



## ONE



## return

When Rhys and I showed up at my “brother” Matt’s house at eight in the morning, he was happy . . . in the sense that he was glad I was alive and hadn’t disappeared forever. Despite being angry, he listened while I put together a vague explanation, glaring at me the whole time with mystified rage.

At least I only had to face Matt. My aunt Maggie is my legal guardian, but she wasn’t there when we arrived. Matt explained that she had gone off looking for me in Oregon. I have no idea why, but for some reason, she thought I’d run off there.

As Rhys and I sat on the shabby-chic couch in Matt’s living room, surrounded by the boxes that he had yet to unpack from when we’d moved into the house two months ago, Matt paced back and forth in front of us.

“I still don’t understand,” Matt said. He stopped in front of us, arms folded over his chest.

“There’s nothing to understand,” I insisted, gesturing at Rhys. “He’s your brother! It’s pretty obvious when you look at him.”

I have dark, wild, curly hair and mahogany eyes. Matt and

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Rhys both have sandy hair and sapphire eyes. They had something much more open in their faces too, and they had the same easy smile. Rhys stared up at Matt with bemused wonderment, his eyes wide with awe.

"How could you possibly know that?" Matt asked.

"I don't know why you can't just trust me." I sighed and laid my head back on the couch. "I never lie to you!"

"You just ran away from home! I had no idea where you were. That's a major trust violation!"

Matt's anger couldn't cover up how hurt he still was, and his body showed signs of the strain he had been under. His face was gaunt and haggard, his eyes red and tired, and he had probably lost ten pounds. When I disappeared, he completely collapsed, I'm sure. I felt guilty, but I hadn't had a choice.

Matt had always been too preoccupied with my safety, a side effect from his mother having tried to kill me and all that. His life revolved around me to the point of being unhealthy. He had no friends, no job, no life of his own.

"I had to run away! Okay?" I ran a hand through my tangled curls and shook my head. "I can't explain it to you. I left for my safety and for yours. I don't know if I should even be here now."

"Safety? What were you running from? Where were you?" Matt asked desperately, not for the first time.

"Matt, I can't tell you! I wish I could but I can't."

I wasn't sure if it was legal for me to tell him anything about the Trylle or not. I assumed everything about them was secret, but nobody had expressly forbidden me from telling outsiders either. Matt would never believe me, though, so I didn't see the point in trying.



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"You're really my brother," Rhys said in a hushed tone. He leaned forward to get a better look at Matt. "This is so weird."

"Yeah, it is," Matt agreed. He shifted uncomfortably under Rhys's stare before he turned to me, his expression serious. "Wendy, can I have a word with you? Alone?"

"Uh, sure." I looked over at Rhys.

Taking his cue, Rhys stood up. "Where's your bathroom?"

"Down that way, off the kitchen." Matt pointed to his right.

Once Rhys was gone, Matt sat down on the coffee table in front of me and lowered his voice.

"Look, Wendy, I don't understand what's going on. I have no idea how much of what you've told me is true, but that kid looks like a total weirdo to me. I don't want him in my house, and I don't know what you were thinking bringing him here."

"He's your brother," I said wearily. "Honest, Matt. I would never, ever lie about something this major. I am one hundred percent certain that he is your real brother."

"Wendy . . ." Matt rubbed his forehead, sighing. "I get that you believe that. But how could you actually know? I think this kid is feeding you a story."

"No, he's really not. Rhys is the most honest person I've ever known, except for you. Which makes sense, since you're brothers." I leaned in closer to Matt. "Please. Give him a chance. You'll see."

"What about his family?" Matt asked. "Who has been raising him all these years? Don't they miss him? And aren't they your 'real' family or whatever?"

"Trust me, they won't miss him. And I like you better," I said with a smile.

Matt shook his head as if unable to decide what to make of all

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this. I knew a large part of him didn't trust Rhys and wanted to throw him out of the house, so I admired him all the more for his restraint.

"I wish you would be straight with me about all of this," he said.

"I'm being as straight with you as I can be."

When Rhys came back from the bathroom, Matt leaned away from me and eyed him warily.

"You don't have any family pictures up," Rhys commented as he looked around the room.

That was true. We didn't really have decorations of any kind up, but we didn't particularly care to remember our family. Matt especially was not fond of our . . . er, his mother.

I had yet to explain to Rhys about his mother being a lunatic locked up in a mental institution. Stuff like that is hard to break to someone, especially someone as awestruck as Rhys.

"Yeah, we're just that way," I said and stood up. "We drove all night to get here. I'm pretty beat. What about you, Rhys?"

"Uh, yeah, I guess I'm tired." Rhys seemed a bit startled by my suggestion. Even though he hadn't gotten any sleep, he didn't look tired at all.

"We should get some sleep, and we can talk more later."

"Oh." Matt got to his feet slowly. "You're both going to be sleeping here, then?" He looked uncertainly at Rhys, then back at me.

"Yeah." I nodded. "He doesn't have anywhere else to go."

"Oh." Matt was clearly against the idea, but I knew he was afraid that if he kicked Rhys out, I'd go after him. "Rhys, I guess you can sleep in my room, for now."

"Really?" Rhys tried to tone down his excitement over staying in Matt's room, but it was obvious.

Matt awkwardly showed us up to our rooms. My room was still



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my room, all my stuff the same as I had left it weeks earlier. As I settled in, I listened to Matt and Rhys talking across the hall in Matt's room. Rhys was asking him to explain the simplest things, like how to turn on the bedside lamp, and it made Matt frustrated and uncomfortable.

By the time Matt came into my room, I had already changed into my pajamas. They were worn and comfortable, and I loved them.

"Wendy, what is going on?" Matt whispered. He shut the door behind him and locked it, as if Rhys were some kind of spy. "Who is that kid really? Where did you go?"

"I can't tell you what happened while I was gone. Can't you just be happy that I'm here and I'm safe?"

"No, not really." Matt shook his head. "That kid is not right. He's so amazed by everything."

"He's amazed by *you*," I corrected him. "You have no idea how exciting all this is for him."

"None of this is making any sense." Matt ran a hand through his hair.

"I really do need to get some sleep, and this is a lot for you to process. I get that. Why don't you go call Maggie? Let her know I'm safe. I'll get some rest, and you can think about everything I've been saying."

Matt released a defeated sigh. "Fine," he said, then his blue eyes went hard. "But you better think about telling me what's really going on here."

"All right." I shrugged. I could think about it, but I wouldn't tell him.

Matt's gaze softened again, and his shoulders slackened. "I am glad you're home."

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I could see just then how terrible this had all been for him. And I knew I could never disappear like that again. I went over and hugged him tightly.

Matt left me alone in my room, and I crawled into the familiar comfort of my twin bed. I had been sleeping in a giant king-sized bed in Förening, but somehow, my narrow bed felt so much better. I snuggled deeper in the covers, relieved to be somewhere that felt sane again.

I'd always had an inkling that I didn't fit in with my family, despite Matt's devotion to me. My mother had nearly killed me when I was six years old, claiming that I was a monster and not her daughter.

Turns out, she was right.

Less than a month ago, I found out I was a changeling—a child that is exchanged in secret for another child. Specifically, I was switched at birth with Rhys Dahl. It turns out that I'm a Trylle. Trylle are basically glamorous grifters with mild superpowers.

Technically, I'm a troll, but not in the creepy little green monster sort of way. I'm of normal height and fairly attractive. In Trylle culture, the use of changelings is a practice that dates back centuries. The custom's intention is to make sure Trylle offspring have the best childhoods possible.

I'm supposed to be a Princess in Förening—the compound in Minnesota where the Trylle live. My birth mother is Elora, the Trylle Queen. After spending a few weeks in Förening, I decided to head home. I had a falling-out with Elora, who had forbidden me from seeing Finn Holmes simply because he's not royalty.

I escaped and took Rhys with me. In Förening, Rhys had shown me genuine kindness, and I felt he deserved some of that in return.



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I brought him here to meet Matt, since he is really Rhys's brother, not mine.

Of course, I couldn't tell Matt all of that. He'd think I was completely insane.

Growing drowsy, I thought again how good it felt to be home. It only took ten minutes for Rhys to shatter that comfort when he crept into my room. I was almost asleep, but the sound of my door opening made me alert. Matt had gone downstairs, presumably to make the phone call I suggested, and if he knew Rhys was in here, he'd kill us both.

"Wendy? Are you asleep?" Rhys whispered, sitting gingerly on the edge of my bed.

"Yes," I muttered.

"Sorry. I can't sleep," Rhys said. "How can you sleep?"

"It's not that exciting for me. I lived here before, remember?"

"Yeah, but . . ." He trailed off, probably because he had no argument for that. Suddenly he tensed and sucked in his breath. "Did you hear that?"

"You talking? Yes, but I've been trying not—" Before I could finish my sentence, I heard it too. A rustling sound outside my bedroom window.

Considering I had just had a horrible run-in with some very bad trolls known as Vittra, I was alarmed. I rolled over and peered at the window, but the curtains were drawn, blocking my view.

The rustling turned into actual banging, and I sat up, my heart pounding. Rhys shot a nervous glance at me. We heard the window slide open, and the curtains billowed out from the wind.



## TWO



# interruptions

• • He stepped into my room in one graceful move, as if entering through bedroom windows were nothing out of the ordinary.

His black hair was slicked back impeccably, but he had stubble growing along his jaw, making him look even sexier. His eyes were so dark they were nearly black, and he took one discerning look at Rhys before settling them on me, making my heart forget to beat entirely.

Finn Holmes had snuck into my room.

He still managed to stun me the same way he always did. I was so happy to see him that I almost forgot how angry I was with him.

The last time I had seen Finn, he was slinking out of my bedroom in Förening, per his deal with my mother. Elora told him that he could spend one more night with me before leaving. Forever.

We had only kissed, but Finn had failed to let me in on Elora's plan. He didn't even bother to say good-bye. He didn't fight it or



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try to get me to run away with him. He just crept out of my room, leaving Elora to explain to me exactly what had happened.

“What are you doing here?” Rhys asked, and Finn pulled his eyes off me to glare at Rhys.

“I came to collect the Princess, of course,” Finn said, but irritation saturated his words.

“Well, yeah, but . . . I thought Elora reassigned you.” Rhys seemed thrown by Finn’s anger, and he fumbled for a minute. “I mean . . . that’s what people were saying around Förening, that you weren’t allowed around Wendy anymore.”

Finn tensed noticeably at Rhys’s words, his jaw flexing, and Rhys looked down at the floor.

“I’m not,” Finn admitted after a moment. “I was preparing to leave when I heard that you two had vanished in the middle of the night. Elora was deciding who would be best suited to track Wendy, and I thought it would be in her best interest if I went after her, what with the Vittra *stalking* her.”

Rhys opened his mouth to protest but Finn cut in.

“We all know you did a wonderful job of protecting her at the ball,” Finn said. “If I hadn’t shown up, you might’ve protected her right into getting murdered.”

“I know the Vittra are a threat!” Rhys shot back. “I just . . . we came here to . . .”

Hearing his confusion, I got up off the bed, moving to intercede before Rhys figured out why he’d let me talk him into coming here.

The truth was, Rhys didn’t agree to come here. He wanted to meet Matt, but he was adamant about my safety and had flat-out refused to let me leave the security of the compound. Unfortunately



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for Rhys, I had *persuasion*. When I looked at people and thought about what I wanted them to do, they would do it, whether they wanted to or not.

That's how I convinced Rhys to go with me when we ran away, and I needed to distract him before he caught on.

"The Vittra lost a lot of trackers in that fight," I interjected. "They're not eager to repeat it anytime soon. Besides that, I'm sure they're sick of trying to get me."

"That's highly unlikely." Finn narrowed his eyes, studying Rhys's bewilderment, and then he looked darkly at me. "Wendy, do you care nothing for your own safety?"

"I probably care more than you do." I crossed my arms firmly over my chest. "You were leaving to go on to another job. If I had waited one more day to leave, you wouldn't have even known I was gone."

"Is this about getting *my* attention?" Finn snapped, his eyes burning. I had never seen his anger directed at me this way before. "I don't know how many times I have to explain this to you! You are a Princess! I mean nothing! You need to forget about me!"

"What's going on?" That was Matt, shouting from the stairs. If he came up here and caught Finn in my room, it would be very, very bad.

"I'll go . . . create a diversion." Rhys glanced at me to make sure that was okay, and I nodded. He darted out the door, saying things to Matt about how awesome the house was, and their voices faded as they went downstairs.

I tucked my curls behind my ears and refused to look at Finn. It was hard to believe that the last time I had been with him, he had been kissing me so passionately, I could barely breathe. I





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remembered the way his scruff scraped against my cheeks and the way his lips pressed against mine.

I suddenly hated him for that memory, and I hated that all I could think about was how badly I wanted to kiss him again.

“Wendy, you are not safe here,” Finn insisted quietly.

“I’m not going with you.”

“You cannot stay here. I won’t allow it.”

“You won’t allow it?” I scoffed. “I am the Princess, remember? Who are you to *allow* me to do anything? You’re not even my tracker anymore. You’re some guy being a creepy stalker.”

That sounded much harsher than I’d meant it. Not that anything I said ever really seemed to hurt Finn. He just stared at me, his gaze level and unfazed.

“I knew I would find you faster than anyone. If you don’t come home with me, that’s fine,” Finn said. “Another tracker will be here shortly, and you can go with him. I’ll just wait with you until he arrives, to ensure your safety.”

“It’s not about you, Finn!”

He had played a larger part in my leaving Förening than I would ever admit, but it really wasn’t just him. I hated my mother, my title, my house, everything. I wasn’t meant to be a Princess.

Finn looked at me for a long moment, trying to understand where this was coming from. I had to fight the urge to squirm as he scrutinized me. His eyes flashed darkly for a second, and his expression hardened.

“Is this about the mänsklig?” Finn asked, referring to Rhys. “I thought I told you to stay away from him.”

Mänsklig were the human children taken in exchange for Trylle babies. They were the lowest in the Trylle hierarchy, and if



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a Princess was caught dating one, they'd both be banished forever. Not that I cared, but I didn't have any feelings for Rhys that weren't purely platonic.

"It has nothing to do with Rhys. I just thought he'd like to see his family." I shrugged. "It has to be better than living in that stupid house with Elora."

"Good. He can stay here, then." Finn nodded. "Matt and Rhys are taken care of. Now you can come home."

"That is not my home. *This* is my home!" I gestured widely to my room. "I'm not going, Finn."

"You are not safe." He took a step closer to me, lowering his voice and staring into my eyes. "You saw what the Vittra did in Förening. They sent an army out to get you, Wendy." He put his hands on my arms, strong and warm on my skin. "They will not stop until they have you."

"Why? Why wouldn't they stop?" I asked. "There's got to be Trylle out there who are easier to get than me. And so what if I'm a Princess? If I don't come back, Elora can replace me. I'm meaningless."

"You are far more powerful than you know."

"What does that even mean?"

Before he could answer, there was a noise on the roof outside my window. Finn grabbed my arm and threw open my closet door, shoving me inside. As a rule, I don't enjoy being tossed into closets and having the door shut in my face, but I knew he was protecting me.

I opened the door a crack, so I could watch what happened and intervene if necessary. Even as mad as I was at Finn, I would never let him get hurt over me. Not again.

Finn stood a few feet from the window, his eyes blazing and his



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shoulders tense. But when the figure climbed through the window, Finn only scoffed.

The kid coming in tripped on the windowsill. He wore skinny jeans and purple shoes with the laces untied. Finn towered over him, looking down at him wearily.

“Hey, what are you doing here?” The kid flipped his bangs out of his eyes and pulled down his ill-fitting jacket. It was zipped all the way up, and the bottom met the top of his jeans. When he bent over or moved, it rode up.

“Getting the Princess. They sent you after her?” Finn arched an eyebrow. “Elora really thought you’d be able to bring her back?”

“Hey, I’m a good tracker. I’ve brought in way more people than you have.”

“That’s because you’re seven years older than me,” Finn replied. That made the clumsy kid twenty-seven. He looked much younger than that.

“Whatever. Elora picked me. Deal with it.” The kid shook his head. “What? Are you jealous or something?”

“Don’t be absurd.”

“So where is the Princess anyway?” He looked around my room. “She ran away for *this*?”

“This is my room.” I walked out of the closet, and the new tracker jumped. “You don’t need to be condescending.”

“Um, sorry,” he stumbled, blushing. “My apologies, Princess.” He offered me an unsure smile and did a low bow. “I’m Duncan Janssen, and I’m at your service.”

“I’m not the Princess anymore, and I’m not going with you. I just finished explaining that to Finn.”

“What?” Duncan looked uncertainly at Finn as he adjusted

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his jacket again. Finn sat down on the edge of my bed and said nothing. “Princess, you have to come. It’s not safe for you here.”

“I don’t care.” I shrugged. “I’d rather take my chances.”

“It can’t be that bad at the palace.” Duncan was the first person I had ever heard genuinely call Elora’s house a palace, even though it sort of was one. “You’re the Princess. You have everything.”

“I’m not going. You can tell Elora that you tried your best, and I refused.”

Duncan once again looked to Finn for help. Finn shrugged at Duncan, and his shift to indifference startled me. I had put my foot down on the subject, but I hadn’t really expected him to listen.

“She can’t possibly stay here,” Duncan said.

“You think I don’t agree with you?” Finn raised an eyebrow.

“I don’t think you’re helping.” Duncan fidgeted with his jacket and tried to stare Finn down, a task I knew was impossible.

“What do you expect me to say to her that I haven’t already said?” Finn asked, sounding surprisingly helpless.

“So you’re saying we simply leave her here?”

“I’m right here, you know,” I said. “And I don’t really appreciate the way you keep referring to me like I’m not.”

“If she wants to stay here, then she’ll stay here,” Finn said, continuing to ignore me. Duncan shifted and glanced over at me. “We’re not going to kidnap her. That leaves little in the way of options.”

“Can’t you, like”—Duncan lowered his voice and fiddled with the zipper of his jacket—“you know, *convince* her somehow?”

Word of Finn’s affection for me must have spread through the compound. Aggravated, I refused to let my feelings for him be used against me.



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“Nothing is going to convince me,” I snapped.

“Do you see?” Finn motioned toward me. Sighing, he got to his feet. “We should be on our way, then.”

“Really?” I couldn’t hide the shock in my voice.

“Yeah. Really?” Duncan echoed.

“You said there’s nothing I can do to convince you. Has that changed?” Finn turned to me. His voice was hopeful, but his eyes were almost taunting. I shook my head firmly. “Then there is nothing left to say.”

“Finn—” Duncan started to protest, but Finn held his hand up.

“It is as the Princess wishes.”

Duncan looked skeptically at Finn, probably thinking that this was some sort of trick, much as I was. There had to be something I wasn’t getting, because Finn wouldn’t just leave me here. Sure, that’s exactly what he had done a few days ago, but that’s when he thought leaving was what was best for me.

“But Finn—” Duncan tried again, but Finn waved him off.

“We must go. Her ‘brother’ will notice us soon,” Finn said.

I glanced at my closed bedroom door, as if Matt would be lurking right there. The last time Matt and Finn had a run-in it had not gone well, and I was not eager to repeat the experience.

“Fine, but . . .” Duncan trailed off, realizing too late that he had nothing to threaten either of us with. He gave me another quick bow. “Princess. I’m sure we’ll meet again.”

I shrugged. “We’ll see.”

Duncan climbed out my bedroom window, practically falling onto the roof. After he was out, he half jumped, half fell off the roof. Finn watched him apprehensively for a moment, holding my curtain open, but he didn’t follow after immediately.

Instead, he straightened up, looking over at me. My anger and



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resolution were fading, leaving me hopeful that Finn wouldn't really leave things this way.

"Once I'm out this window, lock it behind me," Finn commanded. "Make sure all the doors are locked, and never go anywhere alone. Never go anyplace at night, and if at all possible, always take Matt *and* Rhys with you." He looked past me for a moment, thinking of something.

"Although neither of them are really good for much of anything . . ." His dark eyes rested on mine once again. His expression was imploring, and he raised his hand as if he meant to touch my face, but he lowered it again. "You *must* be careful."

"Okay," I promised him.

With Finn standing right in front of me, I could feel the warmth of his body and smell his cologne. His eyes were locked on mine, and I remembered the way it felt when he tangled his fingers in my hair and held me so close to him I couldn't breathe.

He was so strong and controlled. In the brief moments he allowed himself to let go of his passion with me, it was the most wonderfully suffocating feeling I'd ever had.

I didn't want him to leave, and he didn't want to leave. But we had both made choices we were unwilling to change. He nodded once more, breaking eye contact, and then turned and slid out the window.

Duncan waited at the bottom of the tree, and Finn dropped gracefully to the ground. From the window, I watched Finn coax a hesitant Duncan away from the house.

When they reached the hedges separating my lawn from the neighbors', Finn looked around, checking to make sure no one was there. Without even looking at me, he and Duncan turned and disappeared.



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I closed the window, locking it securely the way he'd said to. I felt a terrible ache watching him go. Even though he had done this kind of thing before, I couldn't wrap my mind around Finn really leaving and convincing Duncan to leave me too. If he was so concerned about the Vittra, why would he leave me so unprotected?

It finally dawned on me. Finn had *never* left me unprotected, no matter what I or anybody else wanted. As soon as he had realized I wasn't going with him, he hadn't wanted to waste any more time arguing. He would wait in the wings until I changed my mind or . . .

I shut the curtains tightly. I hated being spied on, but I also found it strangely comforting that Finn was watching over me. After having my window open for so long, my room felt chilly, so I went over to my closet and pulled on a heavy sweater.

The adrenaline rush from seeing Finn had left me wide awake, but I was looking forward to curling up in bed, even if I wouldn't be able to sleep.

I settled into my bed, trying futilely to forget about Finn. Within minutes, I heard a loud banging downstairs. Matt let out a yell, but it was cut short, leaving the house in total silence.

I jumped and ran to my bedroom door. With shaking hands, I opened it, hoping that Finn had tried to sneak back in and had a misunderstanding with Matt.

Then I heard Rhys screaming.