

Aria in Ice

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Chapter 1

A denim-clad butt perched in the huge, ancient oak just underneath the north wing of the castle. Legs attached to that butt were busily engaged in grasping tree limbs in an attempt to remain balanced in the branches.

I strolled over to the bottom of the tree and stood in silence until an entire flesh and blood body appeared on the limb some ten feet above my head.

Then I called out, “Pruning time? Or am I interrupting a burglary in progress?”

The butt, and the body, landed with a less-than-gentle thud right at my feet.

I smiled serenely down at the wannabe burglar. “Oops. So sorry. Did I startle you?”

Red hair in bad need of a trim. Stupidly sexy Irish green eyes. Currently glaring into mine. I’d just witnessed what had to be a painful, but most entertaining, performance involving an ungraceful descent from a tree. Since that fall had ultimately landed the acrobat on his backside, laughter was my immediate, if admittedly juvenile, response.

After a good thirty seconds of silence and stares, he spoke. “Excuse me, but is there some reason your hair is partially green?”

My smile changed to a scowl. “Yes, damn it. There is. This past Christmas I ran out of decorations but wanted to get a huge jump on next year festivities, so I figured chestnut and green was the way to go. You know. . . that whole concept of roasting over the open fire and fir trees. I’m convinced green streaks will be the style for holiday ornamentation the world over in a year or two, don’t you?” I took a breath. Is there some reason you’re being rude? Aside from the fact that my appearance caused you to stop your nefarious deeds, and ultimately land on your behind?”

He jumped to his feet. “Rude? Rude? *Me* being rude? How about you? Sneaking around, scaring the crap out of a guy and causing a near-fatal accident. How’s that for rude?”

I raised the pitch of my voice just a notch without changing volume. “I was *not* sneaking around. I have a perfect right to be here and I’d lay odds that you most definitely don’t, because otherwise you wouldn’t be the one climbing out of treetops. Not to mention that if a truly klutzy tumble from the bottom branch can be labeled a near-fatal accident, you’ve obviously led a sheltered - albeit crime-laden - life.”

We continued glaring each other. Finally he winked at me. “We seem to be at an impasse. Tell me, are you planning to use that phone you’re clutching so tightly in those delicate hands and giving the Prague authorities a buzz? I’d appreciate a head start if I’m about to become a fugitive.”

I unclenched my fingers from around the cell. I had no ideas whether a call to 911 in Prague would fetch the cops, the animal catchers, or the *kolache* delivery guys.

And really, what could I say once I reached the local authorities? “Yo! How’s it goin’? Uh, sorry to bother you, but Mr. Johnny Gerard, whom I haven’t seen in three damn months because of his stupid soap opera filming way the hell out of town, now seems to be engaged in a felony, and has fallen out of a tree at *Kastle Kouzlo Noc* just under the north tower where I swear I heard Mozart only moments ago except no one is around and I have this strange gift of second sight so I’m not really sure if what I heard was an auditory premonition or a ghostly serenade but I’m kind of spooked and no, I don’t see anything like the Hapsburg Crown jewels peeking out of his pockets, I’m really sorry to call - but while I have you on the line could you just transfer me to *Kolaches-to-Go*? I want to place an order for two cream cheese and one apricot-filled.”

Johnny whistled. Doubtless he’d followed that entire fictitious call through my entire thought process. He’s good at that. He ran his fingers through my bangs. “I apologize about the hair comment, Abby. Honest. I’m curious though. Last time I saw you, your lovely locks were one color. Was this a deliberate dye job? Going for a retro-punk garage band look?”

“Remember I told you about the *Starlight Express* debacle in that theatre in Kansas??”

“Oh yeah. I was very jealous. Always wanted to play the *Pumping Iron* Elvis part. Although you did make it sound like the production staff was less than stellar.”

“You would have been wonderful. You always are. And believe me, they could have used your exceptional talents because less-than-stellar doesn’t begin to cover the idiocy I endured. Intense and constant diva dramas. I’ll reveal all some night when we’re not otherwise occupied. Where was I?”

“Kansas.”

I shuddered. “Yeah. Nice state. Stupid theatre. Anyway, what I didn’t tell you was that fool director, Bryce, decided all of the dancing, roller-skating characters should have exotic hair colors to represent the different types of trains. He sent me off to a demonic hair-stylist who

chose green. Excuse me while I gag. Why the idiot didn't just order wigs is beyond my comprehension."

"Okay. Demonic hair-stylist. We'll get back to that because what I really want to know, Ms. Fouchet - why are you here in Prague?"

"The other thing I didn't tell you since you were roving around the world *in communicato* - and why the hell was *Endless Time* filming in Africa - and why doesn't Kenya seem to have cell coverage?"

"I have no idea. Wouldn't have mattered. Remember I hate all phones but especially any device that can reach out and touch me anywhere anytime. Africa. Simple. Can we say, soap insanity? Somebody saw some PBS channel special on safaris and decided Gregory Noble and his merry band of murderous wives, mistresses, fellow cops and assorted hangers on - or hanger ons - whichever - should hunt down a neo-Communist spy while riding around in an open Jeep across lion country. I barely escaped being fed to a hippopotamus. And I'm truly sorry that they scrapped your part of Vanessa after Christmas. You were supposed to come with me and I was miserable without you. But, go on. *Prague - why?*"

"Okay. Three days into rehearsals, I took a major header roller skating off a ramp that wasn't supposed to have a bump in the middle. I broke that same ankle that got wrecked back when I first met you when we were doing *Superstar*, so I came back to Manhattan and managed to rest up for about three weeks, and saw no need to distress you since I couldn't reach you anyway. I'm glad I didn't die. You'd've missed the funeral."

"Prague," he prompted.

"Ankle. So I'm enjoy lying on the couch in the apartment with Cherry and Guido, who are supposed to be getting married but that's another story, and we're watching all the soap operas Johnny Gerard is *not* starring in and I get this phone call from Shay who's in Germany choreographing *The Merry Widow* for a light opera company. She ran into a friend of ours. Ms. Bambi Bohacek. Bambi is owner of *Headlights Productions* which is an indy film company and she was looking for a patsy to play location scout. *Voila!* Enter Abby to roam the Czech Republic looking for a place for Bambi's Gothic movie musical that Shay is going to direct which is why I'm at *Kouzlo Noc* since it looks perfect as a creepy castle. Anyway, I've been hacking away at it - my hair that is - not the scouting - which is why I have this lovely long shag cut with the mixture of my natural chestnut and garish green. Satisfied?"

Johnny howled, “Damn, darlin’. A simple, ‘dye job gone bad’ would have sufficed.” The twinkle in his eyes quickly morphed into a glint I recognized. “I’ve missed you.”

“Me too.” I sniffed and dabbed at my eyes.

He grabbed me and proceeded to curl that lovely long shag cut with a classic Johnny Gerard kiss that landed us both under the tree Johnny had plopped out of. Damn nice kiss with extras. It almost made up for his absence the last three months. Stinking-sexy-soap-star-smart-ass.

We broke apart and stared at each other.

“So, now that my presence has been explained, what about yours? Whacha doin’ at *Kouzlo Noc*?” I snickered, “Burglar.”

“Let’s just say I had a good reason for being in the north turret.”

“Ha. Knew it. You were breaking in and you weren’t quick enough to come up with a cover story. Is this research for some other crazy stunt for Gregory Noble, supercop?”

He shuddered. “Gad. I hope not. Then again, I wouldn’t mind *Endless Time* funding some filming in Prague.”

“Stalling, Johnny, stalling.”

“Fine. I’m restoring a mural for Veronika Duskova, who is one of the owners of *Kouzlo Noc*. It’s in very bad condition and in no way ready to be seen so she and I are a bit touchy about it.”

“In the north turret?”

Pause.

“Well, actually, I was muraling in a different area.”

“Not the north turret.”

“No.”

Pause. “Wait. This is new. ‘Muraling.’ Um. Is that a word?”

“No. Neither is ‘muraled’ although I’m sure both will now become part of the Abby vocabulary. Anyway, I got into sketching ages ago during breaks on the soap. Restoration was a logical step up in my artistic repetoire.”

“Oh -kay. Should I even ask how you met the Duskova family?”

“Guess.”

I pondered the question for about twenty seconds. “Yolanda Barrett. Our prolific head writer for *Endless Time*. Right?”

Johnny gave me a thumbs up. “You got it. I have yet to meet someone truly interesting whom Yolanda hasn’t managed to make a friend sometime in her life. We did a little filming in Prague a few two years ago and she met Veronika Duskova at a grocery store or something ridiculously mundane. They kept in touch. Veronika asked her if she knew someone who’d restore a mural for cheap. Yolanda said Johnny Gerard will do it for free.”

“That’s nice of you.”

“Well, Yolanda also had an agenda.”

“Duh,” I smirked. “Which was?”

“There’s a circus training facility about twenty miles outside of Prague.”

I held up my hand. “Don’t tell me. Yolanda wants Gregory Noble to develop skills in - what?”

“Everything. Elephant riding, ring-master, fortune-teller, you name it. I love circuses. Considered joining one back when I was about twelve.” He smirked. “You won’t believe this because I neglected to show my process with balance when I fell out of this tree, but I guess high-wire and trapeze are my favorites so far.”

“Makes sense. Great skills for a wannabe cat-burglar.”

“Now, now, Ms. Fouchet. I am an innocent man. Really.” He paused, then stared into my eyes. “What’s freaking you out about the north turret anyway?”

I hoisted my tote bag to a more comfortable position. “Let me ask you a question.”

“Go ahead. You want a list of the other amazing talents lie hidden behind my shining presence.”

“Shining ego,” I snorted. “Johnny, my dearest darling, it’s common knowledge you’re capable of leaping tall buildings and staring down rays of Kryptonite, but I’ll just have to suppress my admiration and curiosity. Back to my question. Did you hear anyone playing a flute in the north turret before you made that incredibly bad descent down the tree? For that matter, since you have some musicianship skills, were you by any chance. . . uh. . . flauting?”

He snorted. “Flauting? I’m damn sure that’s not a word. And I can assure you that I was not playing the flute. Mind you, I can, Hon. As well as various brass instruments and a fairly

mean guitar on occasion. But you did not hear me. And I didn't see anyone else in the north wing playing the flute, the harp, the piano or harmonica. No one else was even in that turret."

"I was afraid you'd say that."

"Why?"

"Because I'm pretty positive I heard a flute. A very fine flute sounding out more than a few notes from the overture of *Magic Flute*. And if no one was playing, and no one was in the turret, then the only explanation is *Kouzlo Noc* has a musical ghost."

His eyes widened. "A flute-playing spook is haunting the castle?"

"Well, I'm not sure I'd put it in those terms. Common theories say ghosts do not appreciate being called spooks. Kind of like spies, I guess. It sounds rude to them. Where was I? Oh. Yes. *Kouzlo Noc* is haunted."

"And you've determined this – why? Because, to paraphrase Irving Berlin, you're 'hearing music and there's no one there?'"

"I thought it was 'hear singing'?"

"It is. I *said* I was paraphrasing. You weren't paying attention."

"I was."

"Were not."

"Was to."

"Were no. . . . what were we talking about and are you going to refrain from singing the refrain? Or beginning the Beguine?"

I realized I was indeed singing a few measures of the song he was referring to. *You're Just in Love*. "Sorry."

"Are you telling me you heard music from a non-living presence?"

"Uh - sort of."

"Cripes. Care to explain?"

"Remember that little talent I was bequeathed from Granny Dumas?"

"The foreshadowing premonition second sight thingee?"

"Yep. Guess what? It's more than possible Granny bestowed upon me with a little extra giftie that lies dormant until one is past legal age. Like - uh - hearing music from folks who aren't with us anymore."

"Oh crap. This could get dicey."

“And dodgy. Not to mention possibly dangerous.” I paused. “This isn’t actually the first time I’ve had an experience bonding with the deceased.”

Johnny’s eyebrow lifted. “Do tell. Unless you want to count that premonition about me that thankfully didn’t come true?”

“No, no. That was a whompin’ big vision. This is different. I’m talkin’ ‘bout spook-excuse me - *ghost* communing when I was six and attending a fine Irish wake for my great-grandfather who was half Irish and half French. Minette’s side of the family which of course is no surprise since the Dumas’ have all the weird voodoo genes. Where was I? Oh yeah. People at the wake suddenly began asking why I was singing the Canticle harmony to “*Scarborough Faire*.” Not the ancient regular folk song, but the Simon and Garfunkle arrangement from the Sixties. The anti-war version with the really cool lyrics that send chills down one’s spine even at a very young age. Anyway, I explained that Great-Grandpa had taken the melody and I was being polite by singing harmony. Gramps had perfect pitch as well. Even after he died.”

“Why am I not surprised?” Johnny said.

“Because I had visions thirty years into future talking to your father last July?”

“Which I still find fascinating. Of course, I find everything about my petite little Abby fascinating but your Dumas abilities are sort of reality sci-fi tv fascinating. Now we get to add - what? Harmonious trysts with spooks?”

I frowned at him. “Now, now. I won’t let you play ghost hunter with me if you’re going to have a bad attitude about this.”

“I shall be totally supportive. Although, as to flute-playing ghosts, I hate to play Mr. Practical but I do have to point out other possibilities - at least as to the why or how of ghostly sounds wafting out from the north turret.”

“Such as?”

“What about the clichéd but reasonable suggestion of that old standby- the hidden tape player? Cell phone, MP3 player boombox held to head by the creepy gardener who roams the castle?”

“Yeah, yeah. Logical. All great explanations and I promise I plan to explore them all if I get to rent *Kouzlo Noc* for Bambi’s company and sneak around in turrets. But I’m telling you what I’d heard and the techno-quality of your suggestions don’t quite fit the sound of live. Even by a dead flautist.”

He smiled. “Nice phrasing. Okay, howsabout your imagination kicked over into Gothicland because it’s romantic and you love romance?”

“Aw, come on. Yes, I have a marvelous imagination, but I also have a fairly decent grip on reality,” I batted my lashes, “unless I’m around Johnny Gerard who tends to get me into surreal situations even when he’s not playing Gregory Noble.”

Johnny patted my green and chestnut hair as though I was a toddler, then casually leaned down and proceeded to plant upon my lips a kiss that curled my toes as well as my hair. Just as casually, he let go. “Darlin’, I personally love the ghost theory better, too. Tell you the truth, I’m very curious as to any spectral wanderers wandering *Kouzlo Noc*. Care to take a stroll around the castle cemetery and see what pops up?”

I winced. “Not sure ‘pops up’ is exactly what I need to see happening in a graveyard but I do like the idea of exploring.” I linked my arm through his. “Lead on, burglar boy.”