

The World of Lies

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Prologue – The Box

The box was too short. That was the first thing Chloe thought when she saw it. For a moment she was light-headed with relief. It couldn't possibly be her mother in there. Her mother was tall. But she knew that was a lie. She had been there when her mother had calmly closed her eyes. She hadn't opened them again. And then she had been stripped of all belongings, her skin scrubbed, fingernails cleaned, her face prettied with make-up. Then she was put into this black, uncompromising box.

Chloe imagined her in there, lying serene and calm in her red dress. It was just like her to dress inappropriately for her own funeral. Red was her colour – full of life. She was always one to stand out, and to do it heedlessly and without fuss. Her hands would be crossed over her chest, her black hair curled around her shoulders. If she took the lid off the box, the figure inside would look exactly like her mother. But it would not be her. It would be a familiar but empty shell. Whatever strange, binding force had made it her mother had gone.

She thought for a moment what that meant to her. There would be no one to comfort her when she came home in floods of tears; no one to suggest pizza and a movie to wipe away a bad day; no one who instinctively knew her particular fashion; no one to go walking in the park with at night; no one to cook scones with on a rainy day; no one to laugh with at the neighbours' attempts to build their Chinese gazebo; no one to say 'I love you' and mean it unconditionally. Though relatives and well-meaning friends surrounded her she felt utterly alone. Yet despite this terrible motherless future she was numb and detached. As though this had happened to another girl, an unlucky stranger, and she was merely filling with sadness at her tragedy. She should feel much worse. She knew the pain would come later.

There was a soft growl beside her.

'Hello, Bradley,' she said. She glanced at him. He was wearing the bear hat today, furry ears alert either side of his head, the snout prominent on his forehead. It looked

completely out of place with his best black trousers and knitted jumper. Yet there was something in the shape of his face that made him brutish and raw. There was the smell of dirt on him even through his clean Sunday best.

His eyes were fastened on the box. 'Is she in there?'

She nodded.

He reached out. His hands were gloved in bear paws with sharp claws. Her heart leapt as his claw crept forward: there was something menacing about the image. She opened her mouth to protest. But he stopped. His claw fell back to his side.

'I liked your mum,' he said. 'She let me growl at the back door and she'd give me titbits of food, just like I was a real bear, or a wolf.' (He had a wolf hat, too, that frightened her with its wild eyes; she was thankful he wasn't wearing it today). 'I miss her already.'

Chloe shut her eyes for a moment, letting the terrible weight of his memory pass. Surely he couldn't feel the same as her? For him it would be as though she had just gone out one evening and never come back. He hadn't seen her eyes close for the last time. He didn't know that his life was irrevocably changed in that instant.

'I'll miss you, too,' he said timidly.

Her eyes snapped open. She frowned at him.

'You're going up north.'

'How do you know that?'

He shrugged. 'Everyone knows.'

Of course they do, she thought crossly. I bet Aunt Lavinia made sure it was announced that she had won her sister's daughter. The anger surged up into her throat and she

found herself blinking back tears. Then abruptly it went away and she almost laughed. Odd that it was something in her future that almost made her cry. Not here, not now.

She reached out and touched the black box. She couldn't feel anything through the wood. It was just cold and hard and factual. Her lips made the words but no sound came out – 'Bye, mum' she said. She turned away.

A claw gripped her hand. For a moment she was startled at the shock of his touch. It forced her to look into his kind blue eyes. 'Will you come back to visit?' he asked.

She paused a little too long. 'It's a long way away.' His face fell. 'I'll try,' she said, and squeezed his paw.

Then she turned her back on him and walked away.

Chloe made her way to her room. It was the only place where she felt comfortable in this house now. She kept her head down, avoiding the sympathetic cow eyes of her relatives. She couldn't stomach their overwhelming need to help. The only person she wanted to comfort her was gone.

She took the flight of stairs quickly and fairly rushed down the hall to the room at the end. She opened the door and was halfway in before she realised there was someone in her room. She stopped, startled. Slowly, a frown grew on her forehead.

Her aunt and her father had noticed her entrance and were breaking apart, as though she had disturbed something deep and personal and secret. Her father's hand went back to his side. His immediate look of surprise was changing to one of careful pity. It got her back up.

'What are you doing in here?' she snapped.

They shared a covert look, and she knew that they were about to lie.

‘Your aunt felt overwhelmed. She needed to sit down, away from everyone.’

Chloe raised an eyebrow dubiously.

‘I hope you don’t mind me using your room,’ her aunt said. ‘I just needed a moment to-’ She put a hand to her mouth. Fresh tears glistened in her eyes.

Chloe didn’t believe it for a minute. Something had happened here, in her room. *How dare they use her room!* She felt anger course through her again for the second time that day.

‘I’d like you to leave now, please.’ She was still hanging on to the doorknob. She turned aside so they could file past her. Her father came forward. She could tell he was annoyed she was ignoring him. He suddenly grabbed her in a tight hug.

‘It’s going to be OK,’ he whispered in her ear.

She pulled violently out of his hold. There was hurt in his eyes, but also something knowingly triumphant. He had tried so many things over the last year to get her back. Now he had bound himself to her aunt. She was certain it was only so she could be his again. So he could own her, display her proudly as the one evident achievement amidst his failures.

He looked back at her aunt and gave her a calculated smile. Then he left. She listened to his heavy tread going down the stairs.

Her aunt was looking at her with gentle embarrassment and understanding. She gave Chloe a sad smile that didn’t reach her eyes. ‘He’s right, you know,’ she started. ‘It may feel like everything is wrong now. But it will get better.’

‘How would you know?’ said Chloe spitefully, and then bit her lip.

A flash of irritation crossed her aunt’s face. She looked down for a moment, and it passed away. ‘I won’t tell you it’s easy. I still miss my little Emily very much, and think about her every day.’ She touched her stomach and took a deep breath. ‘But it will eventually get better.’

Chloe didn't want to listen to anything her aunt said, but she knew she was telling her the truth.

Her aunt came forward and looked down at her. 'And you won't have to go through this alone. Your father and I will be there.' She gave another wan smile. 'I know you don't want to leave your life here behind, but I think a complete change will be good for you. You can begin again.' She added, rather inanely, 'Not everybody gets the chance to start anew, you know.'

Chloe was furious at the suggestion that she should rid herself of her past life and begin again with a new pseudo-mother and father. She knew that was what her aunt was getting at. And yet she was helpless, placed into her aunt's hands as though she were a coveted, priceless object the woman had long wanted. She shouldn't antagonise her. Yet she couldn't help herself – she wanted this woman gone from her room.

'Please leave,' she said strongly.

Her aunt's expression subtly changed, muscles tightening, eyes hardening, to become stern. She nodded her head. 'Yes, I think you should get some sleep. There's a lot to prepare for.' Chloe hated how she made it sound like a punishment. 'But, as it's going to happen whether you like it or not, could you please consider being a bit kinder, if not to me, then at least to your father?' She inclined her head, waiting for an answer.

Chloe nodded truculently.

Her aunt left, her eyes watching Chloe the whole time.

Chloe closed the door behind her. Instantly the tension fell from her. The room was filled with a delicious silence. She kicked off her shoes and lay back on the bed.

How dare her aunt lecture her in her own room! And how dare she ask her to be nice to her devious, adulterous father. She felt like screaming at the injustice of it all. Her heart

was beating hard with pain and guilt and anxiety. But no matter how much she struggled in the grip of circumstance she knew she had no choice but to begin the new life with her aunt and her father. She would have to go into the cold, dreary north. Where she would have to learn new names and make new friends. The unknown was the most terrible thing in the world to her. At the moment she was in limbo, she had been pushed out of the day-to-day world by this enormous, devastating event. She could stay here in her room and not even exist. But now they were forcing her to exist in that terrible motherless world, forcing her to feel again. She didn't like it one little bit.

She lay back and thought of her mother in that hard, black box. She thought of that awful moment when it would be lowered into the earth. How unnatural it was that her mother was still whole and perfect, sealed inside the box, even as she shared the earth with creatures that would eat her. Just as the cancer had eaten her from within. "Riddled," the doctor had said.

She closed her eyes and imagined herself inside the box. It wasn't difficult. She imagined the lid coming down upon her, shutting out the light. She imagined the nails being hammered in, echoing loudly in her ears. There was only the dark and the silence to imagine then.

She lay there, imagining one last precious moment with her mother, and wondering when she might be able to cry. And the night came down upon her, as though it too was the lid of a black box, shutting her inescapably into her new life.

Spring

Chapter One – The Queen of Spring

Chloe woke up to a loud crash. For a moment she was disoriented, the tail end of the sound lingering in her head. She blinked herself properly awake. But the feeling of uncertainty did not leave her. Slowly, she registered another sound - water splashing against stone.

It was raining, thin waterfalls pouring through holes in the ceiling. It was not the ceiling with the chandelier and rose-pattern she knew from Aunt Lavinia's guest bedroom. She sat bolt upright. It was not the bed she knew either.

It was a large bed, large enough to sleep five or more people, and it filled half the room she found herself in. She was wrapped in heavy quilts and pressed against soft pillows. Lace curtains cocooned the bed and moved lazily in a wind that blew in from the holes in the ceiling.

The ceiling was a great arched dome, directly over the bed. It was riddled with holes, where the jade-green tiles had been punched in. They lay on the floor in piles of rubble. The sky outside looked heavy and dull. Four battered chandeliers hung precariously from the dome and glittered in the morning light.

The room itself was luxurious though macabre. The walls were crowded with paintings, all indiscernible, as the rain had seeped over them, bubbling and cracking the paint, making them run into abstracts. From what she could see they looked like seasonal landscapes, filled with oddities (she made out the spires of an unusual spiked fortress). Though perhaps they only seemed odd in their new surreal confusion. Only one painting was partially visible – the smudged remains of a portrait, a man's features blurred beyond recognition. But his eyes showed clearly, having bizarrely escaped the rains blotting. They stared out, cunning and malevolent as a spider's. They focused on Chloe as though he knew exactly who she was. She shivered in his glare.

Despite its faded luxury the room was sparsely furnished. There was the large bed she was in, a single chair beside it and on it a candle in a glass burnt down to its wick. At the other end of the room was a dresser, flourishing with make-up, and there was a plain mahogany wardrobe with double doors in a corner. Behind her there was a row of windows, high up in the wall. They let in a hesitant, sulky light. Green plants pressed up against the windowpanes as though eager to get in.

It was clear this room was rarely used. There was an air of decay about it, its decadence now covered with dust. But there was a mystery and a beauty in the ruin, too. One thing Chloe knew – it was not her bedroom in Aunt Lavinia's terrace.

So where was she?

She remembered sitting in a train, staring out the window at the fields racing past. The rain spattered against the windows and made her feel safe and snug in the warm interior.

She had drawn in her sketchbook for a while; she loved escaping into that other world. But after a while she'd become bored and tried to read a book instead. She had eaten a chocolate bar and looked for any interesting characters in her carriage. But everyone had been plugged in to their iPods or found their books far more entertaining than hers.

She remembered the conductor being kind to her as she came aboard at King's Cross station. The station had impressed her with its gothic splendour and frightened her with its rush of people and their lost-looking faces. But the kind conductor had taken her hand and shown her to her seat in first class.

'Have you ever travelled first-class before?' he'd asked.

Chloe had shaken her head, loose black curls bobbing up and down, like some innocent girl caught up in fairytale.

‘Well then, it will be the most exciting trip you ever have on a train. The first time in first-class.’ He’d winked, and she’d been taken aback at such a familiar gesture. ‘You must be a very special girl to someone,’ he’d said.

‘I am,’ Chloe had replied, rather glumly, thinking of what awaited her at the end of the trip. A draughty terrace house, a new school, and her strict, moody aunt.

The kind man had asked for her ticket, taken out a small device like a toenail clipper and punched a hole in it (‘So you don’t have to go through all the bother later,’ he’d explained), and sat her down in her allocated seat. Then he realised she was in the aisle. ‘Can’t have that,’ he said and quickly switched the reservation tickets. ‘You’ve got to have the window on your first trip in first-class.’

Leaving her, he explained he had other jobs to do to make sure the train left on time, and that he’d come back to check on her during the journey.

Chloe was pleased when he left. She’d wondered how much longer she could keep up the smiles; she had learned that adults liked them, and she could get her own way through careful, sparing use of them. But he had tended to talk down to her. She wasn’t a childish simpleton; she could take care of herself.

She had a sudden disturbing thought: what if the conductor had been nice because he’d wanted to kidnap her? Had he drugged her (that lemonade!), snatched her away at one of the mid-way stations and secreted her here? Why would anyone want to kidnap me? she thought. Unless it was something to do with her father? It seemed exactly the sort of thing he might try. But surely he’d be waiting for her in Edinburgh with her aunt. She remembered a look and a touch that had changed everything for her.

Well, it was no good sitting here and wondering. She would have to see if there was anyone else in this odd place, or whether she was stuck in this room, a prisoner.

Chloe jumped down from the bed and into a puddle of water. She was a practical girl who didn’t mind getting her shoes wet, her new black brogues, bought for the trip to Aunt

Lavinia's. New shoes to step into a new life. The whole floor was awash with puddles. She tiptoed carefully through them, using the rubble as stepping-stones.

She was drawn to the wing-mirror dresser at the other end of the room. It was scattered with pots of powder and rouge, blush and foundation; lipsticks clustered under the central mirror. Tiny bottles of perfume were arranged in neat rows. This had obviously been a woman's bedroom. Taking a bottle that glimmered something blue and gem-like, she unstopped it.

There was an audible *whoosh* and a strange scent suffused her senses. It was as though she were suddenly immersed in the briny depths of the ocean, and every small thing in it was experienced – the wet sand, the pungent seaweed, the fresh scent of fish, and the salty souging of the waves that mingled them together. She replaced the lid and the scent disappeared. The label on the bottle said, *Sea in Winter*. Intrigued, Chloe peered closely at other bottles – *An Autumn Storm*, *Tea on the Ice*, *The Duke's Velvet*, *Summer Bazaar*, *After Rain*, *Blood of the Hunt*. She wanted to open all of them.

'I wouldn't, if I were you.' A voice quickly discouraged her.

'Who's there?' she replied, startled, for there was visibly no one in the room.

'You'll get caught up, you will,' said the voice, having seen this before, 'you'll get stuck in the scents of those lovely memories, and you'll never come out. Sucked into the past, which is all gone. It'll take you with them.'

Chloe frowned. 'Look here, this is not funny. I demand that you show yourself this instant. And tell me exactly what is going on here! Have I been kidnapped?'

'Kidnapped? Oh no, not at all. Though I couldn't possibly tell you why you're here. Not up to me, you see.'

'I see,' replied Chloe, bewildered.

'No, you don't, but that's quite all right.' The voice – female, elderly and cigarette-husky - sighed. 'You will find out all in good time. As for me, see the hand-mirror on the dresser, with the silver filigree? Pick it up.'

Chloe picked it up guardedly, as though something might leap at her from the glass. She looked into it. For a moment she saw nothing, and her heart started beating in panic. Where was she? Why couldn't she see herself? Had she ceased to exist? Then, suddenly, the glass shivered like water, and a face appeared. A very old woman stared out at her: a wrinkled woman with deep-set blue eyes, dark hair piled high and bursting with errant grey ringlets, and a friendly mouth. Chloe dropped the mirror. It splashed into a puddle and ripples bounced across the room. A ripple went through her too; she was certain she recognised the woman.

‘Do you mind?’ said the woman in the mirror, her voice water-muffled.

Chloe delved into the water, and picked the mirror out. ‘I...I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘You startled me. I’m usually used to seeing myself when I look in a mirror.’

‘Well the rules here are entirely different, so you shouldn’t expect anything at all.’ The woman in the mirror gazed fixedly at her for a second, eyes narrowing, and then her features softened. ‘Poor Chloe, you must be in quite a state.’

Chloe frowned. She did not like it when adults treated her in this patronising manner. She squared her shoulders, ‘And just where am I? And who, might I ask, are you?’

‘You are in spring, and all you need to know of me is that I am a friend, possibly your best here.’

Chloe pouted dubiously. ‘Spring?’

‘Yes.’

‘That would explain the rain.’

‘Very probably,’ said the woman in the mirror.

‘Then how did I get here?’

The mirror woman looked at her and sighed, as though this was a difficult question. Instead of answering, she gave Chloe a suggestive glance and said, ‘You should go and see the Queen of Spring for an answer to that question.’

‘The Queen of - ’

‘Spring, yes.’

Chloe considered this for a moment, a frown on her aristocratic features. 'Fine. Anything to stop my feet getting wet,' she decided.

There was a complicated pulley system on the door. Looking over it, Chloe eventually found the brass knob in the shape of a closed flower and pulled it. Chains and cogs began to whirl and the bars clicked upwards and slotted into prepared grooves at the side of the door. The whole mechanical performance reminded her that she could be a prisoner in this strange place, though giving a prisoner the key to her own cell seemed slightly contrary.

She opened the door and boldly stepped out.

She was in a long hallway carpeted in a strip of red velvet. Doors, spaced evenly apart, ranged the length of the hall. She could see the railings of a staircase at the far end. The walls were papered in a flocked green print with raised fleurs-de-lys; the persistent rain had managed to drip behind the walls and the paper peeled in long strips. Chloe took all this in before she attempted to examine the bizarre spectacle that was occurring some way down the hall from her.

There were two slim girls standing absolutely still, as though in the aftershock of a violent storm. The girl facing Chloe leaned against the lintel of a door, eyes closed, apparently exhausted. She wore her red cardigan open, revealing a thin chest and a protruding stomach. Her waist was wrapped in what may once have been a fashionable tulle skirt but was now tattered ribbons. They looked like vines wound around her; there was certainly something earthy and organic about it, as though she had been dug up from a garden. Underneath this she wore white stockings and cream shoes with a strap across the toe. Her face was like a china dolls, snub nose raised, red lips pursed. Her hair stood upright as though in shock. In her left hand she clutched a giant yellow flower petal.

The other girl had her back turned to Chloe but her posture was one of defiance - elbows bent, hands curled into fists, as though she were inwardly fighting for control of herself. She wore the same costume as the girl in red with the exception of a white long-sleeved blouse with a frilled neckline. Her skirt was ripped and trailed two lengths of soft

ribbon, as though a bow had been undone. Her long braided hair also stood electric-shock upright in imitation of her sister's.

A sunflower, as large as an occasional table, lay raggedly on the carpet. The flower had been torn from its stalk. Petals were strewn down the hall. It seemed like a scene from a painting, a pause in the midst of some absurd game.

Chloe took a step forward and time began again. The two girls were instantly aware of her presence. The red girl's eyes snapped open. They were an icy blue, full of wicked humour and a hint of callousness. The white girl turned her head to acknowledge Chloe, looking her full in the eyes with a disapproving stare. Absurdly, their hair did not fall back into place but remained upright.

They turned as one to each other and smiled covertly. Abandoning their enigmatic flower play, they skipped nimbly up to her.

'Hello,' said the red girl. 'Who are you?' She peered at Chloe, unashamedly inquisitive.

The white girl glared at her then clapped her hands in front of Chloe's eyes. Chloe flinched. 'I don't know you,' she said.

'That's because we haven't met,' replied Chloe. She was quite put out by their impolite manners.

The two girls turned to one another. The red girl began to skip around her. 'We know everyone in spring.'

'You're not from the garden' said the white girl rudely.

'No.'

'Perhaps a new kitchen maid?' suggested the red girl, skipping and circling.

'No.'

'I know. You're on loan from another season. That's it.' The white girl folded her arms and plumped out her chest at her brilliant deduction.

'I'm not any of those things,' said Chloe derisively. 'I'm not sure what I'm doing here at all. I don't even know where *here* is!'

The red girl stopped her skipping circle. The white girl peered suspiciously at Chloe.
'Everyone here has a purpose. You must know what yours is.'

'Why?' asked Chloe stubbornly.

'Just the way it is,' tinkled the red girl. 'The way the world works.'

'Otherwise you could be terribly dangerous. And we can't have that,' spat the white girl.

'Well then,' started Chloe, folding her arms in challenge, 'what's your purpose?'

Both girls smiled wickedly at her. 'We're from the garden,' they stated in unison.
'We're here to bring a little wickedness to the days.'

Before Chloe could ask anything further there was a vibration from her pocket. Both the strange girls took a step back, alarmed. Chloe pulled the mirror from her pocket. The old woman gazed at her with a solemn expression.

'Take no notice of them, Chloe. They're Miss Chiefs, silly little girls who live in the hedgerows of the garden and come out and play tricks on people. Ignore them. They're troublemakers.'

'How dare you!' shrilled the white Miss Chief. 'We entertain people, we make them laugh.'

'You make them cry,' replied the mirror hotly.

The red Miss Chief giggled. 'Only if they won't play.'

'Oh, get off with you,' said the mirror woman. 'We have an audience with the queen.'

The Miss Chiefs gave each other a sly glance.

'She's in the counting house.'

'Counting out the one hundred and one raindrops for the Spinster.'

'She's in a terrible mood,' said the white girl, arching an eyebrow.

'Disgracefully bossy.'

'She won't receive you well.'

'You'd be silly to try.'

‘I hope you don’t mean to question her.’

‘She detests questions.’

At this Chloe interjected. ‘But I have to find out how I got here so I can get back!’ She looked into the mirror, ‘You said she’d know.’ The woman in the mirror opened her mouth to remonstrate.

The white girl snatched the mirror away. ‘How you got here is not her concern.’ She peered into the glass and, frowning, reached up to hook an errant hair behind her ear. Obviously she couldn’t see the mirror woman. She thrust it back at Chloe. ‘It’s what you’re doing here now which is.’

The red girl handed Chloe the sunflower petal and brushed her hands of the pollen. It filled the air with a cloud of yellow and made Chloe cough.

‘Oh go away, you pests,’ said the mirror.

The Miss Chiefs linked arms and walked away down the hallway. But their voices came trailing back like the ribbons of their wrecked dresses.

‘Better find a purpose.’

‘Or one’ll find you first.’

‘And that might not be pleasant.’

‘Remember, without a purpose... you don’t exist.’

‘And you wouldn’t want that, would you?’

‘Ta ta. See you in the garden.’

‘Yes, do come out and play. If you’re able.’

Their unnerving giggles filled the hallway.

The mirror guided Chloe through the crumbling palace, down grand staircases, through opulent rooms covered in dust and cobwebs. Everywhere there were piles of rubble from where the roof had caved in, and the hissing of waterfalls as the endless rain streamed through the holes. They walked through long halls hung with ancestral art - beaky faces staring condescendingly at her as she passed. They walked through so many parquet foyers that

Chloe began to think the mirror was leading her around in circles. Many of them were littered with strips of gold paper someone had peeled from the walls, and the shattered remains of giant chess pieces. Shafts of light streamed in on occasion to highlight intricate tapestries, or bluebells growing from cracks in the stones, or brutal metal implements hung on walls. Chloe had a sense of grandeur fallen into ruin. The longer the journey through the palace, the more anxious and doubtful of herself she became; nothing in this place was easily explained. She was out of her depth.

She rubbed the sunflower petal for comfort.

Finally, the mirror directed her to a rickety spiral staircase, and she climbed up and up and up the giddy corkscrew, having to pause for breath many times on the way. Eventually she reached a simple wooden door at the top.

‘Go on, knock,’ said the mirror.

Chloe knocked. An imperious voice from within commanded, ‘Enter!’

The room she entered was small compared to those she had seen so far. It was an attic room, the roof vaulted with dark beams. The entire room was hung with mirrors, their infinite reflections making it seem dizzyingly large. They threw back the light from hundreds of candles in glass jars; the room blazed. There was a wooden desk in the centre, covered in tiny glass phials. On the right side of the desk, the phials were full of a clear liquid and each was packed carefully into a small bookshelf, partitioned precisely for their shape. On the left side of the desk there was a jumble of empty bottles.

It was the structure above the table that impressed; an enormous knot of chrome piping twisted to form a complicated but beautiful receptacle. It looked not unlike a number of tubas welded together. The large mouth of the receptacle pointed upwards to gather the raindrops that fell through the hole in the roof. Mechanics processed the rain as it passed through, with musical sighs and sudden deep tones, before it dripped out a small outlet pipe and into an empty bottle.

The Queen of Spring sat directly in front of the rain machine, fitting the filled bottles into their velvet-lined spaces in the shelf, and marking them off in a small book. She wore a

red gown with butterfly sleeves and a hooped skirt that billowed like a galleon's sail around her seat. Even from behind, Chloe could see the diamonds on her fingers and her ears dripping with falls of pearl. The Queen murmured under her breath, 'Ninety eight, ninety nine, one hundred, one hundred and one...' and abruptly swigged the contents of a phial. She burped. Her movement was mimicked in the mirrors, making her seem ominously everywhere at once.

Chloe stood still for a moment to fully absorb this spectacle.

The Queen, becoming impatient, turned and, when she saw Chloe, gave a startled yelp.

Chloe jumped and almost retreated down the stairs.

They stared at one another for a moment then the Queen said, apologetically, 'I was expecting someone else. Who are you, my dear?'

Realising she was in the presence of a queen, Chloe curtsied. 'I'm Chloe.'

There was a dense pause. 'Chloe...what?' the Queen replied frostily.

'Chloe Susannah Alexandra Jane - '

'No, no! Chloe... "Your Majesty". You forgot to call me "Your Majesty"!'

'Oh. I'm sorry, Your Majesty.'

'How am I expected to behave like a queen if no-one says, "Your Majesty"?'

'Wouldn't you just know?' asked Chloe, perplexed.

'Don't be impudent!' snapped the Queen. 'And you forgot the "Your Majesty" again.'

'Sorry, Your Majesty.'

There was a sudden sparkle in the Queen's eye. 'Ah, I see. You're my new advisor, on loan from summer? Has the Spinster sent you to advise me in my daily routines, in my consultations with the other royal heads of the seasons? Come, quickly, answer.'

'No, Your Majesty. I'm not sure why - '

'No!' she screeched like a harpy. Then: 'Chloe? Chloe?' The Queen frowned. 'No. I don't know any Chloe's. Do you have any other names?'

‘Yes, Your Majesty. My name is Chloe Susannah Alexandra Jane Hattersley.’

The Queen of Spring smiled, a predatory smile showing uneven yellow teeth. ‘Oh that’s excellent! Four names. One for each season. We shall have fun with you.’

There was a mumble from Chloe’s pockets. Chloe pulled out the mirror. ‘Ask her about the dailies,’ suggested the woman in the mirror. Chloe nodded.

‘A vain child, are you? After my own heart,’ said the Queen eyeing the mirror.

‘Your Majesty, I’ve been told to ask you about the dailies.’

The Queen’s eyes narrowed and her whole demeanour trembled with tension. ‘What do you know about the dailies?’ she snapped.

Chloe looked to the mirror. The old woman smiled at her reassuringly. ‘You do not know why you’re here. The dailies should have recorded your entry into spring. They may help you to find out what you’re doing here.’

Chloe relayed this to the Queen, who softened. ‘Oh, you poor dear girl. You’re confused and befuddled. It’s perfectly natural. I felt the same when I was first sent here. But you’ll get used to it. I do wish the Spinster had told me you were coming. I could have prepared.’ She preened her eyebrows with a studied artifice.

Chloe’s heart sank. ‘What do you mean I’ve been sent here?’ There was a great pause. Then Chloe remembered, ‘Your Majesty.’

The Queen smiled graciously and hiccupped. ‘My dear,’ she explained gently, ‘this may look like a crumbling spring palace but the reality of it is that we’ve both obviously been very naughty, and have been locked up here in this season.’

Chloe looked at the mirror but the woman glanced away. ‘You mean this *is* a prison?’ She felt tears begin to prick at the corner of her eyes.

‘Oh yes,’ replied the Queen. ‘But as prisons go it’s quite a lovely one.’ Her eyes brightened and she leaned forward. ‘I’ve been here so long I can’t actually remember what my crime was. But what was yours? Was it something ghastly, something petty and selfish? I bet an awful girl like you did something mean and spiteful, didn’t you?’ She smiled her yellow smile with such glee that Chloe was repulsed.

‘But I haven’t done anything!’ she cried, outraged at the unfairness. ‘So why am I here?!’ she demanded.

‘Don’t question me!’ the Queen shrieked. ‘You must have done something to be put here.’ She pressed her lips together at the childish tantrum. ‘And now you are here we shall have to find a role for you. We can’t have you wandering about without knowing what you’re supposed to do.’

Chloe glared at the Queen. ‘I can see you’re going to be no help at all. I’m going to find my own way home.’

The Queen laughed. ‘You’re not. You’re here forever now.’

Chloe found herself staring into a mirror – a distressed girl in a white blouse, red pinafore, and black brogues stared back, ringlets framing her pale face, mouth down-turned in sadness. She had pollen smeared across her cheek. She had crushed the sunflower petal in her anxiety. She didn’t like what she saw.

‘Believe me,’ continued the Queen, ‘it has been tried before. You can’t escape.’

Chloe made her hands into fists. ‘You just watch me.’ She turned her back on the unhelpful queen and strode out, slamming the door.

The Queen’s irate, self-absorbed cry of ‘Your Majesty! Your Majesty!’ was soon lost to her as she fled down the stairs, trying to blink back tears, and failing.