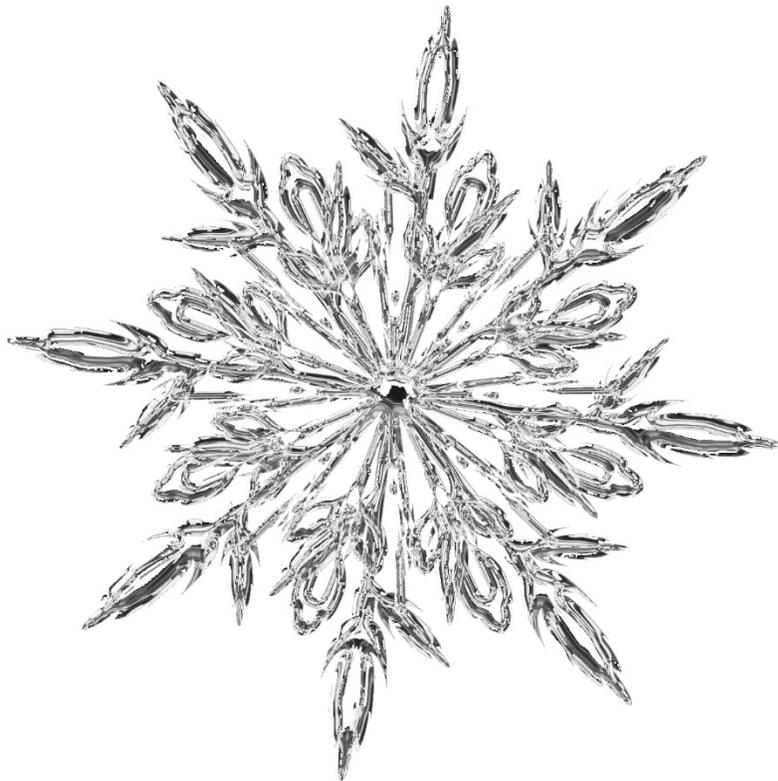


A close-up of a woman's face, focusing on her eye and cheek. A large, intricate, glowing blue and white snowflake is positioned on her cheek. The background is a soft-focus winter landscape with snow-covered mountains and a blue sky. The title 'Winter Falls' is written in a stylized, purple-to-pink gradient font across the top.

# Winter *Falls*

A TALE OF THE SNOW QUEEN  
JACQUE STEVENS

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WINTER FALLS

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## **Author's Note**

This book was written for me.

It was written at a time in my life when nothing seemed to go right and I didn't know what direction to turn. It was written when I discovered the God I knew and loved was unwilling to make my choices for me, that it pleased Him for me to struggle and find my own path. It was written when I wanted my life to be perfect, and I realized it would never be. It was written in Winter.

This book was published in Summer. It was published when I took one trembling step in the direction I wanted desperately and watched God throw open all the doors I saw in my way. It was published when I discovered that my imperfect life could be far better than I ever dreamed. It was published when I realized that was a journey worth sharing.

It was published for you.

The message of Winter Falls is that winter ends. The answers I found will not speak to every case, but I know the answers are there for those that choose to seek them. Give it one more day, one more night, and one more sunrise. You will find your guideposts, your roses, your lights along the way.

And please know that at least one person wishes you the very best on your way.

## **Part 1: Witch of the Spring Haven**

## Chapter 1

I stood perched on the bridge outside of town. My eyes dried; my heart slowed. A plan had rooted itself inside my head, taking hold.

I could jump and leave everything behind.

The March wind moaned in my ears, pulling at my skirts, scarf, and long braid. Snowflakes glistened with the glow of distant street lamps. Numb fingers—so numb, they no longer seemed attached to me—untangled my skate blades from my right shoulder. Lack of interest and the melting ice had prevented me from using the blades in over a month.

I held them out by their straps and watched them dangle and fall.

One splash, and they disappeared beneath the river current.

With them, a great weight fell off my shoulders. I no longer had to worry about the hotel, my father's family, or even myself. After the pain of drowning ended, all my cares, my very existence, would melt away as surely as the snow dripping from the bridge's curved railing.

If I did this, nothing would be left. Nothing.

My grip tightened on the wooden banister as if frozen in place. I used to think those who chose this fate for themselves were cowards. Was I the worst coward of them all, too fearful to jump? To fall? I wanted my current pain—my current life—to end, but I didn't want *nothing*.

Could there be some other option? My gaze dropped to the ice chunks floating down the river beneath me. Light refracted off the icy water in a curious prism of color. The surrounding reflections didn't seem to match, like an entrance to another world. Another fantasy.

More than life or death, I still wanted a fantasy.

Imagining myself heading toward the lights, I lifted one foot onto the railing and then the other. I held onto the banister, hunched over. One more step would do it. One more . . .

The damp wood shifted under me. My legs shook, slipped. No more choice, no more thought. Splinters cut into my palms as I lost my hold and gravity took me, jump or fall.

Wind rushed past, flaring my skirts and petticoats around my legs. I hit water—it was supposed to be water, but it cut through my skin like a sea of blades. A sudden *crunch* echoed around me. Pain exploded down my spine. Ice chunks struck me from every direction, and I slipped under them. So many colors, so many sounds.

I closed my eyes tight and focused on slowing the speed of my heart. Calm. I wanted to be calm and repeated the word in my mind, but my lungs screamed in protest.

They wanted air and they wanted it now.

I wasn't ready. My body knew it even if my mind did not. I gasped, and icy water filled my chest. No air. I flailed for the surface, dragged down by the leaden weight of my water-filled skirts. Wet. Cold. Pain. The colors around me blurred to an angry red.

Nothing but red, red, red.

Moments passed, lost to the movement of the river. Minutes. Something whipped across my shoulders, jerking my body in the opposite direction and pulling me toward the mud bank. Slime coated my hands and face as I hit the ground. My chest moved up and down. My lungs burned. Was I breathing air, water, or nothing at all?

Did it even matter anymore?

*Katie*. Something called to me, but even my name seemed distant, foreign. I knew who Katie was. I knew the dark-haired girl struggling weakly in the mud and briared hedge, but I had retreated to something outside and indifferent to Katie. A great numbness encircled me, like a dream forgotten on awakening, and I surrendered to it.

The villagers in Riverside would say I jumped because of Shay; they would call me an

unstable girl frustrated in love. But as I reflected on my seventeen years, it seemed I had been preparing myself to jump for a long time.

Ever since I met Avery, a crow from the Four Kingdoms.

Once upon a time.

## Chapter 2

*I will listen. I will not fidget.*

White chalk scraped across the field of green. I traced the words over and over again on the blackboard, my punishment when Ms. Sarah held me after class. It seemed far worse than a slap on the wrist since I wasn't seven yet and had barely started reading. I could only write the lines by copying the ones before them. But Ms. Sarah said something had to be done. "Even boys can sit and listen better than you can. You're supposed to be a young lady."

I stood with my head down to absorb her lecture, but young lady or not, I wasn't like Shay and his friends. I never *planned* to cause trouble. But no letters or figures held my attention in that one-room schoolhouse. The window, even closed, called to me. Stray insects buzzing around caught my eye. My legs tingled, demanding some action to match my racing thoughts.

*Come play, come dance with me*, the world insisted. And I longed to answer, every time.

My chalk hit the end of the board. Ms. Sarah stood up from her desk and stepped up behind me. She held her eraser as she squinted at the ill-formed letters. I held my breath, waiting for that eraser to pass through any mistake and sentence me to recopy the words all over again.

She sighed, erasing the whole board in a few wide strokes.

My knees shook; I nearly toppled over. Work of an hour gone in seconds.

Her face betrayed nothing when she turned to me, wiping chalk dust from her apron. "All right, Katie, you may go. Though, I suppose I'll have to explain your tardiness to your father later."

I caught my breath. The last line barely registered. I was free. My heart lightened as I rushed to my desk for my slate and other supplies, gathering them in the same motion I used to hike up my skirts. Threats about my father never worried me anyway. He would not interfere

with any punishment Ms. Sarah might give me, but he never punished me himself.

I darted into the schoolyard. Late as it was, the yard was completely clear. No one jumping rope, shooting marbles, or chasing each other around the flagpole. Wind rustled through the fallen leaves, and I crunched right through them, content to celebrate my freedom alone.

I circled around the pine and oak trees near the old wooden bridge before finding Shay—a curly-haired, freckled boy of my same year—and two other boys I hadn't learned the names of yet. I only knew Shay because he came to our hotel sometimes with his father. The men would drink and talk about "grown-up stuff" while we were left to play together.

Shay was the rowdy kind of boy who brought frogs to tea parties and called every stick a sword or rifle. I liked frogs and wooden swords well enough, but not *all* the time, especially not after I had gone through the trouble of setting out teacups and begging treats off Ms. Mary, our cook.

I started to go around the boys when something *squawked* from the group's center.

I scrambled over the tree roots to join them. "What have you got there, Shay?"

Shay broke formation with the other boys to look at me. A soot-black crow stood at their feet, dragging a misshapen wing. "Just some bird." Shay pointed at the creature with a long stick. "Look, he's walking funny."

"Oh, poor baby." I dropped onto the dirt and leaves, letting my satchel fall from my shoulder. A solemn intelligence in the crow's sad, brown eyes drew me in.

He seemed different than other birds—special.

"Are you Ms. Katherine today, or do you want to play games with us?" Shay asked. I had called myself Ms. Katherine once, only to explain why I didn't want him wolfing down food and putting his frogs on the tea table, but he kept using it.

It wasn't his fault, though. No girls lived at Shay's house. If Ms. Sarah knew how hard I tried to explain these things to him, she wouldn't sigh so much.

"We can be robbers and hunters and—" Shay moved the stick toward the bird again, and I knocked it away.

"Don't hit him. Can't you see he's hurt already?"

Shay bent down and snatched the bird, pressing it against his shirt buttons as it flapped in his hand. "He's our bird," Shay said. "I'm the one who found him. And I say we take him home and eat him."

Eat him? My stomach lurched, and one of the other boys shook his head. "You can't eat a crow," he said. "It's bad luck."

"Why?" Shay asked.

The boy shrugged. "It just is."

I stood up, leaving my satchel on the ground. "I'll tell you why it's bad luck. Because I'll knock you into the river if you do, that's why."

Shay backed away from the riverbank and squinted at me. "You couldn't really."

He had a point. The boys towered over me like giants, but I couldn't let that deter me. "If you tried to stop me, I'd tell your pa you fought a girl. He wouldn't like that."

Shay's face darkened. Laughter fled his eyes. Ms. Sarah had threatened to go to my father, but with Shay, saying the words felt different. Harder. Crueler. I won, and I hated myself for it.

"Tell you what, give me the crow, and I'll give you a full pie the next time you come over and I won't tell your pa nothing." That boy was always hungry, but one of Ms. Mary's pies had to taste better than a dirty, old crow—even if Ms. Mary wouldn't help and I had to make it myself.

The other two boys exchanged looks while Shay scrunched his face. “Apple?” he asked, blue eyes brightening. “I hate the berry ones. They’re all seedy.”

I nodded, and Shay looked to the other boys for confirmation. Then he shrugged at their blank faces like it hadn’t mattered to him in the first place.

“I guess that’s all right, then. Here you are.”

He handed the crow to me and straightened his suspenders, looking into the distance. Expecting Shay to stay focused on a subject for more than two seconds was as useless as expecting a snake to play a banjo.

“Come on! Let’s go play in the river.” He pointed to their destination with his stick and took off running. The other boys trailed after him in a V, mimicking a family of geese flying south.

The crow flapped in my hand. I put him down as soon as the boys disappeared behind the trees. The crow started away lopsided, one wing flapping and the other hanging uselessly. He crashed back down to the foliage, but sprung up again in a moment, grumbling and preening desperately as if to prove he meant to land there from the beginning.

“Insolent hooligans.” The crow’s nasal voice dripped with annoyance. “Sneaking up on unsuspecting cripples. No one in this place has any manners at all.”

“I know some manners,” I protested without hesitation. I had already guessed the crow was special, a storybook creature who could be a friend and talk anytime it wished.

I spread out my skirt in a fumbled version of the half curtsy Ms. Mary had shown me for greeting guests. “Hello, sir. I’m Ms. Katherine Graham of the Riverside Boarding House and Hotel. Do you need any help, little birdie?”

“My name is Avery. Not ‘little birdie’ and certainly not ‘baby.’” He puffed himself up,

speaking with enough authority to convince me he deserved the same reverence as an adult, no matter his size.

“Mr. Avery, then? Would you let me help you?”

He didn't answer. He hopped around the scattered twigs with his beak in the air, leaving wishbone marks in the mud as he looked from one tree to the next. I stood watching him, scarcely daring to breathe lest I upset him again.

He sighed loudly, shaking off a few pin feathers. “I suppose I better. Here's hoping that you're a better friend than a boy or a fox.” He hopped closer. “Don't even think of grabbing me again. Just hold out your arm, and I'll climb on your shoulder.”

“I won't grab you.” I took pride in how still I stood as his small talons pricked their way up the sleeve of my sweater. I reclaimed my fallen satchel as soon as he settled. “I'll take you home and you can be my new pet. I'll feed you and talk to you, and we'll play all sorts of games when your wing is better.”

Avery shuddered. “Well, I'll stay until the wing heals, that's for sure. Can't say about the rest. I mean to return home as soon as I'm able. That is, as soon as I figure out how I got here in the first place.” He peered at me. “You haven't heard of the Four Kingdoms, have you?”

I shook my head. I crossed the wooden bridge and continued through the trees, taking time to hop on the first fallen log that presented itself and balancing with my arms stretched out. “But I bet my mother's been there. She goes all over the place.” I jumped off the log with what I imagined was the grace of a tumbler. “Was it a nice place?”

The crow bobbed his head. “Better than this one. Travelers pass through all the time. You know, the real adventurous sort who always have a story to tell. Some of them are kind, some are coarse, but there's real order there. The kingdoms are ruled by four sisters, fairy princesses who

control the seasons and live together in a central castle. Princesses Ivy, Aurora, Gale, and Flurry—they would never allow riffraff to do whatever they please.”

“Fairy princesses?” My heart leaped forward to dance among the clouds. “Does it have princes as well? Gnomes? Trolls? Witches? And do most of the animals talk?”

Avery nodded along with each of my additions. It was just the sort of place I imagined myself visiting when I was old enough to follow in my mother’s footsteps in world travel. “I’ll help you look for it, and maybe, when your wing gets better, I could go see the kingdoms, too.”

“I don’t know about that,” he said. “It seems like such a different place than here. Besides, something strange must have happened to bring me here—there might be trouble.”

My face fell. Adults were always saying no to things, but it struck me like a kick to the shins every time it happened. The river’s roar and the scattered forest trees gave way to the houses and shops that lined the dirt road. I stepped aside for a cart and an errand boy on a bike. A few loggers walking home with empty lunch pails tipped their caps.

I had been thrown off my cloud into the evening bustle of boring old Riverside.

Avery looked me over and shook his head. “Maybe a quick peek wouldn’t hurt anything . . . if we can find it.”

We *had* to find it. Then we would be off on an adventure in no time. We would drop through a rabbit hole like Alice or fly through the stars like Peter Pan. We would fight pirates and natives and mermaids too—anything with a creepy fish tail and scales had to be a villain, no matter what that fancy new playwright said. Picturing my dramatic struggle against a mermaid, I opened the kitchen door without much thought.

Ms. Mary shrieked, dropping a spoon on the counter. “Katherine Graham. Are you trying to bring a curse down on us?”

I frowned, unsure how to respond. All the boys' talk of curses had to be nonsense, but her brown eyes widened with horror. Everyone in the kitchen had stopped their work. Even my father, who had abandoned the front desk for the night to tune up his violin, was quiet.

But then, Papa never was much for talking until pressed.

Ms. Mary formed the cross over her broad chest. "Everyone knows crows are dreadful bad luck. They're thieves and carrion eaters."

Avery shrugged his wings, giving a look as if to say "Well, someone has to do it." Still, he didn't respond. I was left to defend him alone, though I wasn't sure what "carrion" was.

"He's not. He hurt his wing. We need to help him." I turned my appeal to my father. If I widened my eyes and added a level of shrill to my voice, he was sure to give me what I wanted.

Sure enough, he stood from the barstool and put down his bowstring. "If he is hurt, helping him would be the only decent thing to do."

"Thank you, Papa." I hugged his waist. Avery squawked in protest, flapping his wings to avoid falling off my shoulder.

"Here, let me see him." My father took Avery to the counter to set his wing.

I started after him, but Ms. Mary stopped me with a firm look that brought out the creases across her black skin, frowning at the mud I had tracked through the kitchen. I had to remove my boots and stockings before I was permitted to hover, surrendering them to one of the village girls my father hired as a maid.

"He can talk too," I said, running back to Avery's side.

He didn't though. He just squawked and squawked. A stray cat came up to the door to investigate, yowling in chorus. Papa shook his head, sleeves rolled up and biting his lip. Light brown bangs shaded his squinting blue eyes.

“It’s all right, Avery. Papa is trying to help you!” I pulled on Papa’s arm so I could see, but I couldn’t blame Avery for being upset. When I fell from a tree and broke my leg, I had to see a barber and then a real physician when it became inflamed.

Neither were pleasant experiences.

“He won’t understand you,” Ms. Mary said. “Birds can’t talk.”

“That isn’t true.” My father stepped away from Avery’s freshly splinted wing, unrolling his sleeves. “There are parrots in the tropics that never shut up and crows are supposed to be right smart themselves—smart enough to make a nuisance of themselves and earn a reputation.” Papa closed the kitchen door, though it did nothing to muffle the cat’s piercing cries.

“Now, Katie, if you want to keep this bird, you are going to have to take some responsibility for him. We can’t have him pestering any of the guests.” Papa brushed back his hair and sat down as if struggling with a crippled bird had tired him out.

“Don’t worry. He’ll stay right on my shoulder.” I put my arm down and showed them how Avery stepped up on his own.

Ms. Mary made the cross again, but she didn’t say anything. Sounds of chopping and stirring refilled the room. Papa announced it was time to start serving dinner for the guests.

I hurried to assist the maids, earning a few sidelong glances as my footsteps shook the floorboards. They called me a hurricane—sometimes affectionately, sometimes not. I almost crashed into one of them while looking behind me to talk to the cobbler, and I spilled coffee when I ran to see the mayor’s wife in her new dress from Paris. A happy hurricane.

Everyone had an opinion about Avery. Some said he was sweet, but others shuddered like they would rather not see him there on my shoulder. It didn’t matter much what anyone thought, but I wondered why Avery wouldn’t do anything but squawk around them.

I took our first spare moment to ask him about it, pausing in the storage room.

“I don’t know why,” he said, “but I knew it would be a bad idea. Didn’t you notice how dumb that cat was acting when I first came in?”

I shrugged. The cat was a mangy stray, begging for scraps. It had never acted particularly bright and was far too ornery to make a good playmate.

He shuddered. “Something is dreadfully wrong with this place. I’d bet that even if I tried to speak, they wouldn’t hear it. The sooner I get back to the Four Kingdoms, the better.”

I nodded, eager to get started. But orders for more coffee, stewed mutton, and carrots piled up, and Ms. Mary called through the door, telling me to “stop dawdling” and get back to it. Eventually, the plates were set, and Papa brought out his violin, playing everything from Mozart to *Turkey in the Straw*. I spun along with the music while clearing tables. Avery squawked and I laughed, and soon it was time for me to go upstairs with my father.

“Do you think I could learn to play the violin, too?” I asked while we climbed the stairs together.

Papa sized me up with his eyes. I didn’t quite reach his shoulder, but he was so thin and tall I doubted I ever would. “Yes, I think you might be old enough,” he said. “Not tonight, though. It’s time to get you ready for bed.”

“Will you tell me about the time Mama fought the pirates?” It was one of my favorite stories, and Avery should appreciate it since it featured a parrot.

Papa frowned. “Don’t you think you are getting a little old for those stories? You’re in school now and—”

“But what’s wrong with them?” My mother left to start her adventures when I was three—nearly four years ago. Stories were the only connection I had to her. I would need them no matter

how old I got.

My father shook his head, looking away. “All right, honey. We’ll go to the rose garden and I’ll tell you whatever stories you want.”

I nodded and climbed the last few steps. We crawled out my bedroom window to the “rose garden,” a few flower pots that sat on the flat stretch of roof between the two attic rooms. They belonged to my mother. I loved to tend them so much I claimed an attic room as my own, even though those rooms traditionally went to the staff. And it was there my father would point past the train tracks to the Twin Mountains in the distance to tell me of all the adventures Mama was having beyond them.

I didn’t have many memories of my mother, but formed several of my own ideas sitting there and listening to my father’s stories. She would have long dark hair like mine, but hers would be a shiny ebony, and her cheeks would turn rosy when she laughed.

Pirates were one of the many adventures she had. She danced on stage in the great cities and stood with striking factory workers. She crossed the western plains to pan for gold and settled disputes with the natives. She sang opera, rode bulls, and fed orphans . . .

*Everyone* needed her. She couldn’t be expected to sit at home darning socks like other mothers, but I felt her love in every story Papa told. She, he would say, was the most beautiful and wonderful woman in all the land, and I was her jewel.

While my father told the pirate story, I sat up on my knees, eyes wide and gasping at all the right places. Avery hopped about the rosebushes, digging for bugs. He was still at it when the story ended, and I spied the stray cat watching from the apex of the roof. That thing had killed dozens of jaybirds. I opened my mouth to warn Avery when the cat pounced.

“Avery!” I screamed. My heart raced to my throat as the cat clawed the roof tile where

Avery had been perched. The crow had hopped away, closer to the ledge.

I scrambled after him, but Papa held me back. I stretched and pressed against his strong arms. Avery could die, and I couldn't reach him.

The cat leaped at Avery again and tumbled right off the porch roof.

I slipped from my father's hands. The cat skidded down the railing and landed in the rain barrel with a *splash*. Fur pressed down, she looked like a tabby-colored rat crawling out, but seemed unhurt otherwise. The cat sulked off a few feet, licking her misplaced fur.

My heart still sped, but both the animals were safe.

After several seconds of tense silence, my father shook his head. "That's one smart bird you found there. It reminds me of another story if you would like to hear it."

I nodded, my pulse slowing with the sound of his voice. Stories about Mama were my favorite, but fairy and animal stories were almost as good. This story featured a princess transformed into a raven, forced to do all sorts of tasks to regain her humanity.

She married a prince at the end.

"That's interesting," Avery said after my father had finished the story and wished me a good night. I snuggled up in bed, blinking back sleep. Avery sat on the windowsill.

"I know," I said. "Isn't my mother amazing?"

"No, that was a load of rubbish. You would be better off without it."

It was rude, but while rudeness wasn't tolerated in children, adults were another matter altogether. I let him continue without a word.

"I meant the other story about the raven. It doesn't sound like something that could happen here, but in the Four Kingdoms, things like that were commonplace. I've always been a crow, but I know several other animals that used to be royalty or common folk looking for

adventure.”

I nodded, thinking back over all the fairy stories I knew for the answer. “Did magic send you here? Were you cursed by somebody?”

“I don’t think so.” He paused, his eyes growing distant, giving my words their full weight. “I was flying outside the castle when I heard shouting. The wind came whirling about, and my wing was cut by something—hail, I thought at the time, but when I hit the ground I was by that river where you found me.”

I hugged my pillow close. “Don’t worry, Avery. We’ll look right after school tomorrow. We’ll find some way to send you home.”

I had said it with confidence, certain we would find something immediately. But in the coming weeks, we walked all over the area by the bridge—up the river and all around the lake—and we never found anything.

Even after Avery’s wing healed and he could fly to places I couldn’t reach.

I didn’t mind too much. I enjoyed playing in the woods with Avery. Not that he was ever pleasant company. He grumbled a lot and saw most human habits as a waste of time, from clothing to eating utensils. When I practiced on my father’s violin, Avery squawked all the way through it. He said that “If humans were meant to be songbirds, they would have been born with feathers.”

But the very thought that he followed and talked to only me made me feel like I had an important secret. I had given Shay his pie; Avery was fully mine, and an unspoken part of me wanted to keep it that way.

We searched every day as part of our routine. Then, on days when the train came in, we

walked by the track on the way home. That way, we could greet guests and carry their bags to the hotel. I always volunteered for this task, daring to hope one of the guests coming off the rail would be my mother, as anxious to see me again as I was to meet her.

Her adventures were important, but lately . . . it just seemed a quick visit every now and again shouldn't be that much to ask. I knew Papa wanted her back too. I caught him sulking at the front desk more than once. He would get a long vacant look in his eye, then sneak out to spend the rest of the night with Shay's father and a bottle of beer.

A dog barked somewhere while we waited for the train, but Avery didn't move from my shoulder. "All these animals are completely brainless," he said. "And you know, sometimes it's hard for me to keep my thoughts together, even with you. Do you think if I stay here too long, I'll get to be like them?"

"Of course not. I'll always talk to you." I hugged myself against the wind, watching as a few passengers trickled out of the passenger car. A line of boots squished through the mud and slush. Women, men, and a few children passed. Mama wasn't among them, but the mayor's wife led one of her gray-haired relations to see me.

"She's a dear," the mayor's wife said with her arm on the older woman's shoulder, "and I would put her up in a heartbeat, but with the wedding coming, it's getting crowded at my house. It would be better if we get a room for her at the hotel."

I curtsied and took the trunk the way Ms. Mary taught me, though it was at least half my size. I tugged and pushed and dragged the luggage across the ground, but waved away hands that offered to help me. As we walked, Avery flew ahead, and the mayor's wife's relation continued to gush—now about how helpful and polite I was, declaring my parents to be the luckiest and proudest in town.

I nodded, well-used to that kind of praise. “And when I get older, I’m going to be like my mother. She helps people and has adventures all over the world.”

“Isn’t she wonderful?” the mayor’s wife asked, hand near her chest as if I had said something unbelievably precious. She turned to speak to the other woman over my head. “Her mother died four or five years ago, but she’s the sweetest child there is.”

I stopped mid-step. The evening bustle—boys arguing, a dog barking, the whistle of the train—faded to the sound of my own breath. My world of clouds, mermaids, and princes crashed before my eyes. The headless crowd trampled them under their feet, each step a steady blow to my heart. The images of their mangled corpses faded, evaporating into dust.

The mayor’s wife put a hand on my shoulder, not seeming to notice how still I had become. “It is a lovely thought: your mother having adventures, watching over you. You must be such a comfort to your father, and such a hard worker, too.”

She took another step, and I followed like a wooden toy on a string. No tears formed yet, but the words took residence in my head, pushing out all other thoughts.

Mama was dead.

Though I had never considered such a possibility before, it had to be true. The woman had no reason to lie, and though I had looked for my mother at the train, such exercises had become as routine as looking for Avery’s Four Kingdoms. I never expected to see her. Not really.

My father’s version of things never made much sense, but questioning his stories tore at the fabric of my life’s experience, unraveling everything else around me. I needed some other idea to replace them, a plausible alternative, which I now had.

My father had lied. My mother was dead, and she was never coming back.

I got all the way to the porch where Papa sat on the bench in his coat and cap. He stood

with a wide smile for our guest. As far as he was concerned, it must have seemed another day, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't continue the charade.

He had lied to me. Not just once, but dozens of times, and I was a fool for believing him.

I dropped the trunk on the stoop and ran.

The trunk burst open, flinging petticoats and stockings into the mud. Both the women gasped and scattered like spooked dairy cows.

“Katie!” Papa fumbled over the fallen trunk, but I wouldn't stop. Not for anything.

I ran with my hands stretched out, crying so hard I could barely find my way through the snow—seeing nothing but a dark blur. A horse reared, and a carriage driver swore at me. I bumped a dozen people on the road and tripped just as often. My knees throbbed. Ash-stained slush soaked through my stockings and skirt, chilling my skin.

Somehow, I found my way to the old brick church. The town's graveyard stood out back, snow piled all about. I rushed around wiping the flakes off the top of gravestones, looking for the right combination of letters. I never had much interest in reading the names before and barely knew my letters well enough to make it worth the effort, but I knew enough for what I wanted now.

On the third gravestone, I found an E followed by an L and an I. My hand trembled as the rest of the snow fell away to reveal the whole line.

Mama's name: Elizabeth Graham.

I sank next to the stone. Silent, chilled tears stung my cheeks.

Avery caught up first, landing on the gravestone. “Oh, Katie, I'm sorry. I was worried this would happen.”

“You knew?”

“I didn’t *know*, but I suspected. Anyway, it wasn’t my place to tell you. It was—”

Avery resorted to a few loud squawks as my father stumbled into the graveyard.

“Honey, I have to tell you something.” Papa had his hat in hand and snow mixed in with his thinning brown hair.

I wiped my face with my mitten, scratching at my throbbing eyes. “I already know. Mama’s dead.” My lips trembled with grief and cold. “Avery told me. You lied. Why would you lie?”

He dropped next to me, trying to hold me, but I pulled away.

I had to know the truth. Now.

Papa sighed. “I don’t know how to explain it, Katie. I guess we could try to use Avery as an example. I know you like to pretend that he can talk—”

“But he *can* talk,” I said. Avery squawked as if to prove it. The rest might have been stories, but I had heard that much for myself.

“Sure, he can make some interesting impressions, but no bird can talk like we can, even if we would like to imagine otherwise. That’s what I did too. I tried to pretend things were different because I didn’t like what the truth was.”

He paused, and I looked up at him, my eyes wide and desperate to hear the rest.

“I knew the day I met your mother that she wasn’t healthy, but I kept telling myself I could marry her and make her happy—rescue her from herself.”

He shook his head, wringing his hat like a gnarly dishrag. “I spent all my time trying to please her, but it wasn’t enough. It was never enough. And when she fell, you were so little that the only way I knew how to explain it was that she had gone on a trip. But you kept believing it, and I put off telling you because I knew it would be harder when you learned what really

happened, and I wanted to protect you . . .”

Father had more to say after that, but I struggled to follow it all. It wasn't until years later, piecing through bits of scattered gossip, that I really understood.

My father was from a respectable southern family, but my mother was a part-native daughter of a fur trader. Father had married her against the recommendations of his family, in what others said was a great bout of “chivalry” and “sentimental foolishness” as she didn't have much to offer him in return. Not even a pleasant disposition half the time.

Still, they married and came here to take over the hotel. Everything worked out well for a time. Everyone was taken by my father, but my mother kept to herself and eventually turned up missing. They found her body in the river when the ice finally melted.

Everyone knew it had to be suicide, that she threw herself over the bridge and sank under the ice. Some had argued against burying her in the church graveyard because of the ungodliness of her chosen method of departure. No one could prove it wasn't an accident though, so the minister brushed over the matter out of respect for my father.

But no one could change the fact that she had abandoned me. I understood that even then, and didn't believe it when Father continued to say Mother loved me as he did.

It didn't make sense. If she loved me, why would she leave me? Why would she *choose* to leave me? What about my father? Didn't she care for him at all?

He was fooling himself then, even if he could not fool me. My mother was a selfish, heartless woman who had not cared a whit for either of us.

As the night grew colder in the graveyard, I let my father carry me home, but we never talked about Mother again.

And Avery stopped talking altogether.

### Chapter 3

All the mourning my father once did in secret, he now did in the open. He drank most nights and slept in most mornings. He didn't play the violin anymore, and my lessons fell to the wayside. Along with the gossip about my mother, it wasn't long until more pressing rumors formed about the hotel losing money. Both of our maids left to seek their fortune elsewhere.

"I can't say I blame them." Ms. Mary passed me a dish to dry while we were both holed up in the kitchen. "Business has been a bit rough, and your pa has been slow about paying."

"Will you go, too?" I tried to keep a straight face, but my voice quivered. I never cared for her stern company before, but I tired of changes, and she was one of the few people I trusted now. She and the silent crow on the windowsill were my only companions.

Ms. Mary paused for so long I ached inside, but then she shook her head. "I've lived here even before your father came and bought the place. My husband's gone on, and my kids are all grown. I'm not about to go running after some new adventure, assuming I still have a bed here. But the way I heard it, your pa may be selling the place. You see that man?"

She pointed out past the serving bar into the dining hall. One of our few guests ate alone at a round table. "His name is Stephen Porter," she said. "He's got big plans for the city and is here to buy up some of the older shops. He might take this place too, and your pa might be wise to sell to him while he has the chance."

The man had a goatee and a highly starched suit. He was sipping tea right now, but I imagined him rubbing his hands together and cackling over our misfortune as soon as our backs were turned. An evil, money-obsessed lord from one of my father's old stories, intent on throwing us all out into the snow. Then I truly would have nothing.

I shuddered, but set my face boldly when I looked to Ms. Mary. "But if I made the hotel

do well again, we wouldn't have to sell, and you would stay?"

"That would take a lot of work for such a little girl."

I stood up as tall as I could. "I'm big enough. Just show me what to do." I couldn't fix my father or bring my mother back, but I wouldn't allow the hotel to be snatched up from under us.

Ms. Mary eventually agreed. Under her direction, I took over the jobs of both of our former maids and did them better than either of them. I ran errands, took inventory, and peeked glances at the accounts, fully taking over the desk when my father was absent.

But I let my mother's flowers die. Every time I scoured a pot or beat the long rug in the main hall, I thought about her until the rage consumed me.

As for Avery, he remained the smartest bird I had ever seen. He was meticulously clean and listened to all my commands. Though he didn't always obey, he found ways to let me know he had at least understood. Sometimes I swore his squawking was a well-thought-out rant, but he was a bird, and birds didn't talk.

My seventh birthday passed without any notice. Slowly we scraped by until Mr. Porter moved on, and my father came out of his stupor, at least in part. "You haven't been going to school or Sunday service." He said it like he had just noticed even though it had been months and months.

I fiddled with the hem of my skirt. "Oh, they're not important, and we've been doing *so* much better—"

"Well, it stops now. Your grandparents didn't cross oceans for you to grow up ignorant. I can watch the desk well enough alone," he said.

Through the next few weeks, he proved his resolve. He literally chased me away if he caught me near the desk and escorted me to school or chapel to make sure I went. Avery came

too, either flying beside me or waiting in the rafters, looking just as firm.

Though I complained at first, neither of these activities were as bad as I had remembered. Compared to my work at home, reciting verses or counting sums was easy, and it was a relief to sit long enough to hear a few of my own thoughts.

Then I came home one day, and Father sat tuning his violin. “It’s been awhile since I brought this out. Didn’t I promise to teach you how to play?”

I nodded, scarcely able to believe it. Had I done enough? Was it really over? Had I saved the hotel, and would my father smile and spin me around like he used to?

“Go help Mary. We’ll start right after dinner.”

I dashed off, daring to hope that things would return to the way they used to be.

My first task was to take the guests’ orders. More coffee. More stewed mutton. More carrots. There would be nothing new until spring. Winter ice tinted the windows and stopped the train for the season. Most of the customers were long-term boarders or locals coming in for company and a hot meal from a place slightly more wholesome than the tavern. I tried to get through the orders quickly, but everyone wanted to steal my attention with small talk.

I tapped my foot. They were wasting time. I was going to play the violin, the hotel would be as magical as it once was, and nothing else mattered.

“Katie, how are you and Avery?” asked the seamstress. She was a plain towheaded woman who made up for it with frills, rouge, and a pleasant smile. She usually sat with a gaggle of other spinsters, but she had come alone that night.

“Fine.” I looked around to see if there was anyone else in the dining hall I had missed. Avery, who sat on my shoulder, completely ignored her. Even when I thought he could talk, Avery had no patience for women whose reactions to his presence ranged from baby talk to

swinging brooms.

“And your father?” she asked next. “How is Christian?”

“Um . . . Why don’t you ask him? He’s right there.” I pointed to where my father fiddled with his violin. Father wasn’t a big talker either, but more patient.

“Oh, I don’t want to bother him.” Her cheeks went pink. “That is, unless you’re sure he won’t mind.”

I smiled—that was all the encouragement it took. She turned her chair toward my father, freeing me to run to the kitchen. Pots and pans clanked in a merry rhythm. Whistling with Avery, I filled my tray full of plates and hot mugs.

“What’s got into you, girl?” Ms. Mary’s hands rested on her wide hips like she expected some conspiracy. It was the best kind of conspiracy—everything would be better after tonight.

“Papa’s going to play. Then he is going to let me try.”

Though her posture remained firm, her brown eyes brightened. Ms. Mary quickened her pace and helped me load up my tray. “You best get these plates out, then.”

I dashed out of the kitchen so fast that Avery lost his perch, flying to keep up with me. Father played a jig on his violin while I ran back and forth several more times to keep the guests happy, taking any spare moment to spin to the music like I used to. I was a hurricane, one who had never learned any proper dancing steps, but maybe I could learn.

Maybe I could be a graceful hurricane.

We weren’t a tavern or even a proper restaurant. I only served for an hour or so before I looked to my father, trying to gauge if he was slowing down at all. I almost dropped my full tray when I saw it—him twirling with his violin and that seamstress dancing around him like she belonged there. Father wore a smile and a laugh I hadn’t seen all year, the sight I had longed for.

But now the smile wasn't for me. It was for her.

I walked over, staring at them like a cat whose milk saucer had been stolen. I only meant for her to talk to my father for a moment! Not take my father's attention away entirely.

"Katie, there you are," Father said when the song ended. "You know Jenna, right?"

Of course I knew her. At least, she came to the hotel to gossip enough for me to recognize her face. If I had been pressed for her name earlier, I might have come up with it, but more likely would have mixed it up with half a dozen other girls in town. She was a seamstress and a guest and nothing more. But then, that would have been rude to say, so I simply nodded.

"Yes, Katie and I are old friends," Jenna answered for me. "Though, Christian, I never noticed, but Katie looks so much like you."

Father paled, and it was no wonder. My lack of height, rounded cheekbones, and darker coloring spoke more of my mother, but again, that would have been rude to say.

"Pa—" I tried, desperate to send this interloper away with the wild strength of my mother's native ancestors.

"Yes. I promised I would help you with your lessons." He held out his violin. "Here, why don't you play your song for Jenna?"

"That would be lovely." She sat back in her chair to watch.

I didn't take the violin, staring at my blurred reflection in the glossy red wood. I only remembered one song from my old lessons, a silly elementary piece about a star. I would have played it for my father alone, but I couldn't play it here in front of everyone. Especially not Jenna.

The wild army in my chest sounded an immediate retreat. "I can't play tonight."

"Why not?" Father asked.

My face burned bright as I searched for some workable excuse.

“Oh, are you sick, sweetie?” Jenna’s voice dripped with so much syrup that anyone would have thought I was five years younger. She probably wanted me to go so she could have my father to herself, but I nodded anyway.

“Yes. My stomach hurts.” I wrapped my arms around my waist for emphasis. “Maybe I should go to bed.”

My father frowned, but he didn’t press me. “All right, let Mary take you up.”

“Yes, and I’ll help your father clean up here.” Jenna sounded so eager that a chill went up my spine, but I ran off just the same. I came into the kitchen and bumped into a stool.

“What’s the trouble?” Ms. Mary asked after me. “Has some spirit possessed you?”

“Just look.” I pointed into the dining room, my finger trembling. “He’s with that *girl*.” I had already forgotten her proper name, but formed several new ones for her. Temptress instead of seamstress and other names I had picked up on the street but never dared say aloud.

Ms. Mary nodded with her arms crossed. I had expected a small measure of sympathy, but if anything, she seemed pleased. “It’s about time. That girl has been making calf eyes at your father since he first came here. Mind, she was perfectly respectable about it, but it’s been a good long while since your mother passed, and he needs someone. Men don’t do well alone.”

“He isn’t alone. He has *me*.”

“Yes, but that’s different. You’ll understand one day.” She dismissed me with a brush of her hand, but I didn’t want to understand. Not “one day,” not ever.

How could the same man who once would have crossed shark-and-mermaid-infested oceans to make me happy barely notice my distress? Reduced to watching them converse from shadowed corners, I was completely forgotten.

Abandoned, once again.

## Chapter 4

Dreams of my past could only last so long. Since then, ten years and one long drop from a bridge had followed. But nothing hurt anymore—not any place the ice had struck. Warmth brushed my skin, and light shined out behind my closed eyelids. Not a wholly significant light. Just a gentle indication that daylight waited for me if I chose to look.

I kept my eyes closed at first, reaching out with my other senses and bracing myself for more pain. None came. Only the sound of my own breath, bringing in the smell of rain and fresh-cut flowers. I breathed real air again. All that trouble, and I was waking up in bed like nothing had happened. I wanted to be angry at the wasted effort, but I was glad—relieved that the terror of the previous night had ended. I might be a coward, but I couldn't face that again.

I surrendered myself to whatever stood before me, opening my eyes.

I lay in a bed, but not my own, engulfed by pink and white lace. Rosewood cabinets and shelves flanked the walls. Doilies, vases full of poppies, and porcelain knick-knacks crowded every surface in the room. Some of the trinkets were too foreign for me to identify, but most were animal figurines.

I blinked at a sudden movement from what I had assumed to be more porcelain. A cat stepped off a wicker chair with a stretch and a yawn. Then it slipped past the door—already opened a crack but not enough for me to see what was beyond it.

Where was I? I sat up tentatively. My head spun, but I managed it by moving slowly. I looked to the side window. Green leaves of a budding plant flooded in through the open window.

The door creaked behind me. “Darling. You're awake,” said a childish voice.

I turned, half-expecting a doting gray widow based on the room's unique décor. Instead, a girl inches shorter than myself stood at the door. Red ringlets under a wide sunbonnet framed the

freckles on her nose. Her figure had the unlikely perfection of a doll, slender with curves, but she had dark creases about her eyes I usually associated with someone far older.

“Who are you?” I asked. “Where is this place?”

She smiled over my distress. “You may call me Ivy, and this is my home, of course.” She pointed out the window toward the garden. “I found you tangled up in the rose bush near the river. I was so worried.” Her hands went near her face for a dramatic shudder. She sank into the chair the cat had left open, the hoop of her skirt flaring out. “The river isn’t a safe place for young girls to play.”

“Playing? I was trying to kill myself.” Of that much I was certain.

She clicked her tongue. “Sweetie, you shouldn’t use such harsh words. You know you don’t mean them. You’re a young girl. How would you know what harm a river could do?”

“Of course I knew.” I fought a sudden urge to laugh, though it wasn’t funny. Just absurd. “What kind of place is this? Am I . . . in heaven?” None of my lessons in theology included an eccentric girl in a cottage with scores of knick-knacks and a cat, but it was all so odd that I didn’t know what else to think.

I had wanted a fantasy, but expected death. And now—where in all damnation was I?

When Ivy laughed, her eyes creased into crescents. “If you like. I certainly will do my best to make it pleasant for you.” She leaned in. “Would you like to tell me your name? It’s only proper if you’re to be my guest.”

I moved to the opposite edge of the bed. “Katherine Graham. Katie, really.” The room seemed to spin again, so I stopped there, resting my head on my hand. “I must’ve drifted downstream or something. *Far* downstream. Do you know where Riverside is?”

Ivy shrugged and stood from the chair. “I took you from the river, but you are not to go

back there. At least not until you have something to eat. I love having guests so much. Usually, it's just me and my animals. And to have a real human girl here? I never would have dreamed."

She reached for an arm to help me up, and I let her drag me to the next room—I didn't know what else to do. A tortoise crawled underfoot. Birds, dogs, squirrels, and other small rodents sat among the dishes and embroidered kitchen towels. A reindeer stuck its head through an open window along with even more flowers twisting in from outside.

Obviously, she collected much more than cats and knick-knacks.

Still, there were no harsh smells, droppings, or even too much noise. The animals stood there, as much in the background as the furniture.

"Are they all yours?" I had given up trying to count them all.

Ivy blinked as if noticing their large number for the first time. "Well, yes, I suppose so. They all live with me or out in the garden. Dalif got here just before you did." She pointed to the reindeer at the window. "He's hurt his leg, so I'm hoping he'll stay until it's better."

"Must be a lot of work." I kept my tone neutral, though my heart beat fast. I sank into a chair recently vacated by a ferret and a salamander. My feet wouldn't have held me much longer.

She shrugged. "I like to take care of them. I get lonely out here."

Ivy moved to set the table, briskly rinsing teacups after shooing away some nesting white mice. She set down nuts, cheese, bread, and berries in front of us. The animals lined up and dug into their plates face-first. That was a relief. If the mice had raised their teacups with their pinkie fingers extended, my heart would have rioted. In all my previous wishes for adventure, I had never once hoped to join the Mad Hatter for tea.

Ivy sat next to me, but she made no move to eat, turning so her knees touched mine. "I'm so pleased to have you here. I finished a new dress for you. I hope you don't mind, but yours

may be past repair, and it was so much fun to design something for someone other than myself. You would look heavenly in pink. My hair is too red, so I can hardly wear it myself.” She gestured to her turquoise ribbon-and-lace-covered top, as if looking for my approval.

I forced a polite smile, but I wasn’t used to such attention. It made me feel like the teacher had called on me, the whole class staring, and I didn’t know how to answer. Especially when she started pulling at my braid like it belonged to her.

“You know, your hair is really beautiful. You should wear it down.”

After the river and laying in bed, my braid was a tangled mess, but that didn’t mean I wanted her touching it. I pulled away. “I can brush it myself.”

“I’m sure you can, dear. But did you ever think how nice it would be for someone to take care of you for a change? To push aside your worries to someone else for a little while? Someone who loves you?”

I squinted at her. “I barely know you.”

“But I know you. Or at least, I’ve seen several cases like yours. You had to grow up too fast, didn’t you? It happens all the time, but you can stay here all you want. Here in the spring of life.”

Then it hit me. Her name was Ivy. “Like the Spring Fairy, the princess.” Where had I heard that before? I wanted to say it was from Avery, but it had to have been my father or stepmother. I shook my head. Either way, she was a fantasy and couldn’t be here in the flesh. “That’s impossible.”

Her smile grew smug. “Some here would say you were quite impossible. A real human girl, why everyone will want to get their hands on you. But don’t worry, I’ll keep you safe. That’s what I do best.”

“But how can you be a fairy? You don’t even have any wings.” Several more objections came to me as my father and stepmother had always described fairies as kin to fireflies—small, winged, and glowing.

“I don’t need wings to fly.” She sighed, like one in grieving. “At least, I didn’t use to. My powers aren’t what they once were.”

She handed a cup to me, but I put it down. I wasn’t hungry or thirsty enough to be concerned with it, especially now. I pushed away from the table.

“Prove it then. Prove you’re a fairy.”

She gave me a look like a child asking a parent “must I?” I half-worried something awful might happen if I upset her, but I didn’t recant.

She held up a poppy from its vase. “Well, here’s something easy.” Though cut from its roots, the stem lengthened, and all the buds bloomed before my eyes.

Magic. But it couldn’t be. I took short breaths without filling my lungs.

“There,” she said, handing the flower to me. “You might have noticed, but animals and plants tend to be attracted to me. I do what I can to help them along.”

Dropping the flower, I opened my mouth again. She held me off with an outstretched hand.

“I can answer whatever questions you want, but it really would be better if you got something down first. Please drink.” She handed me back my china teacup full of a bright yellow juice.

I stared. “What is it?”

“Poppy.” She pointed back to the fallen flower. “It chases away the darkness. Please, just drink. It will make you feel better.”

She took a sip from her own cup, waiting for me to do the same.

The whole cottage waited. All the animals watched me, unnaturally still. Their eyes tunneled into me, marking me as the single hold out to their evening ritual. This place had a surreal peace I couldn't breach with my words and tightened fists.

If this drink was supposed to make everything seem calm and peaceful again, it had to be stronger than anything brewed in Riverside, but I was desperate for it to work.

I drank and didn't care what it held.

After I swallowed the dense, tasteless pulp, the animals still stared. The discarded poppy still bloomed on the floor. Nothing changed, but the table blurred in front of me. It took all my focus to put the cup back down without knocking it over.

That was wrong. I should want to see straight, but I wasn't too worried about it.

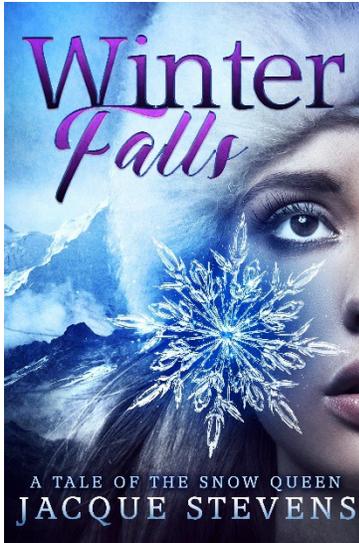
A light airiness filled my chest. I looked up at Ivy again, letting my expression mirror the animals' blank faces. What would we do now?

Ivy smiled. "Now that's better. You look so much more relaxed." She brushed my hair again, and I didn't pull away. "Just tell me of your troubles child, and I will see that they never bother you again."

My tongue thickened, but I wanted to tell her. Nothing had changed in the room, but my questions faded. I didn't need to know the answers. However it had happened, Ivy was here. She was a fairy princess and could keep me safe. She could be the devoted, unfailing parent I had longed for, and I could be a child again—the favored child. Never forgotten. Never lost. The only thing that mattered, the only thought I had, was to please her in return.

Even if it meant revealing things I would rather have remained buried.

\* \* \*



Thank you for reading this sample of Winter Falls. If you enjoyed the sample, you can find the rest of the story on [Amazon](#).

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## About the Author:

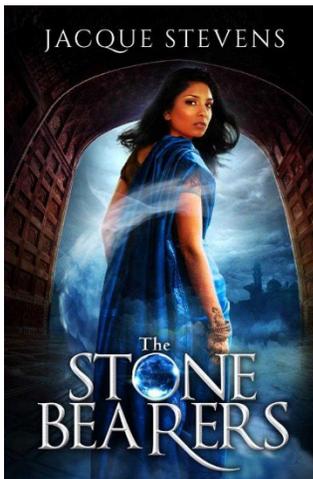


Jacque Stevens wrote her first novel as a stress relief activity during nursing school. Now as a fulltime nurse working in mental and developmental health, she continues to write stories filled with elves, fairies, and all things awesome. She lives in Utah so yes, she does have a huge extended family and occasionally eats green jello, but she does not yet own a minivan.

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[sjacquebooks.com](http://sjacquebooks.com).

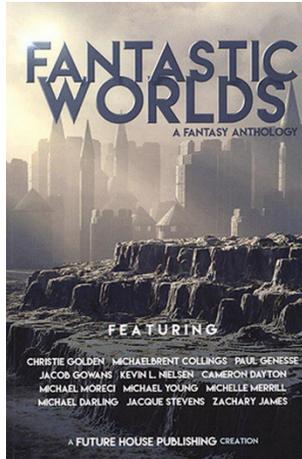
## Other Works by Jacque Stevens:



The Stone Bearers (2016)

To change her fate, 15yo Ashira releases a snarky djinni that could grant her every wish or trigger her destruction.

[Available on Amazon](#)



The Frog's Princess: a Stone Bearers short story included in The Fantastic Worlds Anthology (2016) and given free to newsletter subscribers at my website at [sjacquebooks.com](http://sjacquebooks.com).

[Available on Amazon](https://www.amazon.com)