her hair.

While Alana stayed in my arms, I looked up at Sebastian with subdued anger.

“I need to talk to you. Now.” I demanded.

Sebastian gave Miles a look, which Miles nodded and made up some excuse to lead Alana out of the room.

As soon as the door shut, I turned to Sebastian, who had pulled up a chair and sat next to me. I hated the look on his face, the look that all of those mothers gave me. The look that I imagine Alana gives me in nightmares. The look of pity intertwined with just a dash of mockery.

“Why are you here? How did you know where I was?” I asked him.

“Its a long story. The night you collapsed, after Miles took you to the hospital, he drove back here to let me know.” explained Sebastian.

“Why did you bring Alana here?” I said.

She insisted on coming. She wanted to see her mother.As for the matter of her well-being, you don't know her as well as you think." said Sebastian.

Any bit of thanks I had was replaced with a rush of anger.

"What are you implying? That I can't raise my daughter on my own?" I said.

"I never said that, but perhaps you are." said Sebastian

"If that's the attitude that you're going to have with me, get the hell out of here. You're just like everyone else in that awful town." I said.

Even after I said those words, Sebastian still kept up a patient smile. He got up from the chair and walked towards the door.

"Oh, by the way, Miles talked with the boss of the diner and he agreed to let you leave for next week." said Sebastian.

"What?! You know I can't do that. I need to make more money for…"I protested.

"Don't worry. Miles and I have arranged something for you. You can call him now and ask." said Sebastian.

Sebastian closed the door behind him. I looked over at the bag of food and reached out to open it. It was a double cheeseburger and fries, my favorite order from my favorite burger place. I ate greedily and licked my lips in delight. Afterwards, I reached for my phone and called Miles.

"What did you say to Enrique?" I asked Miles.

"I just told him about you going to the hospital. He was the one who suggested the leave in the first place." said Miles.

"You should have at least told me that you were planning to do this." I said.

"I know, but this is an intervention. I can't let you work like this any longer, Juliet, for you and Alana's sake." said Miles.

I sat in silence for a moment. I hated the kindness in his voice, the pity in his tone. Doesn't he realize that I've been doing this for Alana's sake? This intervention would hurt me in the long run, I just know it.

"...What have you arranged for me?" I asked.

"Oh, yeah, grandpa must have mentioned it. Well, Sebastian wanted you to try being the Storyteller next week." said Miles.

"You're joking." I said incredulously.

"I'm not. Its actually a very fun job. I've done it once or twice when Grandpa was out sick. The pay is pretty good and Alana will be happy to hear her mother read stories to her." said Miles.

"I'm not good with children and certainly not good with the other mothers." I said.

"Well, we can help you with that. Once you get some proper rest, we'll come over and help you prepare. In the meantime, take care of yourself." said Miles.

Miles hung up and I eased myself back into my bed. Me, being the Storyteller? They must actually be crazy. Still, I admit that I could use more time with Alana and with how much she loves the Storyteller, maybe it could be useful. Maybe. In the meantime, my eyelids grew heavy and I sank into a dreamless sleep.

The first weekend I spent in my own house in a month felt extremely unnatural, but Alana was very happy for me. I managed to help her with her homework and even played a tea party in one of her many games of make believe. She was smiling the widest she had in a while, so I entertained her fantasies the whole weekend. Remembering my promise to Miles and Sebastian, I tried to practice reading her favorite stories for the Storytellers Parlor, but my voice

still felt tired. Alana was still patient with me, flashing her adorable smile every time I finished reading a page. When I finished reading Sleeping Beauty on Sunday night before Alana went back to school, Alana clapped and smiled warmly.

"You did well, Mommy! I can't wait for Thursday." said Alana.

"Neither can I. I know how much you love the library." I said.

"Well, it's going to be even better with your reading." said Alana.

I smiled and placed a kiss on her cheek.

"Goodnight, sweet Angel." I said.

I was about to leave the room when Alana sat up from her bed.

"Mommy, can you stay until I fall asleep?" Alana asked.

My heart broke into tiny little pieces.

"Of course, angel. Of course I'll stay with you." I said.

I went to Alana's bed and lay down next to her. 10 minutes later, Alana drifted off to sleep and my eyelids started to get heavy. I moved closer to Alana and embraced her softly, tenderly.

"I love you, Alana." I whispered before sleep overcame me.

For the next three days, I walked Alana to the bus stop before school, something I never could have done before. Alana waved goodbye to me from the window with a smile and I went over to my car to go to work. The hospital cut down my shifts so I could leave in the early evening, just in time for Alana to finish soccer practice. For the first time in a while, I made time to pick her up, and some of the moms at the practice had things to say about that.

“Juliet. You’re finally here. Didn’t have to bother Miles for the millionth time?” said Mrs.Ismelda.

“Hi, Wanda. Yes, I’m here. Is there anything you or the soccer team needs from me?” I said.

“Hmmm, next month is a big game where Alana is playing. We’re going to need drinks for the girls.” said Mrs.Ismelda.

“Ok, I can do that. Just let me know everyone's preferences.” I said.

“Its ok if you can’t. We don’t expect much from you, Ms.Juliet.” said Mrs.Ismelda.

“...Thank you for your concern.” I strained out.

I took Alana, who practically jumped into the car, and excitedly told me about the soccer team and how much she was looking forward to the game on the way home. As I was making dinner, the doorbell rang and in walked Sebastian and Miles, board games and a small cake in tow. I prepared extra plates and as Miles and Alana were starting a game of Monopoly, Sebastian and I stayed in the kitchen to prepare the book for Thursday.

“Since this is your first time, I chose the book for you. It’s the Princess and the Frog.” said Sebastian.

“That’s Alana’s favorite story. She loves Princess Tiana.” I said.

“Now, we need to practice reading. To read for kids, you have to get into character. When I’m reading up there, I’m no longer Sebastian. I am Rapunzel or Sleeping Beauty. Any character to make the kids happy.” said Sebastian.

“Get into character, ok. I’ll try.” I said.

I opened the book, took a deep breath, and began to read. I was Princess Tiana, a kind lady who worked hard to open her restaurant and get to her dream. She, among all of the Disney

princesses, was the one that I wanted Alana to be. Someone who is confident without being rude, and always kind to everyone. I finished reading and Sebastian put his hands together, deep in thought.

"...You're better than I thought, but I want you to think about one thing: What do you want the kids to get from this story? When they outgrow the library and eventually grow old, what do you want them to remember? Also practice your tone and ask them questions about the story." said Sebastian.

"What do you mean, ask them questions?" I asked.

"For example, when you get to Tiana kissing the frog, ask them how do you think Tiana feels after the kiss? They'd probably answer gross or something along those lines. Or when Tiana gets her dress, ask them what color the dress is and then ask them what their favorite color is. If you feel like you need to, you can put sticky notes with questions on pages to ask the kids. You'll get to know the kids that way and thus build a community at the library." said Sebastian.

"How do you know all this, Sebastian?" I asked.

Sebastian leaned back in his chair, eyes glazed with recollection.

"Throughout my whole life, I worked for a program called Head Start, whose goal was to help preschool children develop socioemotional skills and vocabulary for kindergarten. I started as a member reading to kids before moving up to be the site manager and head of the program in California. I retired to Wildgrove 10 years ago and became hired as the head of the librarian by the mayor. I want to give these kids some joy in my last years because this world is not going to be kind to them." said Sebastian.

"...That's incredible, Sebastian." I said in awe.

“You’re more incredible, Juliet. Working hard every day to support your daughter alone and enduring all that vile the other mothers spit at you is admirable. That’s why I’m willing to help you and to offer you a position at the library. I’m getting old and someone like you who cares so much about your daughter would be a great help to me.” said Sebastian.

I looked at Alana, cheering at the fact that she won a monopoly on Miles, and smiled. I haven’t been home long enough to see it constantly. And with the library and new shifts at the hospital, I could stay here longer and be there for her. But, thinking of the mothers and their hateful gazes, I felt myself shaking.

“...I’m not as strong as you think. Being home now, the other mother’s gazes hurt more than I thought.” I said.

“Juliet, you are strong and kind. One day, you will realize that. In the meantime, practice reading before Thursday and if you need any help, you can message me or Miles.” said Sebastian.

Sebastian stood up and told Miles that they were leaving. He took a picture of the unfinished Monopoly game to finish with Alana later and left with Sebastian. After I put Alana to bed, I sat up with the Princess and the Frog for a couple of hours trying to think of questions.

“What do I want them to learn?” I said to myself.

I laid the book and the sticky notes on my dresser and went back to sleep, hoping that questions would magically appear in my dreams.

The Wildgrove Library was even more intimidating than I remembered. Alana was unmoved, however, jumping out of the car and practically dragging me to the front door, where

Sebastian and Miles were waiting for me. Sebastian had something light blue sticking out of his bag and I asked him what it was.

“It’s Tiana’s dress. I had a friend from Head Start prepare it for today. I hope it fits you.” said Sebastian.

“Seriously?! I don’t want to…” I started.

“Tiana’s dress?! Mommy’s going to wear it?!” said Alana excitedly.

“Yes, Mommy will wear it for you.” I said while staring at Sebastian ruthlessly.

“Yay! Miles, let’s go and wait for Mommy.” said Alana.

Alana and Miles walked inside together while I dragged Sebastian to the bathroom.

“You could have at least told me.” I said incredulously.

“I’m sorry. But, it took a while to prepare so there wasn’t time to message you.” said Sebastian.

“...Ok, but in the future, please check with me in advance.” I said.

“That’s fair. But, Juliet, are you ready for this?” asked Sebastian.

I held up the Princess and the Frog book. Sebastian skimmed through all of the questions and gave an approving nod.

“You wrote good questions, Juliet. The kids will love it. But, more important than these questions, is your confidence. You have to own it and not be ashamed.” said Sebastian.

“I…” I mumbled out quietly.

“Repeat after me: I am strong and kind.” encouraged Sebastian.

“Um…I am strong and kind.” I stammered.

Sebastian shook his head.

“Once more, with feeling!” he said confidently.

“I am strong and kind.” I said.

“One more time, louder!” Sebastian shouted.

“I AM STRONG AND KIND!” I shouted back.

Sebastian grinned warmly. I chuckled, not believing that that made me feel better.

“Thank you, Sebastian. For this.” I said earnestly.

“Anything to help a friend. Now, I’ll let you get changed.” said Sebastian.

Sebastian left the bathroom and I changed into the dress, which by some miracle managed to fit me. I took a deep breath, held my book close to my chest, and walked out the bathroom door. The mothers saw me first, their faces laced in shock and with a dash of disgust.Right next to them was Miles, whose face looked happy seeing me.The kids, however, looked at me with pure, unadulterated joy. Alana was especially happy looking at me and all of the nerves slowly went away.

“Everyone, Princess Tiana is here to read a story for us today. She is the Storyteller instead of me, so give her the same respect.” said Sebastian.

“Yes, Storyteller.” said the kids in unison.

I sat down in the rocking chair calmly. The kids looked up at me with anticipation.

“Hello, everyone! I’m Princess Tiana and today, I’m going to read you my story.” I said cheerfully.

“Yay!” the kids cheered

“Now, I wasn’t originally a princess? Does anyone know what I did before I was a princess?” I asked.

Alana’s hand immediately shot up.

“Chef!” Alana yelled out.

“That’s right, Alana. You’re so smart. Yes, I originally wanted to be a chef but now I am a princess. But, I still have a restaurant on the side. Now, tell me, is there a dream that you want to achieve?” I asked.

The hands of all of the kids shot up.

“I wanna be an astronaut.” said Melanie, Mrs.Betancourt’s daughter.

“I wanna be a lawyer.” said Ricky, Mrs.Yolanda’s son.

“Me too!” said Amy, Mrs.Yolanda’s daughter.

“I wanna be a police officer.” said Luna, Mrs.Alexandre’s daughter.

“I wanna be a superhero.” said Simon, Mrs.Alexandre’s son.

“Simon, you can’t be a superhero.” said Mrs.Alexandre from the back.

“Well, Simon, you absolutely can be a superhero. If I can be a princess, you can be anything!” I said.

Mrs.Ismelda's twins, Linsdey and Max, wanted to be president and doctors respectively while Mrs.Betancourt's three kids, Abel, Becky, and Caleb all wanted to be singers together. Alana, however, didn’t mention her dream, which made me concerned.

“Those are all wonderful dreams, children. Princess Tiana knows you can achieve all of those dreams and more. Now that we’ve all shared, are we ready to start reading?” I asked.

“Yes!” The kids all cheered.

“Let’s get started.” I said.

I opened the book and began reading. Through my questions, I learned everyone’s favorite color, what they liked to eat, and even how they felt about kissing frogs(no one wanted to, obviously). And as quickly as I started, the book was over. The kids crowded around me,

asking questions about Prince Naveen and if the crocodile and I were still friends. Finally, Alana came up to me.

“Princess Tiana, can I tell you my dream?” Alana asked.

“Sure you can, Alana. Princess Tiana will listen.” I said.

“I…wanna be a nurse like my mommy. I wanna help people who are sick.” said Alana.

My heart shattered once again in a happy way. Tears flowed from my eyes but I wiped them away quickly.

“...Alana, you can make that dream come true. Now, Princess Tiana has to go and find the Storyteller.” I said.

“Ok, bye Princess!” said Alana innocently.

I left the crowds of children, walked past the mothers and Miles, and found Sebastian, who was eating a piece of cheese from the mothers charcuterie. He finished eating quickly and looked up at me.

“How was it, Princess Tiana?” said Sebastian.

I smiled back.

“...I know what I want to do now.” I said confidently.

Sebastian’s eyes lit up and his smile grew wider.

“I’ve been waiting for you to say that, Juliet.” said Sebastian.

The soccer game was just getting started by the time I pulled up and as usual, the mother’s looked at me with a huff.

“Five minutes late again, Juliet? I thought you would have learned by now.” said Mrs.Alexandre.

“Right, right, I know, but this time I have a good reason.” I said dismissively.

“What good reason do you have to be late to your daughter's game?” exclaimed Mrs.Yolanda.

Right on cue, Miles walked out from behind my car trunk lugging a cooler behind him.

“Excuse me ladies, I’m going to put this cooler near the benches. Juliet, can you get the other one?” said Miles casually.

“Of course.” I said happily as I walked away from the disgusted mothers faces.

I took the second cooler and put it next to the other one. Everyone in Wildgrove came to watch the game and I took my seat next to Sebastian and Miles. Alana was running onto the field and I cheered for her loudly. During break times, I dispensed water from Miles’s cooler to all of the kids while the other mothers watched. The game was exceptionally close, but working together with Lindsey, Alana got the final shot and won the game for Wildgrove. Alana was hoisted by her friends and carried over to the cheering crowd. I hugged her tightly and proudly.

“Alana, I’m so proud of you sweetie. I love you so much!” I said.

“I love you too.” said Alana.

“Now, pay attention everyone! I have an announcement.” I called out.

The kids and adults all snapped to the sound of my voice.

“Remember when Princess Tiana and Snow White came to visit the library? You told them your favorite food and drinks?”

“Yeah! I remember saying soda and pizza.” said Alana.

“Well…” I said proudly.

I kicked open the extra cooler. Sure enough, everyone's favorite soda was inside, saved for after the game. The kids' eyes widened.

"There's even more! We're going to the pizza parlor. All you can eat pizza, courtesy of Princess Tiana and Snow White!" I said.

The kids cheered. The mothers sneered. And I just smiled. Miles and Sebastian nodded at me proudly. As I took Alana to the car for pizza, I remembered the last words of Snow White, the story I read just last week, etched onto the white page and said in my own, chipper voice.

Happily Ever After.