



Over Leaf, Under Bone

LEAH WEBBER

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Ordering Information:

Quantity sales. Special discounts are available on quantity purchases by corporations, associations, and others. For details, contact the publisher at the address above.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing, 2013

ISBN 0-9000000-0-0

Please note: The following is an advance reader copy, which has not gone through final editing. Some passages may change in the final publication. I would love to know what you think of it! Comments, criticism, suggestions, and vitriol can be sent to my address at author@leahwebber.com. Thank you for reading, and if you like it, please pick up the full novel when it's published!

On Storytelling

A short time ago in a land far enough away to be the stuff of stories, there dwelled a princess. Oh no, you're saying, not another princess story. They're always so boring, full of froo-froo dresses and kissing and one-note villains defeated by the power of good. I admit there is a little bit about dresses, and a smidge of kissing, but the similarities end there. This is a story about assassinations and curses, about dangers and escaping them, the stupid decisions that got you there and the ones that almost get you killed. A story about hard truths; that sometimes the good guys end up making things worse, and sometimes the heroine not only doesn't win, she ends up in a pretty bad place. There is magic and mysteries, but trust me, they're not the good kind.

This is my story.

Chapter One

I lunged forward in the chair as a hair pin stabbed me in the scalp, hissing between clenched teeth. "I'm not going to have any skin left by the time you're finished." I cried. The same pin nicked my ear, and I twisted away.

"Stop your squirming, Delly." Magda growled, tugged on the rope-thick braid of my hair. "If you'd let me fix it this morning before you went tearing off into the woods with no shoes -- NO SHOES, for saint's sake, and almost winter -- then I might be able to spare your poor tender head now. You're not fit to be seen."

I leaned forward for protestation's sake, gripping the dressing table and huffing through my nose. "If I'd let you fix it, you'd have wasted all morning at it, and made me try on seven dresses besides." I said, glaring at my reflection, sitting rigidly in a green velvet poof of a dress. "Heaven forbid I be allowed to spend my morning as I like on my birthday."

Magda clucked, flipping her wrist in an expert twist that coiled the braid in an elaborate loop, and stabbed another pin in as she said, "Your morning is one thing. Yet where did I find you at half one with everyone waiting in the great hall for your coming of age

ceremony? In the weaving hall all covered in dirt!"

I flexed my freshly scrubbed feet in my too-tight new slippers, a prickle of guilt tickling me. I protested, "Bridgett made a new cloth pattern by double weaving the indigo dyed jacquard and the silver threaded--"

"Every Lord in the kingdom comes to get a look at the eldest princess of Tuchwald on her first day as the heir, and there you are barefoot, twigs in your hair, and skirt kilted up while you're threading a great loom." She accused. I stared hard at the powders on the tabletop to get away from her glare. "Now I'm expected to work miracles to make you look like the lady you're supposed to be!" She shoved a great heavy jeweled comb in to anchor the last of the braid. I winced and looked at her in the mirror. In spite of her grousing, she looked satisfied at the results.

My head throbbed and was miserably heavy, but I could concede the intricate hair jungle matched well with the intricate dress I'd been stuffed into, all fancy velvet and strings of pearls. The dress and several like it, I had argued about at length. It was expensive and unnecessary, and we couldn't afford it with last year's crops smaller than normal. I had been overruled by the King, who declared it was needed to uphold the royal dignity. As far as I'm concerned, dignity could go climb a tree. However, the girl in the mirror could pass for a lady, even if she stood only passing resemblance to me in my natural state. It was a shame my lady-self also couldn't breathe deeply or stretch her arms without popping a seam. Ladies did not seem to be overly concerned with range of motion.

Magda nodded again, seemingly satisfied. "Well, you'll fool them enough for today, though no promise if you fuss with it." She slapped my hand away as I tried to readjust a coil that was twisted too tight.

I rubbed my hand. "I'm hardly a lady if it takes all this to make me presentable." I said. It's the exact wrong thing to say, which is a special skill of mine.

She puffed up like an insulted toad. "The devil you aren't. I didn't sit behind you for five years, listening to nasally men with sawdust for souls droning on about which fork goes where and which

curtsy goes to who and how to laugh and bat your eyes behind a silly fan to hear it all went sailing out the other ear like it was no bother. Just stand up straight and remember for five minutes that you weren't born in a hovel." Her glare was more fearsome than usual. She must have had to defend me to the other servants again, which always made her cross.

She heaved me up from the chair and shooed me towards the door. "You're already late! Don't dally on the way there!"

Dodging the powder puff she snatched up last minute to fix where I rubbed at my nose, I teetered toward the door. "Leave off, you great hen, before you peck me to death!" I cried.

I flounced out into the hall with what I admit was a surprisingly considerable amount of grace and poise, until I reach the spiral staircase. The problem with big poofy dresses is they come with big poofy skirts, held out twice as wide as a reasonable doorway by a sturdy hoop frame. Buried under all that fluff somewhere were my feet, which, without my eyes to guide them, appeared to forget where the landing was and couldn't find the top step.

"Stop dawdling!" Magda called out behind me.

I bit back a retort, braced my hand against the sturdy stone wall, and slid my toes forward to find the edge of the stair.

Several stairs down, Magda sailed past me with her arms full of my dirty dress from this morning, a disgusted expression on her face. "Slow does not equal graceful."

I toe-felt another step down. "It is when speed would leave me in a heap at the bottom."

She continued her tromp around the corner without even looking back. "It wouldn't trouble you if you'd bothered to practice wearing it like I told you!" She said.

I mentally calculated all the horrible things I could leave in her bed. Although after today she would be sleeping with me in the Heir's chamber, so it would actually be my bed. That is something she probably took into account while baiting me. No one ever tells you that the list-topping quality to work in a nursery is a devious and snarky nature. Magda had that in spades, which is probably why she qualified to work in the royal nursery.

I made a command decision (which I suppose all royal decisions

are, honestly), did a quick check for anyone lurking nearby, grabbed my skirt, and walked the rest of the way down with it snugged around my thighs so I could see my feet. At the exact moment I reached the bottom and started congratulating myself, a servant walked around the corner. We both froze, and she dropped her tray while gaping at my bare legs. My face went hot and prickly, and I hastily dropped my skirt and smoothed it furiously. I gave her as withering a glare as I could manage. Her eyes looked up to my face, caught my expression and dropped swiftly to the floor. Without even glancing at the dropped tray, she backed hastily around the corner and away from me.

A dull pain growing at the base of my skull bloomed into a full eye twitching headache in an instant. Magda would hear about that little incident by day's end, and so would my mother the Queen. Neither was likely to let it pass uncommented, so I had that to look forward to at the end of the festivities, if I survived that long.

Hurrying while trying to look stately, I passed through the guest hall and the portrait gallery to the long hallway outside the great hall, nodding at the servants and minor nobles that bowed and curtsied as I sailed past. Three maids and a serving boy flew past me into the main hall carrying trays of steaming hot bread fresh from the ovens, new-churned butter and honey so thick the spoons stood upright in the jars. I checked myself from following them through the unobtrusive side doors. I was to be announced through the main entrance, to be paraded past the gossipy crowds for judgment.

Some girls, I have observed, have a delightful day on their birthdays. They are relieved of work for the day, or at least have their loads lightened, and there are such things as presents and special treats. My birthday, for as long as I can remember, has been an affair involving proclamations of new responsibilities, parades, and being stuffed into hot, itchy clothing for the display of everyone. There is also cake, but it's hard to enjoy it when everyone is staring at you like a prize cow.

This year would be worse. This year I turned fourteen, time to be named the heir apparent to the kingdom. The feasting would go on until the wee hours of the morning. Well, everyone else would

feast. I'd be passed about so everyone could say they conversed with the princess and go home feeling important. Worse still would be that night.

That night I would sleep in the great cavernous bedroom allotted to the heir apparent that had stood empty some twenty-odd years since my father was made king. It smelled of dust and old, cold ash even though the servants had been cleaning and airing it all summer in preparation. It was large and grand and intimidating, as well as cold and drafty, but even that great room would be no refuge for me. It would also be my audience chamber, and have a constant stream of visitors, advisors, and servants. I would be expected to hold court there, with embroidery and gossipy ladies. Even though I knew it was coming, I didn't feel ready. The change was too jarring, and for a few panicky moments outside the great hall, I couldn't breathe. It felt like womanhood was being thrust on me like a pair of too-tight shoes and I was expected to dance like it didn't pain me.

A servant peered out the door at me, and I felt my poised princess mask slide back into place. I stepped up to the great carved main doors to the great hall, twice as tall as I was and horribly squeaky when opened unless they were oiled regularly. Past the crowd of royal advisors, noble family members, and anyone else who could be shoved into fancy dress on short notice, my father sat on the central throne on the dais. His throne was spindle wood, our kingdom's great treasure, every inch carved with vines and leaves, the wood black and shiny with the patina only brought by great age and a lot of polish. It would someday be my seat of power. At his right hand was my mother in a smaller throne of gilded wood. My seat was beside her's, with the other children seated nearby. On my father's left sat his main advisor, the tall, chilly-faced Lord Emerlich.

Emerlich looked the same as he always had, tall and slender, bored yet somehow so inexplicably focused in a way that made his gaze predatory, like a stalking wolf. I actively avoided speaking to him, but that would soon change. He was to be my advisor someday, and it would be my lot to leash him. My family by this point had been waiting almost an hour while I was being scrubbed,

brushed, and pinned within an inch of my life. My siblings squirmed in their seats, bored but not allowed to play or chatter.

The pomp and ceremony of court is no place for a child, but I crawled on the dais before I could walk, and I lived daily with the strict rules that would have me or my siblings banished without reprieve should we dare to act in a manner sufficiently ill-suited to being royal. It was all much too pretentious and snide. I much preferred the nursery and Magda.

I hesitated for much too long at the door, going over my part in the ceremony to delay the inevitable. Finally, sighing, I caught the eye of the door page with a quick wave, who has been studiously ignoring me while I stood dithering. He struck the floor three times with a heavy stave, announcing me in a deep, sonorous voice that rung clear into the corners of the gallery above. “Her Royal Highness, Princess Odelya Uta Imelda Sieglinde, Firstborn of His Majesty Anton the Third and Her Grace the Duchess Elanor of Passt, Heir of Tuchwald!” The churning, murmuring sea of nobles quieted and turns as one body to look at me. A cold sweat prickled down my spine and my heart thumped painfully. Straightening my spine, I curled damp fingers into the cuffs of my sleeves, and advanced.

My dress swished softly on the polished stone floor as I paraded between the two crowds of onlookers, striding through the puddles of sunlight from the tall gallery windows. Making sure a smile is pasted across my features as I reach the dais, I drop into a curtsy. A seam on my dress groaned in protest three quarters of the way down, and I bit back a curse. I bobbed for a moment as I tried to keep from pitching on my face, caught my balance, and smoothly stood, trying to look as if I had intended the whole thing.

If he noticed my gaff, the King’s face didn’t show it. Not that he was looking at me. His calculating eyes were all for the crowd. “This is a long-awaited day; a joyous day! Fourteen years we have planned for the blossoming of our Princess, and that day has finally arrived!”

He paused, and there is a quiet smattering of applause. I winced. I was not as well-loved as I would like. The King eyes met mine, and there was accusation there. I looked at the floor, seeing my

face flush in reflection. For the first time that day, a sliver of guilt pricked my heart. An hour must surely have been a long time to wait in front of a crowd of people who expected everything of you.

Panic prickled in me, and I thought for a moment he might do it. He might be angry enough to revoke my status as his heir. All he would have to do is not speak the proclamation. Without it, everyone in the room would know I was a failure immediately.

He looked back at the crowd. "Today, our Odelya takes up the mantle long awaiting her, to serve you all. It is with great pleasure that I name her heir in my place, the 14th ruler of Tuchwald, upon my passing. May her reign be long and bountiful!"

The crowd exploded in enthusiastic applause, more for the brevity of the speech than for my new status. I didn't care, though, light-headed with relief and resisting the urge to turn and curtsy to them all. Of course he wouldn't revoke my status as heir for something so small as being late to the ceremony. Strict he might have been, but my father was not cruel. I offered him a smile, but his face was still flinty, his way of saying I was not yet forgiven.

Then my father stepped to the side, and Lord Emerlich stood in front of me. "A gift, Princess, for your birthday." He said.

This wasn't part of the planned ceremony. I was supposed to go to my new seat next and listen to several more speeches before we would go to the feast. Emerlich's teeth, small and pearly like a child's, were bared in a painting of a smile at me. I looked at my father, but he was looking at the crowd, pointedly away from me.

Deciding to improvise, I smiled fiercely back at the steward. "How thoughtful of you. You needn't have gone to all that trouble!"

"You are never a trouble, my liege." He said, still smiling. My new title made my head reel a bit. Emerlich gave me a slight bow, and eyes never leaving my face, reached inside his tunic, and plucked something sparkly from a hidden pocket.

The crowd murmured behind me in approval.

Breaking his gaze to look at it, I gasped. Dangling from a chain wrapped around his finger was a drop spindle. Gold leaf winked in the afternoon light pouring through the windows. There was a design worked into the gold, a snaky pattern of vines twined around one another so small they looked like single threads. It was

tiny and perfect, one half of the crossed spindle and tree on our flag, the perfect symbol for the kingdom's Heir.

I reached for it almost without thinking, drawn like a moth to a candle. It was like a stamp of the kingdom's approval I could wear around my neck. Emerlich, still smiling, tugged it away, shaking his head. "Turn around, Princess. I will put it on myself." He said.

It was such an odd request. Seeing no harm in it, though, I gave him a small curtsy. "Thank you, Lord." I smiled.

I turned, and as I felt his fingers brush my bare throat as he reached around me, a prickle of warning passed through me. His touch felt wrong, and I was suddenly alert, horribly exposed with him at my unprotected back. I wanted to lunge away. Only years of painful poise training, making sure I could stand proud and smiling even while horribly ill stopped me. His breath tickled against my neck as his fingers fastened the chain, his voice hissing very softly by my ear, "You will be a perfect delight to everyone the rest of today. You will not trip, or complain, or question anything at all. I am most seriously displeased."

I had a moment of indignant rage. How dare he speak that way to me?

Then the world turned slow and heavy, a dust of menace blurring my eyesight. The tiny spindle dropped heavily against my chest. Spikes of agony drove through my back, rushing through me to weigh down all my limbs. My vision went white for a moment, and then the room came back too sharply in focus, every person in the crowd daggering at my eyes. I couldn't move. My face should have been a rictus of pain, but I felt my mouth stretch long and horribly up in a smile so big it made my cheeks ache.

I tried to step away from his hands, tried to make it look natural. Nothing happened. Then, jerking forward, my body stepped away from him without my command, turned back, and executed a perfect curtsy. I tried to gasp in surprise, but my lungs refused me. My heart should have sped up in panic, but continued slowly, calmly beating.

Emerlich spoke to the crowd over my head. "With this token, I bless the beginning of your rule. May it be long and fruitful. May you be wise in your decisions, may your trees never wither." I

smiled at him, and his smile is as wide as mine, no longer painted but real, eyes full of manic joy, and I knew somehow he had done this. He thundered to the crowd, “Hail, Odelya the First, Princess Regent!”

“Long may she reign!” The crowd roared back, feeding off his enthusiasm so loudly it echoed off the rafters.

I turned to go to my seat, and the movement is nauseating because I can't anticipate it. It makes me dizzy, all the motion that I can't control. I once dangled from a rope in one of the barns after I had twisted it so much it folded over on itself. Once my feet had left the ground, the spinning started and quickly went beyond my ability to stop. I screamed and spun, horribly sick while servants tried to grab me and halt the wild rotation. It was just the same, out of my control and the whole world moving.

I walked past my father, trying to look into his eyes and plead for help. He was looking over me at the crowd. Then he slipped up and looked me in the eye for a split second, and I saw it there before he swiftly looked away. His face was so hard, he was almost glaring away from me. He knew. Somehow he knew. For the first time, I was afraid.

Then I saw my mother as I swept past her, and she looked at nothing but me. There was helpless sorrow in her eyes, buried under fear. I knew then that she also knew and could do nothing, and that frightened me more.

I took my seat with sweeping grace, fanning my skirt out perfectly in front of me. I scanned the crowd, and noted they all saw me yet didn't seem to see at all. They were all delighted with the puppet me. There was no help to be had from that quarter.

I wanted to scream, to cry, to throw myself on the floor and kick. Anything to make my body mine again. The speeches lasted forever, and the puppet was enchanted by them all. She clapped, and smiled, and offered nods of appreciation to each speaker. It was endless.

A numbness came over me as we quit the Great Hall and went to the Dining Hall for the feast. The puppet spoke to people with my voice, and she was clever, witty, and charming to everyone. I hated her, the not-me people loved more than me. Why didn't they

recognize that it wasn't me? Why did no one else see what was *wrong*?

I walked past an empty corner on my way to speak to more guests, focusing on a far away point to tamp down the nausea, and suddenly my mother was in front of me, holding my arms and smiling a large false smile. "You must endure it for tonight." She whispered, teeth clenched. "Winter is almost here. He will be gone soon. I promise I will explain everything." She hugged me, and I swung around enough that I saw up to the high table. Emerlich was seated, eyes glued to me, predator gaze searing me from across the hall. He was no longer smiling.

Then she left me, and I continued on as if nothing had occurred. I ate bites of everything, even the things I loathed, and praised them all just enough. Puppet me was a flawless hostess, giving everyone a turn at her side, making sure no one was slighted. I dropped nothing, tripped on nothing, forgot no one and never once looked out the windows to check where the sun was to see when it would all end. I was perfect for the whole of the evening.

Then the guests left, the tables were cleared, and we were alone, my parents, Emerlich, and I. He was smiling at me again with that painted smile. Cornered in my own body like a wounded animal, I smiled back.

Emerlich gave me a wry look. "Now, that wasn't so bad, was it? Everyone will talk about how graceful and lovely you were for years to come. A small sacrifice, really." He said.

I nodded, still smiling. My father glared at the floor, saying nothing. Emerlich hovered, waiting for something, and the silence stretched long and heavy.

My mother finally cracked, stepping forward. "Please, My Lord, let her go. She has been punished enough."

The change was instantaneous. Emerlich's face was wiped clean of feeling. He held out a hand, and the Queen flew back as if struck, collapsing on the ground. I screamed inside, unable to flinch or reach for her, my puppet face still smiling.

Emerlich's character turned cold and flat as a slab of ice as he walked over to her. "Elanor, your acting has grown very poor of late. I'm beginning to think you're tired of this." There was no

emotion in his words, they were as empty as his face. "You looked ill this evening. People are going to talk."

My mother lay with her face to the ground, unmoving. "Please, let her go." She said, her voice muffled by the floor.

Emerlich cocked his head, seemingly curious. "She will be released when I am ready to release her. So much defiance for one night! I'm beginning to think you all need a lesson." He said.

The Queen shuddered, but didn't rise.

He turned to look out the window, and a small frown touched his face. "But not tonight. I must go. First snow will be falling in a few hours. This winter will be long and hard." He reached for my face, cupping it gently, and I felt ill, wanting to flinch away. "You have so much to learn. Remember tonight when the snow is deep and sickness spreads. Remember what happens when I am displeased." The loathsome hand stroked my cheek gently.

Then there was a sharp crack of noise, and I looked up to see if the ceiling was breaking. Nothing was there, and I look back to see he is gone.

The room was filled with a sharp, alarming wailing, and it took me a moment to realize it was coming from me. I ran to my mother, grabbing her dress and sobbing incoherently. As she reached for me, all the sound and emotion that had been denied me poured out at once, and the world went black.

