



CHAPTER 1

He'd been watching them for over a week. That was part of the fun. The woman, June, lifted the small bag of groceries from the back seat of the blue Buick Century and closed the door with an arthritic hip. William, her husband, hurried down the front steps of the covered porch to help. Well into their eighties, it was plain to see the couple was still very much in love. It would be best for them to die together. Almost too good for them, considering what they had done to him, the hell they had created in his life.

It was a modest home, hedges meticulously trimmed and window boxes overflowing with flowers. Set in a quiet, mature neighborhood of starter homes, the streets lined with huge old oaks and maples. He wondered how the old couple would face their final moments.

Zachary put the car in drive and edged slowly out onto the narrow street, moving past the house without looking at it. He stayed away for two hours, driving around, stopping at the Applebee's on the corner of Larch and Colonial, about sixty miles away, for a cup of strong black coffee and a piece of blueberry pie. He wore a suit today, white shirt, button down collar, navy blue jacket and pants, penny loafers polished to a high shine, his face buried in the *Wall Street Journal*. Before two p.m. June and William Sanderson would be dead.

Bill wanted to show her the progress on his latest project. June followed him down the narrow stairs to the basement where florescent lights hummed and the blade of the circular saw glowed dimly. This was his cave, she thought affectionately, and he loved it here as much as she loved the little room upstairs where she read books and played solitaire on the computer her son and daughter-in-law had bought her for her 80th birthday, now six years ago. She felt grateful they were both still healthy enough to enjoy these simple pleasures.

The bookcase was coming along nicely. The largest and most ambitious piece Bill had attempted, it was spectacular, with its tiered moldings and cherry wood edges. Someday, when she and Bill were gone, it would be passed down to their grandson Jordan and, later, to his children. It felt good to know, that long after they passed away, she and Bill would be a part of lives to come.

"It's beautiful," she said, caressing the smooth wood surface with the tip of a gnarled finger.

He beamed. "I think it might just be one of my best." His hand joined hers on the wood and he laid his palm flat against the surface.

"You've done a lot today. It looks nearly finished," June said, marveling at the way the thing had taken shape once he began assembling the separate pieces.

"It's that way every time," he mused. "I seem to turn some invisible corner and once that happens, the process glides along by itself."

She wrapped her arms around his neck, pulled him down to her stooped five foot two inch frame and kissed his bristly cheek. Even after all these years, she thrilled a little when he didn't shave. At eighty-eight, he maintained the rugged handsomeness that had attracted her to him at the tender age of 17. He cupped her chin in his hand. Upstairs, the doorbell rang.

Scarlett meandered along the edge of the brook, pausing now and then to clean between her toes, chewing out the little pebbles that caught there in the tufts of white fluffy fur. She was in no hurry to get home, though she loved it in her cozy burrow. The day was simply too glorious to stay inside. Daintily, she dipped a fuzzy forepaw into the cold shallow water and brought it to her face, where she scrubbed the bridge of her nose and rubbed her heavy-lidded brown eyes.

"Scarlett, hello," came a gurgling welcome.

She turned and looked upstream toward the sound of her friend's voice. Thomas Tealeaf, a frog, was floating lazily toward her along the shallow surface of the water, letting the current carry him over shiny rocks and moss-covered riverbed.

"Thomas," she called as he joined her on the shore. "It's good to see you. You are enjoying the cool springs?"

"Nothing like it," he said, giving her a wide, watery smile. "Are you ready for the party tomorrow?"

"I am ready, yes," she said, twitching her long ears against the bee that had begun buzzing around them.

"Do you need help with food or anything?" He asked.

"I think I have things under control. The date did sort of sneak up on me though. I can't believe it's already late August."

"It is wonderful of you to give us a sending off," Thomas said. "Soon, Fielding and I and all the rest will be hibernating and then it will be six long months before we see one another again."

"The winter is long when you miss someone," she said, coming close and bending low to nuzzle him with a pink nose. "You're lucky you get to sleep through it."

Thomas blushed and his bulgy green eyes filled with tears. He sniffed and lowered his eyes, bashful, as she bumped him again with her furry head. "I always get emotional this time of year."

“Well, you’re allowed to cry a little at the party, but only a little. We’re going to be having too much fun for sad faces to prevail. Just wait and see.”

Scarlett pictured her cozy burrow filled with his friends and hers, mice and squirrels, chipmunks, toads, other frogs like himself, Mistress Chubbs the cat, and of course, rabbits. Even the hummingbirds, Eustace and Godiva would be there, before heading to Mexico for the winter season.

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One more snuggle and she hopped away in the direction of her burrow. Thomas watched after her and wondered again at the mystery that surrounded his good friend. Scarlett was an enchanted rabbit. At two feet tall and a solid forty pounds, she was vastly larger than any of the other rabbits in the forest.

Scarlett’s dreams and prophetic visions had saved the day many times over. She could sometimes read minds, but being a very polite rabbit, never did so unless it was an emergency. Thomas didn’t know how she had come to be or what her greater purpose was in The Enchanted Forest. He only knew he loved her.

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Elizabeth sketched a rough outline of the giant rabbit that was currently taking up most of the space in her head. Dagny Ann, the scruffy white poodle mix and Beth’s constant companion, lay curled in the little bed at the base of the easel. Lena watched unobserved from the doorway.

Beth worked quickly and in an absorbed way that Lena appreciated. Her daughter, she decided, looked her most beautiful at moments like this, her dark eyes serene, her lips parted, a faint blush visible beneath the olive skin of her high cheekbones.

Pushing a hand through her short dark hair, Beth shifted on the stool. She couldn’t draw the rabbit fast

enough, her mother knew. It was often like this. The animals, the forest floor, the trees, and streams, hummed with life beneath the stroke of her pencil.

Finishing the outline, she sketched in the barest of details before looking up to see her mother in the doorway. "Hi Mom," she said as she laid the pencil in the groove of the easel and stood, easing back.

"Hi yourself," Lena said, smiling. Dagny, roused from sleep, ran to her, tail wagging. Lena bent slowly and scratched the little dog's head. "You've been in here for hours. I thought you might like a break."

"Have I?" Beth squinted at her watch. "Wow, I had no idea. It's almost 5:00 pm."

"You never do," Lena replied, smiling as she wheeled deeper into the room. "May I see what you've done today?"

Beth stepped away from the canvas. Her mother studied the drawing in progress. Of all her daughter's creations, Scarlett was Lena's favorite. The rabbit had such kind, wise eyes, and soft, thick gray-brown fur that tufted out at the knees and between the big bunny toes. The burrow, a dark cavernous space behind the animal, promised something enchanted within its circuitous depths. Beth had drawn a little frog at the feet of the rabbit to show the exaggerated size of the gentle beast.

"Of all your characters, I love Scarlett the best," Lena said as Beth bent to kiss her cheek.

Lena turned her wheelchair deftly to the right, making her way to the table beneath a series of long windows at the back of the studio. "Let's see what else you've done today."

"Oh, Bethie," she exclaimed, clapping her hands together like a delighted child. "They're spectacular, every one of them. I can't wait to see what happens at the party."

Dagny leapt onto Lena's lap and stood, planting two tiny front paws on the older woman's sunken chest.

Her whole body wriggling, she looked intently into Lena's eyes and dove in to lick her face. Lena laughed and wrapped thin arms around the dog, hugging her close. "You're such a little love and you've been so good to let your mommy ignore you all afternoon."

"No more, I'm sure. Her bladder is probably ready to burst and she needs to run a bit before dinner. Do you want to go to the park with us?"

"No, I think I'll stay here and get dinner ready. You girls will be hungry when you get home."

"You're sure, mom? Summer won't last much longer and it looks beautiful out there now."

Lena shook her head and smiled up at her pretty daughter. "You go on. I'll have time yet before the snow flies."

"It's really no trouble to get you into the van, especially now that we have the lift. I feel like I've hardly seen you today."

"Well, that's what you get when you spend the day in an enchanted forest. You'll see me when you get home and you can tell me all about the story then."

Beth shrugged, planted her hands on her narrow hips and shook her head as she looked down at her mother. Leaning in, she kissed Lena's cheek.

**Thank you for reading an excerpt of
Dragon Sleep, by M.J. Simon.**

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