

Song of the Unicorn

by Nancy Massand

c. January 1, 2001

Chapter 1

When a second daughter was born to Jean Hebert, he cursed violently and smashed his glass on the hearth. In the bedroom his wife sighed and watched dispassionately as the midwife swaddled the child. "She's a pretty little thing, Madame. What will you call her?"

"Marie. For the Virgin and for my sister, God rest her soul."

"A fine name, Madame. Will you be nursing her as you did Corinne or shall I find a wetnurse among the women in the town?"

"A nurse this time, I think."

"Very well. At our age we want to preserve our figures, do we not? There are several women who gave birth recently and will be glad of the money. Do you trust me?"

"I'm still alive after two births, even if they were girls. Of course I'll trust you, until our next appointment!" Mme. Hebert winked at the woman and took the crying babe in her arms. "Hush now, child. It's not all that terrible. Ignore your papa fussing in the next room; he has a temper but he's not a bad sort and I promise you'll never want for anything." She smiled at the midwife. "She is a pretty little thing, as you said. Prettier than Corinne, even."

"That she is. I'll come around to check on you in the morning and bring a nurse for the child. I trust the financial arrangements will not be a problem." There was a thud and a yelp from behind the door. "Monsieur Hebert seems to be in a bad way tonight. Shall I wait until he subsides a bit?"

"Nonsense, he won't touch you. Just bid him good night and let yourself out. I'll take care of both you and the woman tomorrow." She held the child until it quieted, then placed it in a cradle by the bed and slept.

The midwife found a stout peasant woman whose child had been stillborn only days before and was more than willing to come live with the family until Marie was weaned. In fact, she prolonged her stay for three years. Although she was uneducated, she did know about babies, and she knew within weeks that something was very wrong with Marie.

"Look, Madame," she said. "The child doesn't flinch when I move my hand toward her face. Either she has no fear or she can't see me. The first is unnatural and the second is a curse, the poor thing." A stinging slap sent her reeling.

"You will never, never say such a thing about my child again! Remember who you are, and who pays you!"

So the woman kept silent in the presence of the Heberts, but word spread among their friends that M. Hebert was now recompensed for his flaring temper and mercenary

heart with a second daughter who was born blind. Her parents quietly consulted several doctors who only confirmed the wetnurse's diagnosis and were paid handsomely in cash instead of slaps. All concurred that nothing could be done. Little Marie was oblivious to all this, and when her nurse tearfully bid her goodbye a whelp from a litter of hounds adopted her and became her constant companion. They grew up together, Marie steadying herself with her hand on his neck as she toddled around the yard, and as time went by running with him through new mown grass, plunging chest-deep through dewy fields of wildflowers, and playing hide and seek in the stables. Justice was ever watchful, and more than once he snapped at the heels of a horse that was too close to his precious baby. Hide and seek was a one-sided game, but they both loved it. He hid in a stall and barked twice, and Marie followed the sound of his panting until she fell upon him laughing, holding his velvet ears in her hands and burying her face in his neck. They were inseparable, and the stable grooms joked that either Justice thought he was a child or Marie thought she was a puppy.

Of the two delusions, Marie's was closer to the truth. She was allowed to roam freely as she grew, with none of the restrictions imposed on other girls her age who were cooking, cleaning, and caring for younger siblings. Instead Corinne, five years older, had charge over her. The job was not difficult, as Justice provided all the supervision required. Corinne needed only to know their general location and see that Marie was cleaned and dressed for dinner, and later taken upstairs to the bed they shared. Madame Hebert often joined them to hear them say their rosary, and then left them to whispered conversations before one or the other would drift off to sleep.

"Corinne. What's a sunrise?"

"It's when the sun peeks out over the hills and morning comes."

"What do they sound like?"

"Sound? Why, there's no sound, only colors. Red, gold, orange, and yellow, all splashed over a deep blue sky."

"Oh. Well, what do they feel like? Is it like the wind in my hair? Is it like wading barefoot in the brook?"

"No, sunrises don't feel like anything. You can't touch them; they're too far away."

"Do they have a smell?"

"I don't think so."

"Can you lick them?"

"Not unless your tongue is a million miles long. And then you'd get burned."

"Then I probably wouldn't like them."

"Yes, you would. They're pretty."

"What use is it to be pretty if you don't have a sound or a feeling or a smell? I'd rather have a day playing with Justice than see a thousand sunrises."

"Well, you have your wish. You can play with Justice for the rest of your life. As for me, I have to go to sleep. Mama wants me to see the seamstresses for another fitting of my dress in the morning. She thinks I'm not eating on purpose and losing weight to complicate the wedding plans."

"Why are they in such a hurry to get you married? None of your friends are even promised to anyone yet."

"It's what Papa wants. The Delacourts are very rich, and he's dying to be linked to them. That's why he offered such a grand dowry and the Delacourts chose me for Claude over all the rest. Actually the matter was settled when I was not much older than you, and I do believe Papa would have packed me off at age thirteen if the Delacourts had agreed."

"Why didn't they?"

"Claude has three sisters, and they didn't need another girl in the house to help his mother. I would have been just one more mouth to feed, and my babies too, when I started having them. But now the sisters are all married, and Claude is almost thirty, an age when he should be taking over his father's business. So I guess they don't mind taking me in."

"Thirty is really old."

"Papa didn't get married until he was about that age, either. Most men don't. That's because their parents want to keep them as long as possible before expanding the family, which costs money. That's also why only the oldest son gets married, in most families. They don't want to split up the inheritance. In Claude's family he's the only son, no there are no younger brothers to resent us."

"You mean if you're the younger brother, like I'm the younger sister, your parents won't let you get married?"

"That's right. Why do you think Uncle Paul lives with us and helps Papa, and they fight sometimes?"

"I never thought about it."

"Papa says I'm lucky to get a man who's an only son. I think what he really means is I'm lucky for him. A lot of families wanted their girls to marry Claude."

"Do you love Claude?"

"I hardly know him. I talk to the day laborers and stable grooms more than I've talked to him."

"I talk to the servants a lot too. And all they talk about these days is your wedding. The dress, the feast, the trousseau, and the money. Papa's spending lots and lots of money. I can't wait for the wedding. If it were my wedding, I don't think I'd sleep all night for the rest of the month. Do you think Papa will pick someone for me when I'm thirteen?"

Corinne was silent.

"Well, do you?"

"Most girls aren't betrothed until their early twenties, Marie. Papa had a chance to make a good match this time, so he took advantage of it. I don't know if he'll be in such a hurry again."

"You mean he may not get me married at all? I'll just live with you and Claude, and be like Uncle Paul?"

"It doesn't work that way for girls. Usually the fathers manage to get all their daughters married, or at least get them into a convent. But who knows what Papa will do? He's never passed up a good investment. On the other hand, he's so tight with his money the merchants wince when they see him coming."

"If I could pick a husband, you know who I'd choose?"

"You can't pick. But go ahead, tell me who."

"Gerard."

"Papa would never allow it."

"Why not?"

"He works for us. He's not well to do, and he never will be."

"But he's so nice, Corinne. I bet he's much nicer than Claude."

"Oh yes, he is. And more handsome, too. Claude is ugly in comparison. But Gerard will probably never marry at all. He can't afford it."

"If I married him he could live with us, after you go to the Delacourts. Or I could live with him, in the stable."

"If you did that, Papa would kill both of you. It's no use. I'm going to sleep."

"Corinne?"

"I'm tired, Marie."

"Am I pretty?"

"What difference does it make? You smell good, and your hair is soft."

"Corinne! I just want to know."

"Yes, you're pretty, for a twelve year old who's still growing. You have red and gold in your hair like a sunrise, and big brown eyes. You're not fat like the cook or skin and bones like great-aunt Claire. You're just right. Now can I go to sleep?"

"I really look like a sunrise?"

"You don't look like anything but a little girl who asks way too many questions. Good night, Marie."

"Are you pretty?"

"That's what some people say."

"Who?"

"Just people, that's all. Now if you don't be quiet I'll take out a needle and thread and sew up your mouth." Corinne was asleep in minutes, but Marie lay awake for some time trying to fathom an entity she could not discern by any of the senses which defined her world. It was beyond her. The concept of pretty eluded her as well. Corinne had a voice that bubbled with an undercurrent of laughter, a voice that charmed and teased and captivated. Her hair was silky and straight. Her skin was smooth, too, and she smelled like lavender. As well as she knew Corinne, though, Marie would never know how pretty she was. Apparently it had something to do with color and light, an aspect of Corinne which would be forever hidden from her. For the first time in her life, Marie felt like a misfit. She cried silently, picturing herself as old as Mama, still sleeping in this bed with her parents taking care of her, while Corinne was mistress of a grand house and gave lots of parties. She understood the real reason Papa would be in no hurry to get her married, and it had nothing to do with money.

A faint tapping on the window startled her, sparking a tingle that numbed her limbs and rendered her immobile. Terrified, she whispered her sister's name. "Corinne! Someone is trying to get in!"

"Don't be silly. The window is twenty feet off the ground."

"But I heard someone knocking!"

"You were dreaming. If someone were really trying to break in, Justice would be barking."

"What if they killed Justice? Can you just look and see?"

"All right, I'm getting up." Corinne's bare feet padded across the floor, and her dressing gown swished as she threw it over her shoulders. Then the hinges creaked as

Corinne unlocked the window and flung it wide to let in the cool night air. Marie strained to hear the whispered conversation that followed, but Corinne's voice was barely audible and her words were indistinct. After a few moments she locked the window again and sat on the bed, stroking Marie's hair. "It was only Gerard throwing pebbles at the window. One of the mares is sick, and I'm going to help him make a plaster."

"Can I come?"

"No, she's skittish and she might kick. I don't want you to get hurt."

"Why did Gerard ask you? Why didn't he get one of the other grooms?"

"So many questions in the middle of the night! It's because I'm good with horses, that's all." She gave Marie a hurried kiss and told her to go back to sleep. "And it may be best not to mention this to Mama and Papa," she added. "They're so concerned that I might take sick and ruin their wedding plans, they've hardly allowed me outside at all this month, and never after dark. I've been like a prisoner."

"Corinne?"

"I have to go. Gerard is waiting."

"Don't you want to get married?"

"Of course I do. Everyone does." Marie pulled her close and felt tears on her sister's cheek. She lay awake pondering this for a long time after Corinne left, and when she finally fell asleep, she was still alone.

Chapter 2

Morning shined warm on Marie's face, and she rolled over to shake Corinne's shoulder. "What is it, Corinne? Male or female?"

"What are you talking about?"

"The foal that was born last night! What is it? If I go out there now do you think Gerard will let me pet it?"

"There's no foal, Marie. It was a false alarm. Maybe later today or tonight."

"Then what took you so long?"

"Just waiting and watching. The mare was skittish, like I told you, and she took some calming down."

"Maybe tonight I can sit with you. I won't spook the mare; I play in the stable all the time and the horses are used to me."

"We'll see. I have to dress and meet Mama downstairs for my fitting. She's wild when I'm late. Help me do my hair? I can never get the braid straight in the back."

Marie worked deftly, twisting the strands evenly and tucking the ends under at the nape of Corinne's neck. As Corinne inserted the pins, a sharp rap on the door startled them both. "Just five minutes, Mama!" called Corinne.

"Your mother is downstairs. Are you dressed?"

"Papa?!" Marie couldn't remember the last time he'd been in their room.

"May I come in?"

"Yes, Papa, the door is unlocked." M. Hebert strode in and straddled the desk chair, resting his forearms on the back.

"Corinne, my girl. Almost a woman now, ready to be married."

"Yes, Papa. I'm to be fitted for my dress today."

"That's what I came to talk to you about. We're postponing the fitting until tomorrow. I spoke to your mother already."

"All right, Papa. Then maybe I'll nap for a few hours. I didn't sleep well last night."

Marie couldn't contain herself. "Yes, Papa, she was helping --"

"I was helping Marie learn how to braid. See how well she does?" Corinne whirled around to display her coif.

"I've known how to braid since I was seven!"

"But you can always use more practice. Isn't she talented, Papa?"

"It's you I've come to talk about, not Marie," replied M. Hebert. "I need your help today."

"Is the mare giving birth?" Marie interrupted. "Corinne is good with horses, Papa. Gerard even said so."

"And what would Gerard know about it?" scowled their father. "Stop talking nonsense; there's no mare even close to giving birth. It'll be two or three more days at the earliest."

"But--"

"Hush, Marie, you're annoying Papa with all your chatter."

"She is indeed. Corinne, there's talk of a unicorn in the town. A woman claims to have seen it in the stream that runs by the church. And a few of the young men think they saw it while hunting in LaGuerre's Wood. None of the stories are confirmed, of course, but there's enough talk to make me think there may be something to it. I'm organizing a hunting party today, Corinne, and I want you to be part of it."

"Me, Papa? But I've never even carried a weapon!"

"And neither will you carry one today."

"What use would I be without it?"

"You would be the most important member of the hunting party, my dear. Do you know anything about unicorns?"

"Marie's nurse used to tell me stories about them, years ago," answered Corinne. "I remember a little. The unicorn is a great white steed with a single horn in the middle of its forehead, about a meter long. They're solitary creatures; you never see them in herds or even in pairs, but always alone. Their horns are magical, people say. If you've been poisoned, drinking the powder of ground unicorn horn will reverse the effects of the poison and you won't die, or even get sick. And if a unicorn touches a wound with its horn, the wound is instantly healed. It can purify bad water, too, just by dipping its horn in it."

"The nurse taught you well," replied her father. "She's not as ignorant as she appeared."

"Oh, she wasn't ignorant at all, Papa," said Corinne. "She talked to us day and night, telling us all kinds of stories."

"Why do you want to hunt the unicorn, Papa?" asked Marie. "It sounds nice."

"Men hunt the unicorn for its horn, Marie," explained Corinne. "The horn has healing power. After they kill the unicorn, they cut off the horn and ground it to a powder. Elixir made from this powder cures any number of diseases, and people pay a great deal of money for it."

"That's right, my girl. If I can get a unicorn's horn, I'll be a rich man. And you'll be a rich man's daughter. That's why I'm asking you to help me."

"I still don't understand, Papa. If I don't know how to shoot a bow and arrow or throw a spear, how can I possibly be of any help in the hunting party?"

"Ah, then your nurse didn't teach you everything. She never told you about the virgin?"

"The Virgin Mary?"

"No, the virgin who tames the unicorn. Of course she's a symbol of the Blessed Mother, but in reality she's just a maid like you. The unicorn is attracted to virgins because they're pure, like himself. If a virgin is sitting in a field, the unicorn will approach her and lay his head in her lap, as gentle as a puppy. It is said that no man can approach him in his fierceness, but that he'll lay aside his wild nature and fawn over a virgin, and all she has to do is sit in the field alone and wait for him. We'll take care of the rest."

"He only comes to virgins, Papa? No one else?"

"Only virgins, Corinne. That's why none of the other women in the house will do, only you."

Corinne's arms tightened around Marie. "I'm scared, Papa. What if the story isn't true? And even if it is true, how can a beast know if a girl is a virgin?"

"Beasts know a great many things, Corinne, even the common beasts in our stable."

Marie felt Corinne tense and turn to face their father.

"I'm scared, Papa. Unicorns are as big as stallions, and more powerful. Nurse used to tell me that they pierce their enemies straight through with their horns and carry them off--wicked men, wolves and even elephants!"

"Nonsense. There are no elephants in Brussels. The woman was truly ignorant, just as I suspected. Go the stables as soon as you've had your breakfast, in about an hour. I'll have one of the grooms saddle a horse for you and escort you to the last place the unicorn was seen, the meadow beyond Loisel's."

"What's a virgin, Papa?"

"Don't ask so many questions, Marie."

"Am I a virgin like Corinne?"

"Of course you are."

"Then can I go, too? I'm not afraid."

"Don't be ridiculous. It's too dangerous."

"Then why are you sending me, Papa?" cried Corinne.

"It's not dangerous for you, Corinne. Didn't I tell you the unicorn will lay its head in your lap?"

"Then it won't be dangerous for Marie, either. Let her come, Papa. I won't be afraid if she's with me. Please?" Her voice, with its practiced earnestness and arresting music, won him over as it did every male she'd ever spoken to.

"Your mother will have my head. Hold onto her in the saddle and leave that dog tied in the yard. If he follows her he'll spoil everything. The two of you will have to be sitting in that meadow alone! Do you understand?"

"Thank you, Papa!" Both girls bounded from the bed to hug him.

"It's against my better judgement," he responded gruffly. "Just sit quietly in the meadow and try to keep silent for once, Marie, even when the unicorn comes to you. Your escort will hide in the thicket and watch; he'll signal the hunters when the unicorn is off his guard. Then we'll come and finish him off. Hurry now, we leave in an hour!" The girls listened to his heavy footsteps on the stairs for a few moments after he left, Corinne in anguish, Marie in ecstasy. She was the first to break the silence.

"Oh, thank you, Corinne! I know you're just doing it because you feel bad about not letting me go with you last night, but thank you all the same! A real unicorn! I can't believe you're letting me do this when you wouldn't even let me help you with the mare last night, and that's not dangerous at all. But wait, Corinne, why did Papa say her time wasn't to come for another few days? Gerard knows all about horses; how could he make a mistake like that?"

"Shut up, Marie."

"Corinne?"

"Just leave me alone. Here, Put on your clothes and we'll go downstairs."

Corinne thrust a clean dress into Marie's hands and busied herself with her own affairs, ignoring Marie's attempts at conversation.

Chapter 3

The yard was bustling with activity that morning. Horses had been saddled in preparation for the hunt; Marie could hear them stamping outside as the men mounted. Most of the voices were familiar to her, but there were others, as well. No doubt Papa had enticed men from the village to join the party with promises of grand rewards. "How many men are outside, Corinne?" she asked.

Easily twenty or twenty-five. Some I've never seen before, but most of them I know. Claude and his father are there, and all the men who work for Papa. They're carrying bows and arrows, and some of them have spears."

"Is Gerard with them?"

"You're always looking for Gerard!"

"Well, is he?"

"I don't see him. They're all heading for the gate now, with Papa leading them. The dogs are already fanned out on the hill."

"Justice, too?"

"No, not Justice. Papa said to leave him tied up in the yard, remember?"

"Poor Justice, he'll miss all the fun. Can I have some breakfast? I'm starving."

"Go ask Cook to give you something."

"Don't you want some?"

"I don't feel well."

"I'll tell Mama to give you some peppermint tea."

"No! Don't tell her. I'll get it myself." Marie heard heavy boots outside the open door. "On second thought, I'll just wait for you in the yard. Maybe I just need some fresh air. I think I smell bacon, Marie! Why don't you see what Cook is making?"

"The only thing I smell is porridge, the usual. But I'm hungry enough to eat the whole pot." Marie ran her hand along the wall, down the hall to the kitchen, where she

ate her fill and endured her mother's cautions about the dangers of the day that awaited her.

"...and listen to Corinne," Mme. Hebert continued. "Stay right by her every second; you're not to be left alone. Gerard will be nearby watching you both, and he'll signal the others when the unicorn comes."

"Gerard?" Marie reddened a little as she said it.

"I know he's your favorite, ma chere, but don't get foolish ideas. Your father doesn't like it, but he's the only man I'd trust with you and Corinne, and for once your father didn't get his way. I told him if he didn't approve my choice I wouldn't allow either of you to go, and then all his schemes would come to ruin. It put him in a fine temper, to be sure, but at least I know you're in good hands."

"I like Gerard."

"So do I. Now go; he's probably waiting for you in the yard. Where is Corinne?"

"She wanted to wait outside."

"Isn't she eating?"

"She said she didn't feel well."

"Probably all the excitement." She kissed Marie and sent her on her way. In the yard, all was quiet except for a soft nicker of a horse. Corinne gasped when Marie called her name.

"I didn't hear you come out, Marie. You scared me!"

"Is Gerard here? Mama said he's to meet us in the yard."

"And Mama knows best, my little rosebud!" laughed Gerard as he swept her off the ground. "Now up you go on my finest steed. Hold tight to the reins, there you go, while I lift up your sister to sit behind you. Oof! Been eating too many bon-bons of late, my sweet? Ouch!" Marie heard the slap and giggled.

"Why can't I ride by myself, Gerard? You let me in the back pasture."

"That's our secret. If your mama knew, she'd kill me." He swung up on his own horse and clicked his tongue as a signal for the girls' mount to follow.

"Can we canter, Gerard?"

"Not today, my love. Your sister's feeling a little queasy, and the last thing she needs is a bumpy ride. We'll just amble along 'til we get to the meadow. It's a fine day, Marie. Everything's in bloom. The hills are ablaze with wildflowers. I'm a fortunate man, I am, lord of the manor with two pretty ladies to keep me company."

Marie blushed at the compliment and Gerard chuckled to himself. "How is the ride, Corinne?"

"I'm all right. Just nervous is all. Are we almost there?"

"That's the place it was last seen, just around that bend of trees. There's a little fenced-in enclosure where I'm going to get you two settled, and then I'll take the horses into the woods downwind of you. Ah, here we are." Gerard dismounted and lifted the girls down.

"Will you stay close by, Gerard?" Corinne's voice was shaking.

"Of course, my love. I can be at your side in five seconds, if need be. But there's no cause to fear. Your brave little sister is right by your side, and you'll come to no harm. As soon as the beast lays its head in her lap, I'll sound the horn and summon the others. Then I'll sweep you off your feet and we'll ride off into the sunset together while they divide the spoils."

"That means I get to ride by myself," smiled Marie.

"If you can keep up with us!" laughed Gerard. "Ouch! Those boots, Corinne! I much prefer my ladies to be barefoot!"

"Of course she can keep up with us," said Corinne. "After all, you taught her to ride." She put her arm around Marie and led her to the middle of the clearing. "Sit very close to me," she said, "and be quiet. If you must talk, whisper. I'll tell you the minute I see anything." The horses trotted off with Gerard to be tied a good distance away from him, after which he doubled back and hid behind a tree within sight of the girls. They waited thus for perhaps an hour, Corinne starting at every rustle in the grass and Marie bubbling over with impatience, asking a hundred times if the unicorn was anywhere near. Corinne scanned her boundaries ceaselessly but saw nothing. "It may be just a legend after all," she said. "No one has ever said, 'I saw it.' It's always 'I think I saw' or 'it seems as if I saw.' And why would such a fearsome beast just lay himself down to die in a virgin's lap? And how would it know if a girl is a virgin?"

"Papa says he just does," answered Marie. "I believe Papa. Just because you can't see something doesn't mean it isn't there; I know that better than anyone."

"I'll really miss you when I get married," said Corinne.

"Silly, you'll live right in the next town. I'll get Gerard to take me there." Corinne said nothing, but held her close. "Corinne? He's here. I can . . . feel it, somehow. I can't explain it. Can you see him?"

Corinne peered into the trees. "I don't see anything. What do you mean, you feel it?"

"It's a shivery feeling, but not shivery cold. Shivery warm. Like when Justice licks my face, only it's so much more than that."

"You should see your face, Marie! It's glowing! And you're so hot; do you feel all right?"

"Corinne. The birds have stopped singing. He's coming closer. I'm sure he knows where we are, and he's coming to find us. He's a good beast, Corinne, and he loves me, I know he does. Maybe even more than Justice. Corinne, do we have to do this? Can't we just tell Gerard to keep quiet, and let him get away? Gerard! Can you hear me?" She jumped up, but Corinne pulled her down roughly.

"Be quiet, you little fool! You'll ruin everything! It's only a beast. Would you act so if they were hunting a stag, or a wild boar? Besides, it's nowhere to be seen. I really don't think--"

Her speech was interrupted by a trumpet call, cut short in mid-measure by a sickening crunch and the sound of a large body crashing through the brush. Corinne screamed. "Gerard! Gerard, are you there?" She pushed Marie aside and ran to him, weeping. Her wails stopped abruptly, though, and Marie assumed she had found him.

"Don't worry, Corinne," she called. "It's all right. Tell Gerard to be quiet and come wait with me. He's so close I can almost feel his breath. Come back, Corinne, come and see!"

Marie felt a stirring in the air next to her, and heard a soft whickering close to her ear. She dared not reach out to touch, not for fear, but for an awe that approached reverence. Slowly, softly, miraculously, the great beast knelt at her feet and lay his head in her lap. She fondled his mane and beard wonderingly, lovingly, and ran her hand along the astonishing horn. It was wet and smelled of gore. She wiped her hands on her

dress, then rubbed the horn until it was clean and dry. "Oh, if only I could see you," she whispered fervently. In one of those flashes of inspiration that come to a chosen few, she found herself knowing several things; not suddenly, as a great surprise, but as if she'd been sleeping and oblivious to them, and upon awaking knowing them for reality. Gerard was dead. The unicorn had killed him, and it was not to be questioned. Corinne was dead as well, by her own hand, and another soul, too, as yet unnamed. Marie struggled to grasp this last revelation, as the communication was not in words but in the deeper language of feelings and impressions. The other soul that was taken, it was very young. Younger than a baby, going back and back, a wee little being in a tiny, dark world.

"Corinne was with child," she whispered with tears running down her cheeks. She and Gerard. She loved Gerard. They were planning to run away together after you were dead. I loved them both so much!" It seemed that her heart could not contain her grief, and she wept without constraint. "They never told me their secret, and now they're gone. You'd better go, too, before the hunters come. I don't think I could bear to lose you even though I've only just now found you. Go, please, before it's too late." The beast was silent. During Marie's revelations, he had not made a sound; this new silence was a ceasing of communication rather than a ceasing of noise. The baying of hounds echoed in the distance, and she shoved the unicorn to make him move. He would not. His head lay heavy in her lap and she wondered if he were sleeping. "Wake up!" she screamed. "Don't you hear them? They're coming to kill you! Run, while you can! Please, tell me you're not going to stay here and let them take you. Tell me you're not going to die!"

She knew the truth just as she knew about Corinne, and Gerard, and the babe; in an instant, but as if she had known all along. And she shed bitter, bitter tears, because she knew he loved her with a great and wild love, a pure love, a love she didn't understand or deserve; and because of this love, he would die.

"No!" she screamed as the dogs rushed upon them. She heard ripping flesh and crunching bone; whether hers or the beast's, she did not know, for she had lost all feeling. Racked with sobs, she buried her face in his mane and held him close. She heard the hunters call off the dogs and pierce the beast with their spears, but there was no need. He had died in her arms, as she knew he would.

Someone pried her fingers from his mane and lifted her up. Gerard? No, Gerard was dead. It was Papa, her own Papa. She prattled incoherently about Corinne, about Gerard, about a little baby with no name. M. Hebert clapped a hand over her mouth and hissed furiously in her ear, "Shut up, child! What if the Delacourts hear you?" He carried her away from the men, out of their hearing.

"Ah, poor Claude," whispered Marie.

"Claude will find another wife," he shot back bitterly. "Corinne was first in line, but it was a long line."

"Corinne didn't love Claude, Papa."

"Of course she didn't! What would she know of love? She was only a girl."

"She loved Gerard, Papa," Marie whispered. "They made a baby together. They knew you'd never allow them to marry, so they were planning to run away before Corinne had to marry Claude."

"They TOLD you these things?" her father roared.

"No, no, before today I never knew anything. I wanted to marry Gerard myself, but now I know that was foolish, a little girl's daydream. I didn't know anything about love, Papa, but I do now, just like I know the truth about Corinne.

"And who told you all this, Marie?"

"The unicorn, Papa. I don't know how, it wasn't in words, but suddenly I felt him and I just knew. He loved me, Papa. He really loved me. And now he's dead!" She cried uncontrollably.

"She's delirious with the shock," M. Hebert called back to his men. "I'm taking her home to her mother." He lifted her up to his own mount, then swung up in the saddle behind her. "I'll send a carriage for Corinne's body. The other, you may bury where it fell. I never liked him." He kicked the horse and put an arm around Marie.

"Papa! What about the unicorn?" M. Hebert jerked the reins to the right and turned back to his man.

"Cut off its horn, Jaques, and give it to me. With the body you can do what you will. The dogs have mangled it so badly it can't be salvaged; otherwise I'd have the head stuffed for a trophy."

"NO, Papa!" Marie shrieked. "Don't cut off his horn!"

"Hush, child, you don't know what you're talking about. This horn will provide for us for the rest of our lives. Now it's you I'll have to arrange for, and a blind girl's dowry is larger than a king's ransom."

"But I don't want--" She was cut off by a great shout from the men.

"Back, back! Give him air!"

"He's probably fainted is all."

"When he hacked off the beast's horn he got covered in blood. Like a fountain, it was!"

"Papa? What happened?"

"Jaques fainted, I think. He's passed out on the ground."

"Monsieur Hebert? I can't find a pulse!"

"My God, I think he's dead!"

M. Hebert cursed and leaped from his horse, leaving Marie holding the reins. "He was always a chicken-heart," he sneered. "Give me the horn." Marie didn't wait to hear more, but slapped the reins and dug her knees into the horse's flanks as Gerard had taught her. Ignoring the cries of the men behind her, she urged the horse to a canter, and then to a full gallop. Gerard had once told her that given no direction a horse will instinctively go home, and even after all that had passed that day she trusted his practical wisdom. Just as an added precaution, though, she willed the smell and feel of the stable into the horse's senses and hoped he would understand. He did.

Chapter 4

Justice was wild. Persistent lunging in the direction he'd seen Marie ride off had only succeeded in choking him half to death. His barking brought no aid from his usual allies, the grooms being employed in the hunt and the house servants under strict orders not to loose him. Red-eyed and frothing, he returned to the post which held his tether and began to dig. Earth flew beneath his paws, and he growled as he worked. He gripped the post in his powerful jaws and worried it frantically, but it stood firm, though

his mouth bled. A mound formed behind him as he dug. In the midst of his fury, a great fear seized him and he raced toward the hill with a roar, only to be cruelly jerked back, thrown into the air in a half-somersault and landing on his side, his flanks heaving. In seconds he recovered and sped back to the post to resume his desperate fight. The air was thick with whirlwinds of dirt, stinging his eyes and hurting his lungs.. A racking cough replaced his growls, yet he pursued his mission relentlessly. He seized the post in his teeth yet again and felt--at last!--a slight giving way as he tugged. With a mighty leap he flew six feet before touching the ground, an avenging angel bent on destruction. His flight was checked at the end of his tether, but this time he did not stop running. The post inclined in his direction; his feet continued their mad scramble, and suddenly he burst free, speeding over the hills with tether and post flying behind him.

He spotted his master's steed only a half mile from the yard and heard Marie's cries. The child had no fear, only grief, but Justice in his frenzy could not discern that. He barked a warning that the horse did not heed, then ran beside him, nipping the right foreleg. "No, Justice, no! Go home! I'm coming!" yelled Marie. For the first time in his life, he disobeyed her. He cut across the path in front of her to attack from the other side, and the tether tangled in the horse's legs. With a deafening scream, the steed went down. Much later, Marie would recall sensations of the accident as if it were drawn out in slow motion, lasting whole minutes--the crack of a bone snapping, her instinctive clutch of the mane to avoid being thrown, a headlong plunge and roll as the earth turned over and over. She remembered nothing further. In reality the fall was a matter of seconds. The horse rolled over her once and then lay still, eyes wide with fear and pain. Justice, tangled in the rope which had wrapped around the horse, could only just reach his beloved child. He nosed her everywhere, wriggling his head under her arm to be hugged, licking her face, whining like a puppy. There was no response. Finally he pointed his nose toward heaven and howled.

It was this sight that greeted M. Hebert and his men as they charged toward the stable in pursuit of Marie. The party reined to a halt; he dismounted and killed the two beasts with his own hands--one with a merciful slit to the throat, the other with a clubbing so severe that even the most stout-hearted of the men had to turn away. Then he lifted his child in his arms and carried her the rest of the way home on foot, lest her trauma be worsened by the gait of a spirited steed.

Chapter 5

Though Marie lay in her bed as if in peaceful slumber, her spirit wept and wandered. As her sorrow soared, she began to fly--at first close to the ground, smelling fresh furrows and manure, new-mown grass and flowers, then higher and higher, away from everything familiar, at dizzying speeds. "I'm falling up," she thought. "How can this be?" A sensation of warmth enveloped her, and she thought she must be approaching the sun.

"Don't be afraid," she heard. Her heart failed her, and what began as a prickle of fear sent shock waves through her body that made her hairs stand on end. She stopped in midflight and plummeted toward earth, falling and falling for days. "Don't be afraid," she heard over and over. "I'm carrying you. I've been carrying you all your life. Can't you see me?"

"Of course not!" cried Marie. "I've never seen anything!"

"Oh, but you have, child. You've seen Justice, Corinne and Gerard, your mama and papa."

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"Look not with your eyes, which reveal only shadows at best, even among the sighted. Look with your heart, little one. See me and know me. Know that I've been bearing you these twelve years that you've been on earth, not as a steed bears a rider, but as a mother bears a child. Doesn't a babe know its mother at the moment of birth, even though it's lived in the darkness within her and has never seen her face? Know me, then. Know that I've carried you and cherished you and protected you. It's time to be born! Open your eyes, child! Watch the darkness run away before you!"

"Am I dying?"

"No, child. I'm taking you home, to your own bed. You will sleep a very deep sleep, a healing sleep, and I'll come to you in your dreams and tell you many things. And when you awake, you will watch the shadows flee and begin your life anew, this time with the blessing of sight as others have.

"I'll SEE?! My mama and papa? And Justice?"

"Hush, little one. I have much to tell you before you wake."

And she slept long and soundly, while her father filed the tip of the unicorn's horn to a powder at her bedside and mixed it with his own spittle in his impatience at the maid who took too long to fetch the water. He pressed his moistened fingers to Marie's lips and worked her teeth apart, rubbing the mixture on her tongue and praying that she'd swallow while her mother wept in the doorway. Still she slept. He sat with her all the night, and in the morning when she yet had not stirred he dashed the horn against the door frame, breaking it in two, and flung the stump of it against the wall in a rage, cursing as he left the room. Almost as an afterthought, he returned with a heavy sigh and touched his little daughter's eyelids with his fingers, as if closing the eyes of the dead. "It was only a bloody fairy tale, after all," he growled, and slammed the door violently as he left the room. Marie slept on, while the household mourned Corinne and buried her in the family plot, while doctors from three towns conferred around her bed and concurred that there was nothing they could do. She was conscious of nothing save the beast at her side, his wondrous horn flashing sparks in the dark, illuminating his lush mane cascading down a rippling neck like froth on the great sea swells, his beard swinging gracefully as he spoke, with a voice like thunder and wind and water all at once. And his eyes, his eyes drew her closer and closer until she drowned in him and saw him no more.

A piercing scream in the early morning hours brought the whole household running to Marie's room. The maid who had been assigned to watch her was weeping hysterically, and the bed was empty. "It was only a moment that I slept!" she cried. "A moment! And when I opened my eyes, she was gone! Oh! The spirit of the unicorn has ravished her, body and soul!" And the maid flung herself across the bed in a new agony of tears. M. Hebert had his own suspicions and raced down the stairs toward the stables, followed by his wife and the servants. They found Marie kneeling in the open field, her hands raised toward the hills as the first orange fingers of light shot across the sky.

She turned to them, one finger to her lips and her other hand stretched with palm facing them to halt their flight. "It's the sunrise," she whispered. "Corinne told me it was pretty, and it is. It truly is." She walked toward the little company, which stood agape as

if under a spell, and touched her mother's cheeks with both hands. "Mama. He said I'd know you as soon as I was born, and he was right." Mme. Hebert, embraced her, pronouncing blessings on the Virgin Mother who had restored her only living child, and M. Hebert embraced them both, too overcome for words. The servants rejoiced, and it was not long before news of Marie's healing had spread all over the countryside.

Chapter 6

Although Marie shrank from celebrity status, her parents did everything possible to promote it. They contrived occasions for an increasing number of social galas and delighted in parading Marie in front of their impressive guest roster, arrayed in lavish gowns. Marie had always loved to sing, had warbled like a lark from her baby years, but now the Heberts engaged a master who accompanied her in classical and folk renditions at her parents' affairs. She endured his tutelage patiently several times a week, and to her delight discovered a new passion, not in the musical score but in the words beneath it. She was never exactly sure of the moment of enlightenment, since the master assumed she was parroting the words by rote. She had learned to chant her alphabet as a child while listening to Corinne repeat her lessons, and now pored over her sister's old schoolwork to associate the names to the letters. Over the months, sounds and shapes cemented their relationships in her mind and she found that she could decipher the printed word in all kinds of documents, including an old journal of Corinne's.

Unlike most fathers, M. Hebert had kept a tutor for his elder daughter in hopes that an educated girl would attract a wealthier husband. He had no such plans for Marie, banking instead on his wild card, the horn of the unicorn, to lure a suitable match. Marie was oblivious to all this, enduring her parents' social extravaganzas and then fleeing to her room after her "performance" to dive into Corinne's journal, painstakingly copying each line in the space below it, matching each letter exactly.

In time she learned to write fairly intelligibly, albeit the spelling was completely phonetic, and began a journal of her own on the blank pages where Corinne had stopped. She wrote the way she used to run through the tall grass with Justice as a child; plowing headlong through her consciousness with abandon, reveling in all her senses, all her joys, all her tears. It was during one of these solitary interludes that her mother burst into her room flushed with excitement, screaming Marie's name.

She stopped abruptly when she saw her daughter hunched over her book. "What are you scribbling there, Marie? Put it down and take my hands--I have wonderful news!" She pulled Marie to her feet and danced her around the room. "You're to be married! The Delacourts have agreed! Never in my fondest dreams did I imagine they would approach us after we lost Corinne, and who would guess that Claude would express an interest in my little Marie!"

"Claude?"

"Yes! Claude! Oh, Marie, you'll be the wealthiest girl in all Brussels! Think about it! Papa and I are so excited!"

"Claude?"

"Why, what's the matter? You're as white as a ghost. Sit down, child, you're overcome."

"Mama, how could you? Claude isn't interested in me. He's never even spoken to me. All he's interested in is the unicorn's horn, like everyone else in the town. Please, Mama, convince Papa to turn him down. I hate Claude!"

"Nonsense, Marie, you don't even know him. Claude is a fine man with good breeding and manners, from a prominent family. You'll never lack for anything, you may be sure of that."

"Yes I will, Mama."

"And what would that be?"

"I don't know, exactly. I just know there's more than . . ." she paused, at a loss for words. "More than Claude. I don't know what it is that I really want, but I know it's not Claude. Mama, before Corinne died, before I could see, I used to want to be just like her. I wanted the wedding trousseau, the feast, the fuss. I wanted to be princess for a day. I even fancied myself in love with Gerard, since he was the only man I ever talked to. But now, reading through Corinne's old diary, I see how terribly unhappy she was. She hated everyone. Sometimes she even hated Gerard for not being rich enough to marry her. In my childishness I thought she had everything, but now . . . Mama, what if I just never married at all? When I was blind Papa never gave it a thought. Why is it so different now?"

"Stop this foolish talk. Of course you'll marry. You'll marry Claude Delacourt. Ordinarily we would put off finding a husband until you're much older; in fact, your Papa and I had not even made any inquiries. But the Delacourts approached us, and they do not want a long engagement. Claude turned thirty last month, and he's anxious to start a family. They made a very reasonable offer, too. I expected all your suitors to ask for the unicorn's horn as a dowry, but the Delacourts only want half of it. They're fine people, Marie. They'll be good to you."

"I won't marry him, Mama. I wish to God I had a lover like Corinne did, to carry me away from him, but all I have is you. And if you won't help me, I'll run away by myself."

Her mother slapped her, hard, for the first time in her life. "If your father heard you talk like that, he'd kill you!" she said as she stood up to leave. "We have guests coming at eight, and the Delacourts are invited. I'll expect you downstairs."

"I hope Claude dies!" Marie muttered under her breath as she closed the door after her mother. "He's certainly old enough!" A tremor at the corner of her mouth soon turned into a torrent of tears, and when she finally fell asleep the long shadows of early twilight were just beginning to flood the room.
