

CONFUSED

WANDA WILTSHIRE

BOOK 3 IN THE BETROTHED SERIES

For Krystina,
kindred spirit and blue-winged faery
whose friendship helps me fly above the storms.

PROLOGUE

Fingers stinging and eyes bleeding, the faery watched the vapours spiral together. A kaleidoscope of colours turned bad with ill intention. Purple and pink and red—madness and weakness and lust; a twist of orange for rashness and another of yellow for fear; a slick of green for jealousy; and blue, of course blue, the most noble of colours made arrogant.

Exhausted, the faery leaned against the wall, watching Premilla lead the others in a dance around the vapours. Seven in all, their oiled bodies gleaming as they added to the pot. A splash of this and a pinch of that, a dash of this and a touch of that. Scents colliding and blending, creating the most rancid of odors, like poison and bad food and decay.

The faery retched and Premilla turned to see. She shook her head, one side of her mouth hitching up as she returned to weaving the colours together with her movements.

Eventually the colours dulled, slipped from the sky and fell back into the pot. The dance stopped. Premilla picked up a ladle, dipped it in deep and poured a sliver of black liquid into a jar no bigger than her thumb. She handed it to the faery. ‘Do you need further instruction?’

‘No.’

Premilla inclined her head. When she looked up again she was grinning, a flash of sapphire in her ebony eyes. ‘Then go and may you derive pleasure from the experience.’

The faery took to the sky, wings glittering against the dark.

CHAPTER ONE

The shadow creatures merged in and out of the cave walls, their numbers growing as they crept from tunnels and flew in through the roof, blood-filled wings glittering and full-moon eyes aglow. Their dry-dirt scent stung my nose as they shuffled close and poked fingers through the bars of my cage, starlight flashing on their daggered nails. Now and then they'd drag the points across my flesh—a sting, a taste and growling disappointment as they gulped my blood and smacked their lips. 'Mortal, forbidden,' they declared, leaving me alone.

The creatures pulled faeries screaming from their cages before merging with the walls, vanishing into shadowy crevices and darkness. But I could hear the Fae still, their sounds filling the dark—moans and weeping fading to nothing. I rocked and whispered Leif's name, my heart banging against my knees. But my betrothed had gone the way of the others; all that remained of him dangling from the hook embedded in the wall—silent.

I rocked and the top of my head scraped the roof of the cage. Fear pulsed through me. Somewhere I had a home—in a land far away.

A girl with sunset hair emerged from the shadows. She was shrieking at the creatures to leave me alone. A man appeared beside her, and then a woman. They were holding their arms out to me, yelling at the creatures to let me go, that I belonged with them. But the moment I realised their identities, my human family disappeared and another of the shadowy creatures crouched before me. Her eyes were huge and wild, her hair a nest of dirt and twigs.

She grinned and reached through the bars, opening her hand. Inside was a pile of dust, sparkling like ground glass. I peered closer, hypnotised by the twinkling colours. Then she leaned forward, drew in a deep breath and blew the dust into my eyes. I cried out, my hands flying to my face while her laugh cackled.

I woke, gasping, my heart crashing against my ribs and my eyes feeling as though they'd been stung by mosquito bites and filled up with hot sand. Resisting the urge to rub them, I blinked hard, discovering they were coated in a strange sticky fog that pulled at my eyelashes and made a hazy blur of the single sunstone shining in the darkness.

I stumbled out of bed and fell to the floor, my head spinning. Squeezing my eyes closed, I crawled in the direction of the ensuite, scrabbling for the basin and using it to pull myself up.

Slowly, I opened my eyes. They looked like they were filled with cinders—miniature embers swirling and sparking in the ash. I pumped the faucet as fast as I could, unable to drag the water through the castle walls quickly enough. As soon as the water began to run, I splashed my face and felt the sensation in my eyes begin to clear. I looked up just in time to see a swirl of grey-black mist. For a flash it seemed to take the form of lovers. Then, like magic, it vanished, leaving a pair of clear blue eyes staring back at me. I blinked. Not a trace of discomfort remained. After blinking a couple more times just to make sure, I left the ensuite and glanced around my room.

The stars had been a splash of glitter across the dark when Leif and I were carried back to the castle after being kidnapped and attacked by the Shadow King. We didn't linger with family and friends. After checking Jack had made it safely back, and assuring everyone we were okay, we went to Leif's room where we were bathed and tended to by a small army of maids and healers. By the time we fell into his bed, covered in herbs and ointments and healing poultices, the day was already turning bright.

I recalled curling into Leif's body, listening to his long breaths and watching the slow rise and fall of his chest beneath my palm as he fell asleep. Exhausted as I was, it had taken me a long time to join him, the horrendous events of the night on a loop in my mind. Strangely though, it was *Leif's* words rather than the Shadow King's dying ones which haunted me most of all. 'Let's go home, Marla.'

Home. For Leif it could only be Faera—dreamlike land of incomparable richness and beauty, where love of nature was woven into every aspect of life, where resources were shared, air was pure and food didn't make a faery break out in a rash. Where dark things lurked in the night and protection from them meant being bonded to the ruling king.

But for me, home was a three-bedroom unit in Sydney. It was beaches and bushland and close friends. A sister I loved and fought with, the most amazing mum and dad in the universe, and a newly discovered twin brother. Home called to me with its promise of comfort and safety—Dad's perfect understanding and Mum's relentless care. And, after what I'd just been through, I needed it desperately.

I remembered gazing up to Leif's face, his lips parted in sleep and eyes lost to dreaming. As I brushed my fingers across the dark stubble peppering his jaw, I felt torn because I knew home was also wherever my betrothed was.

I was pulled from my thoughts by the sound of murmurs coming through my open door. For some reason I found I couldn't *not* investigate. I stepped out into the hallway and followed the sounds to Leif's room, the long, soft carpet stealing the noise of my footsteps. His door was open and everything was in darkness, but enough of the colourful Faeran starlight slipped through his windows for me to see that my betrothed was in bed, his back turned towards me. And wrapped up in his arms was Haigen. She was watching me over Leif's shoulder, her almond eyes gleaming.

I was stunned motionless—couldn't even breathe. She pressed her cheek to his face. 'I love you, Leif.'

Leif lifted a hand and ran it slowly down the long length of her hair, his fingers brushing her arm, her waist, closing around her hip. 'I love you also, Haigen.'

Her eyes glittered and flashed in my direction before vanishing into his neck. He pulled her body closer. Sliding his hand lower still, he gripped her thigh and brought it over his. As she lifted her lips to his and he bent to take them, I clapped a hand to my mouth and fled.



I sat on the edge of my bed, numb, shaking, unable to fully process what I'd just seen. *Leif and Haigen together*. I felt as though my heart had been torn out, all sensation with it, leaving a great big pit of nothing. *Haigen*—the girl he'd loved before I came along. Searing pain filled the hole in my chest and, when I could no longer bear it, I drank what remained of the sleeping potion I'd been given after my first Shadow Fae attack and curled in on myself, the liquid quickly infusing my blood and sending me to oblivion.

When I woke again the sun was bright in the sky and the maid, Seraya, was filling bowls with fresh flowers. She saw I was awake and smiled before asking about my health. My head pulsed as though I'd just regained consciousness after being knocked out. I told her I was all right as I rubbed at my eyes, wondering about the night before. Had it all been a dream? But if so, why was I in *my* room when I'd fallen asleep in Leif's?

'I know of your heroism,' Seraya said, pulling me from my thoughts. 'How you put yourself in danger to help overcome the Shadow King. It's all over the castle—probably all over the kingdom by now.' She pointed. 'Some have written to honour you.'

I followed her finger. A bundle of notes sat on my bedside table, beside them a tiny carved box. I picked it up, turning it in my hand. ‘What’s this?’

‘A gift from a grateful man. He says you helped to rescue his wife, and that if the child she carries is a girl, she will be named for you.’

I thought of Nyrie, the faery who’d been imprisoned in the cage beside mine, and the broken husband I’d visited with Leif after she’d gone missing. It made me feel warm to know they were together again. ‘Brant,’ I said, removing the lid from the box. Inside was a small piece of stone, pale pink and polished. It was set in silver and attached to a short length of vine.

‘Do you know what this is?’ Seraya asked, taking it from me and tying it to my wrist.

‘No, but it’s pretty.’

‘It is called Darlemie and represents tenderness and bravery combined. When he brought it, Brant told all who would listen of yours.’

I recalled the way I’d hidden under the crate in the Shadow King’s cave, and shook my head. ‘I was terrified.’

‘Naturally so.’ She tidied the covers around me. ‘And yet you risked yourself regardless. But rest now, you need to regain your strength.’

The prospect of another long recovery period loomed ahead of me and I realised that I wouldn’t be able to go home to my family any time soon. I wondered if Leif’s health would be likewise affected. Then I remembered how quickly he’d healed in the past. Images surged in my head—Leif running his hand down Haigen’s body, drawing her close ... kissing her. I shivered. As nightmares went, it was up there with the worst.

‘Marla?’

I gave my attention back to Seraya. ‘Sorry, what did you say?’

She smiled. ‘Your friends have been waiting for you to wake. Shall I send them in?’

I nodded and she left with the promise of bringing me breakfast.



At the sight of Jack and Hilary, a weight lifted from me, bringing a smile to my face. It quickly fell away again when I noticed the drawn expressions on both of theirs. ‘What’s wrong?’

A look passed between them as Hilary sat in the chair beside me and took my hand while Jack settled on the edge of the bed.

Panic flared in my chest. ‘Where’s Leif?’

‘He’s fine,’ Hilary said quickly. ‘It’s just ...’ She closed her mouth and lowered her eyes to her lap, her grip tightening on my hand. ‘Some of the guards were killed.’ She looked up, tucking a strand of hair that had fallen free of her ponytail behind her ear. ‘Classin was one of them.’

Air whooshed into my lungs as an image leapt into my head—Classin’s bright green eyes changing from serious to mischievous in an instant. ‘No!’

Jack stood and leaned over the bed, hugging me against him. I could hardly breathe. *Classin*—the young guy who’d been so excited to receive the promotion to the King’s High Guard. And then my thoughts went to my betrothed. He and Classin had been friends. ‘Where’s Leif?’ I asked again.

‘He’s with Haigen,’ Hilary said. ‘She came to the castle with Rowan and her father not long after you got back.’

Haigen—oh God, she’d lost her betrothed. A wave of sorrow crashed over me as I imagined what she must be feeling. It rushed through my body like a tsunami, but before it could sweep me away, I found myself standing outside Leif’s bedroom again. I

could feel the blood leech from my face as I realised what I'd seen hadn't been a dream at all.

'Are you all right?' Hilary said, leaning close.

'I feel sick.' I closed my eyes. But I couldn't hide from what was in my mind.



A few hours later, Leif entered my room, tired and weary and overwrought. I could see it in his eyes and in every line of his face and body. He fell into my bed and wound his arms around me, sighing as he drew me close. As if by instinct, I snuggled into him, but then pulled back when images of him with Haigen flashed in my head.

'How are you feeling after ... everything?' he asked.

How was I feeling? Sad, sick, betrayed ... Like I couldn't trust him. 'All right,' I told him.

I was about to add how sorry I was about Classin when he said, 'The maids tell me you have not eaten.'

I turned my face into his side, his amazing forest-spice scent soothing me even as my thoughts raced with accusations. 'I wasn't hungry.'

'You've not eaten for days.'

I looked up, hoping to find his expression didn't match the tightness in his voice. His head was back against the pillows, eyes closed. Darkness had moved in around them. I couldn't stop the prickles in my voice. 'I was worried. I can't eat when I'm worried.'

No response apart from a barely perceptible nod.

'Aren't you even going to tell me where you've been?'

'Didn't Hilary tell you I was with Haigen?'

I had to think quickly. I could plead ignorance, but what would be the point? 'She did.'

'Well then, why would you ask?'

I wasn't sure what I'd been expecting—denials, excuses, apologies. I got none of these. He just carried on. 'Marla, Classin is *dead*. Haigen is devastated and wants nothing more than to join him.'

Leif's words felt like a slap and heat rushed to my face. I was about to apologise for being so self-centred at such a devastating time. But then I recalled the way Haigen had told Leif she loved him, and the way she'd lifted her face to kiss him. The way he'd bent to catch her lips. He was behaving as though it hadn't even happened. So instead I said, 'I understand that, Leif, and I can't imagine what she must be going through, but ...' I had to stop, my stomach was churning like a boiling kettle and I was completely unable to form the words to tell him what I'd seen.

But his next words confirmed he at least knew my feelings.

'Marla, Haigen needs me now and I *will* be there for her.' He put his head back down on the pillow and closed his eyes. 'I am too tired for this. I have barely slept in days.'

If he'd been watching me, he would have seen the disbelief on my face. I'd caught him making out with his ex and he was too tired for me? Was *this* the price of being betrothed to the prince? Was I just expected to share him and be perfectly okay with it? A tear slid down my cheek. I wiped it away in case he opened his eyes and saw. He didn't. He just took his arm from around me and draped it across his forehead. The wound opened up in my chest again, pulsing with pain, but my anger covered it. 'You know what, Leif? You should just be with Haigen. You care *way* more about her than you do me anyway.'

'You *know* my love for you. Your jealousy is ridiculous.'

'Ridiculous,' I cried, blood burning under my skin. '*Jack* never complains about me being ridiculous. Jack understands me. You should have left me with him!' The words spewed out like hot lava and immediately I wished I could gobble them back in.

Leif opened his eyes and fixed them on mine. They were cool

and dark and so much like his father's it made me shiver. Seconds ticked slowly by. 'Twice you have told me so, Marla—say it a third time and I might start believing you mean it.'

'Consider it said a third time,' my traitorous mouth said, while my faithless eyes gave him a cold stare.

He held my gaze for a second longer, then without saying another word, he rolled on to his side and went to sleep.

I wanted to slap him awake again, punch his shoulder and scream. Instead I just lay there, staring at the broad back he'd turned to me—the same back I'd seen turned to me last night when he'd held Haigen in his arms, when he'd told her he loved her, when he'd trailed a hand down her body, when he'd bent to catch her kiss as he'd brought her thigh around him.

The ache in my chest was unbearable. We'd been together less than a year and we already had problems. How on earth would we make it a lifetime—*beyond* a lifetime? Especially with his ex-girlfriend hanging around and fawning over him whenever she felt like it. My heart was breaking. I couldn't survive it—hadn't our last separation proven that? I couldn't believe Leif would do this to me. But then, what did I really know about him? Together from the time we clapped eyes on each other just because of some stupid faery magic. If anything was ridiculous, it was *that*!

I needed my old life back, my human life. The life I'd had before Leif appeared.

But before I could go home, there was someone I needed to see. I knew I could handle my physical state—just stay home until my body healed—but there was no way I could handle my feelings for Leif. *That* I needed help with or else I would sink straight back into the depression I'd been in last time we were apart.

I threw the bed covers off and stood to my feet, grabbing hold of the bedpost for a minute to steady my spinning head and wobbling legs before heading out the door.

CHAPTER TWO

‘His Majesty is in a conference,’ the sentry guard outside King Telophy’s receiving room told me after I’d requested a meeting.

‘Can I wait for him? *Please*—it’s important.’

He lifted his hand to silence me. A moment later he gestured to the huge doors on the far side of the entry room. They were open and a great shaft of arched sunlight spilled inside. ‘My king has agreed. Wait outside and I will come for you when he is ready.’

I walked out into the blossom-scented air. Bright fat bees and twinkling-winged butterflies danced among the flowers—gathering nectar, spreading pollen. How simple life was for them, how carefree. All they had to do was follow their instincts. I considered what that would mean for me and quickly realised *my* instinct was to run straight back to Leif. But then I recalled my reason for being there and willed all thoughts of Leif away. My heart closed off and a lump rose up my throat. I swallowed hard. Soon I would be home—with my family. All I had to do was get through this meeting with King Telophy.

As I followed one of the winding paths through the garden, I banned all thoughts of Leif and emptied my mind of everything but the beauty around me: the King’s Woods, thick and green, the flowers springing up in beds and perfuming the breeze with layers of scent, and the little birds and animals that made this place home. I chose a path that meandered among glittering sculptures of faeries, dipping my fingers under fountain spray. Eventually I chose a seat beside a pond and sat down to wait. A

pair of golden dragonflies hovered around the lily pads, sticking together like a betrothed pair. Tears pricked my eyes. I got up and walked some more, settling on a bench beneath the dappled light of an enormous Lonberra tree, bulging with plump purple fruit.

I hadn't been waiting long when a woman passed me. Even from behind, I could tell she was beautiful—long slender limbs and smooth pale skin. She was familiar but I couldn't place where I'd seen her. She walked as though hypnotised or in a dream, her waist-length hair a sheath of pale gold swaying gently. I wondered at the power King Telophy had gifted her—since she was walking through his garden, she could only have come from him.

When she reached the sentry guards at the entrance, she neither hesitated nor glanced their way. Nor did they speak to her. They just moved aside and allowed her to flow by. My eyes narrowed as it occurred to me what her 'conference' with the King likely involved. I wondered if Atara knew. I quickly figured she must. It was broad daylight and hardly clandestine—the guards were clearly clued in. Maybe this really was just a part of being married to a king—being content to share him with his subjects in any way he saw fit. I thought of the creepy ex-king Mirren, father of the Shadow King and former ruler of this kingdom, sneaking away to Earth after abandoning his subjects. His betrothed, Ayana, had left him, but maybe she'd known all along he was taking other lovers. Maybe she'd put up with it right up until she was kidnapped by the Shadow Fae and her husband had been too busy on Earth enjoying the company of human women to hear her cries for help. I shuddered. I'd made the right decision.

Through the open gates I saw the woman release her wings—dazzling sunlight twinkling through sheer, pale pink. I watched her fly above the forest until she was only a sun-bright sparkle vanishing into nothing.

Several minutes later the guard came to tell me the King was ready to see me. I went to his receiving room and raised my hand to knock, but before I could, King Telophy was opening the door.

‘Come, Marla,’ he said, his voice uncharacteristically subdued as he held the door wide. He’d probably just exhausted himself. A bitter taste came with the thought. I walked ahead of him and took the seat he offered, folding my hands in my lap.

He sat across from me and waited, a peculiar distance in his expression, like he was barely with me.

I twisted my fingers together as I tried to find the right words.

‘What is your need?’ he asked finally, quietly.

I blinked quickly. I’d cried too much today. ‘I don’t want to be here anymore.’ As the words rushed from my mouth I couldn’t stop the tears. I wiped them away with my fingers.

King Telophy leaned forward, elbows resting on his thighs and fingers steepled before him. He watched me, frowning. A touch of disbelief laced his words when he said, ‘After all my son has done to keep you here?’

I nodded and lowered my face to watch my fingers pick at the hem of my dress.

He reached out and, lifting my chin, captured my eyes with his. There was something dark and troubled there. ‘You have nothing to fear in my kingdom,’ he said softly. ‘The Shadow King is dead and I would see harm *never* comes your way again.’ The passion in his voice took me so completely by surprise I was distracted from my reason for being here. What could possibly have happened to make him so intense?

‘Marla?’

Dragged from my thoughts, I mumbled an apology before telling him that concern for my safety was not my reason for coming to him.

He lifted his hands, holding them open. ‘What then?’

I gulped and, swallowing the compulsion to be completely honest with him, told him only a small part of the truth. ‘I miss my family, and I’ve decided to go home, but—’

‘Have you discussed this with Leif?’ he interrupted, his eyebrows drawn close.

I shook my head.

‘Do you not think you should?’

‘No,’ I said quickly. There was no way I could go through with what I was about to do if I had to see Leif again.

‘Well then, would you confide in me?’

I thought of the woman I’d just seen slinking through his garden. Even if I were willing to tell him the truth, he wouldn’t understand. It was obvious he thought kings should be able to do whatever they wanted. I knew it was in his power to force my confidence but I shook my head. ‘I’d rather not.’

He sat back, linking his fingers across his chest. ‘I won’t insist upon it,’ he said. ‘But you confound me I confess. My son will be the next king, you, his queen. You have been welcomed as such already. Would you give that up because of this ... human world?’

His words made me realise I’d made the right decision. I wasn’t cut out to be queen. Not only because Faera was so new to me, but also because I just didn’t have the confidence. Haigen was strong and self-assured. And Leif loved her. Anyone could see she would make a better queen than I. But I kept all this to myself and only said, ‘The human world is my home, Majesty ... my family is there.’

King Telophy watched me as he inhaled a breath and released it slowly. ‘I understand, Marla, but you must know you cannot go at this time. You won’t survive a day in your condition. Remain until after you’ve reached immortality, then, providing you take care, you may visit the human world at your leisure.’

Immortality. The pain of watching the people I’d loved from childhood grow old and die. An eternity of living without them,

and without even the comfort of Leif by my side. Immortality was the last thing I wanted. ‘I have to go *now*, King Telophy—today. I’ll be fine, really—I’m used to being sick. Mum and Dad always get me through it. I only came to ask a favour.’

He stood and said, ‘Hush. Perhaps some time with your humans *would* be of benefit to you after all that has passed.’ He held his arms open and there was something so sad in his voice when he added, ‘But if it must be today, then come to me, Marla.’

My heart hammered in my chest, my emotions clashing with each other—the buried-deep fragment that despised him rising to the surface screaming *no*, while the rest of me cried, *yes*.

‘Come,’ he repeated.

I rose to my feet and went to him. He released a long sigh as he took me into his arms. Every part of me became tense. I closed my eyes and tried to make myself relax, one muscle at a time—*your arms are floating, light as air*. I couldn’t focus. It was too strange to be in his embrace—this king I both loved and loathed. And what was he doing anyway? I went to pull away but something caught hold of me—warmth, softness, comfort. I felt myself melt as it took me over. And then he released a great surge of power. I cried out as it penetrated my skin, my muscles and veins, all the way to the marrow of my bones. I wrapped my arms around him, fingers digging into his flesh. Nothing mattered but this—the heat, the love, the light. His mouth came down on mine and he parted my lips with his. He poured sweetness into me—liquid sunshine, hot and thick and rich. I drank it all, the heat searing my tongue, my throat, my limbs. Heaven was only a silver thread away as all the best things whirled and danced in my head—Leif’s lips on mine, the comfort of Jack, my family and friends, Faera—rainbows of colour and gardens of scent—marshmallow, musk, wood and spice. Then I was flying over the ocean in the arms of my betrothed, his warm breath in my hair, sun on my skin. And

oh, my king! His mouth on mine and everything magnificent coming in to me.

Then the kiss was ending, the sublime delirium fading—too soon. He made to release me, but I couldn't let go. Bringing me with him, he sank into his seat. And in that moment he was everything—father, brother, protector, king. We sat in silence, my face buried in his neck, my arms like vines around him, and he, slowly stroking my hair. I could not have felt more loved or honoured.

'You are well now, Marla,' he said when I started to loosen my grip as awareness trickled in, bringing embarrassment with it.

I peeled my arms away and slid from his lap. I did feel stronger. The blur was gone from my head, the heaviness from my limbs. And my senses were sharper.

'You healed me?' I thought of all those long weeks of recovery after my first Shadow Fae attack.

'In effect.'

I made the movement to release my wings. They flew out behind me, as dazzling as that first time. I dropped a curtsy as I inclined my head to him. 'Thank you, my King.'

'Revere me so always, Marla, and all will be well between us.' His voice was different—the strength seemed missing. I lifted my face to him. He looked drawn, tired and there were half-moon shadows beneath his eyes. I would have asked him if he was all right, but it seemed impertinent.

'I wanted to ask a favour, Majesty. It's the reason I came.'

'You are bold from the human world,' he said, his smile softening his words. 'But go on, give me your wish—let us see if I might grant it.'

'Will you confuse me so I don't care for Leif? I know normal Fae can't make confusion last for more than a few hours, but *you* can.'

He frowned. ‘You believe I have the power to stop you caring for my son?’

My heart sank. ‘Can’t you?’

It took a little while for him to speak. ‘I *could* put a wall between your betrothal connection with him, but ...’ He shook his head. ‘No, you ask too much.’

I grabbed his hand with both of mine. ‘*Please*, King Telophy, I need this. When you sent me back last time, I grew weaker every day. If Leif hadn’t confused me ... I don’t think I would have survived.’

I watched the colour fade from his face, surprised he seemed so affected. ‘I didn’t know.’

How would he? He’d never known his betrothed, had no way to understand the strength of the connection. ‘It doesn’t matter now, but I need your help in case it happens again.’

‘Then so it will be, for today I find I cannot deny you.’

I only had a moment to wonder why that was so and then I felt something change within me, almost like a fog descending around my mind—I was no longer tied to Leif. I knew it as I knew my hair was blonde and my eyes blue.



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Betrothed

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Confused