

Maagy's heart pounded faster as she descended the stairs. She stayed in shadows and crept along the wall to the back staircase, which led down the north side of the palace where McTavish was waiting. Her excitement grew as she hurried along the dark corridors. She began to sweat under the layers of wool and fur. Finally, she reached the bottom and stopped to make sure the way was clear. One last dash across the hallway and she was at the service entrance, which opened to a road mostly used for delivery. She put on the coat, hat and gloves, and quietly unbolted the door, giving it a gentle push. A blast of frigid air hit her face. The wind whipped wildly and the door almost swung out of her hand. She was able to hold on... preventing it from crashing against the wall... and wrestled it closed without a sound. She breathed a sigh of relief, but almost lost her breath when she looked toward the road and saw no sleigh or diminutive driver. Her mind raced. Had she dreamt it all? Was she standing in the frigid night air for nothing?

"Psst... Psst, Princess Maagy. Here we are... down the hill."

Her heart quickened again, as she realized it had not been a dream. She was embarking upon a secret mission to save Krispen.

"Coming," she said. "I'm coming!"

She crunched through the snow and slipped and slid on ice all the way to the sleigh. She could hardly believe her eyes when she saw it gleaming in the moonlight. It was solid black with gold trim and comfy red velvet seats that were more like elegant couches than carriage benches. She recognized the two horses harnessed to the sleigh. One was dear old Parker whom she had worked so hard to rehabilitate after the barn fire that past summer. The other was Primrose, a big strawberry roan mare, who often pulled the small carriage to Berryville when Grandma Polly and she went on their shopping trips. Both horses were wrapped in the warmest fur blankets and their feet were protected from the bitter cold by fur-lined suede boots that came to their knees. They looked like huge wooly mammoths in the moonlight.

"Parker, Primrose!" She exclaimed, as she went to them with hugs and pats. "It's so good to see you. If I'd known you two were here I'd have brought you an apple."

"Princess Maagy, we must be off. The hour is gettin' late, and we have a long journey ahead of us."

"Of course, Sir... right away."

She climbed onto the seat next to him, and he threw a large fur cover over her knees.

"Bundle up, dear lass. It promises to get even colder where we are goin'. Gee! Get up there team! Take it home!"

He turned the horses and sleigh round and started down the mountain. The narrow, slippery road leading from the back of the palace wound down along the top of steep rocky cliffs, which dropped off... hundreds of feet... on either side. Somehow, huge trees managed to grow

out of them, giving cover to those who might try to attack. It was an arduous and dangerous path usually only traveled on horseback in daylight, rather than by carriage... or sleigh... and *never* at night... *in winter*. She had heard her father say it was the only vulnerable access point to Avington, but had not understood what that meant until that moment. Then something very disturbing occurred to her.

“McTavish... how did you get through the back gate?”

“Pardon me, Yer Highness?” He whispered, just as they approached the wide-open portal.

“These gates are always... I mean *always*... closed... *locked*... and heavily guarded. How did you get in?”

“I... drove through...” he said, not committing to too much detail.

“But... *how*?”

“They... were... open... when I got here...” again, intentionally vague.

“That cannot be,” she whispered, almost to herself.

She began to panic. Her body tightened. Her mouth went dry. Chills and sweat broke out... *at the same time*. She looked from side to side, as her breathing got more rapid and shallower.

“It is *all* good, Yer Highness.”

“But... the guards... how did you get past them? Where are they? I don’t see them!”

“I believe... they might be... takin’ a short nap...”

“Oh good heavens! A nap! If Father... finds out... they were... sleeping on their watch... he’ll have them... beheaded!”

“Then... Princess Maagy... perhaps... ya should not tell him. I can assure ya... I swear upon me own life... which I am rather fond of... there is no cause for alarm. No nefarious* persons have entered the castle walls. The gates will close as soon as we are through them, and the guards will be wide awake and at their posts... *none the wiser*.”

“How do you know this?”

“Ya must not ask questions I cannot answer... Yer Highness.”