

## Chapter One

It wasn't the grief, the anger, or the desperation that would drive me crazy. It was the stillness. The unbearable absence of the familiar sounds of everyday life: honking taxis, police sirens, the rumbling of garbage cans, and music coming from the cafes. Not even the wind seemed to be audible here. Without a sound, it bent the waist-high prairie grass and swept around the horse stalls like a fox hunting chickens.

I stretched out my hand. *Come here, wind. Let me feel that you're there. Let me feel that I exist.*

A gentle breeze wrapped around my fingers, cool and soft. I laughed quietly and it seemed that the very ground under my feet was shocked by the sound of my voice. Oh, this silence. What I wouldn't give to hear the endless arguing of our upstairs neighbors. They used to get on my nerves – Cally and Svensson, the artist couple who never seemed to agree on anything. Now I missed them.

I stood on a small knoll and looked at what was now my home, as of a week ago: a ranch, built of thick, whisky-colored wood and surrounded by rickety fences with peeling paint. Near the main house were large stables that opened onto countless acres of pasture land. Weathered and slightly askew, idyllic, cozy. Tourists could rent rustic guest rooms here to enjoy a few days of vacation far from the hectic pace of a big city. I had a large room under the eaves. They had gone to so much trouble: ordered furniture, bought decorations, and made my room really nice. And I wanted nothing more than to get out of here. I felt sore and raw, and absolutely not ready yet. For a new beginning, a new home, a new life.

"Ariana?"

*Go away.* I ducked my head. No one called me Ariana. Maybe I could crawl even deeper inside the hood of my sweatshirt, just disappear into it.

"Ariana?"

*Go away.* I took a deep breath. "Yes?"

Susan stood next to me.

"We're ready to eat dinner. I couldn't reach you on your cell phone."

That was probably because cell phone towers hadn't yet made it to Texas. Reception outside the main house was practically nonexistent, and even there the wifi barely reached my room in the attic. "I didn't get a message."

Susan leaned forward until she could peer around the barrier of my hood and see my face. She had Mom's eyes. I quickly looked away.

"Everything okay?"

I decided that was a rhetorical question and didn't answer it. The accident had been four weeks ago now. Absolutely nothing would be 'okay' for me anytime soon.

Mom had fled Texas after she finished high school because she couldn't take life in the country anymore. She went to college in New York and soon met my father, with whom she rented a tiny place in Chinatown, while Susan took over their parent's farm in Little Creek. The two sisters had never really been close. Nonetheless, when she heard about the

accident, my aunt had immediately packed her bags, left the ranch in the care of her husband and two managers, and come to New York as fast as she could.

The last time I had visited her was eight years ago, and we left earlier than planned because Mom and Susan got to fighting again. As a result, our first meeting had been stiff. Dad didn't have any siblings and my grandparents were long dead. Susan, as my only living relative, was such a stranger to me that it was difficult to get used to the idea of living with her.

I forced myself to smile. "Okay, I'm coming."

*I don't belong here. Why can't I just wake up from this nightmare?*

Susan smiled back at me. She seemed relieved. "Macy made you a fruit salad."

The thought of the fun-loving cook brightened my mood a little. Susan reached an arm out in my direction, but then she hesitated. I slipped underneath it and together we walked down the hill.

An aunt who is a stranger to me, an unwanted new beginning, and the infinite expanses of the Texan prairie. Would any of this ever feel right?

"So are you excited about your first day of school?" My Uncle Richard winced in the next moment as Susan shot him a somewhat menacing glare. "I mean... uh..." He took off his glasses and cleaned the lenses with his shirt. "Things will work themselves out." He put on a brave smile.

Across the table from me, Susan rolled her eyes, but a smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

The big table in the middle of the cozy ranch kitchen groaned under the weight of all the delicious foods Macy had made. Grilled meat, coleslaw, and a few classic Tex-Mex dishes like fajitas, enchiladas, and tortillas were stacked high on brightly patterned plates. As soon as I came into the room my mouth started to water. The guest rooms weren't rented out right now, but that didn't stop Macy from pulling out all the stops. While the tourists usually ate with us in the main house to get that authentic ranch experience, the workers had their own small dining room in one of the outbuildings, but they were also spoiled by Marcy's excellent cooking.

"Thanks, Richard." I couldn't suppress a grin as I helped myself to the coleslaw. Even after years on the ranch, Richard still looked like he was wearing a costume in jeans and a plaid shirt. He had studied history and archaeology, even earned a PhD, and then love had gotten him stranded here in the grasslands. Richard and nature seemed to abhor each other like the same poles of two magnets. Not only did he suffer from hay fever and cat allergies all year long, he was a vegetarian, which here in the cattle state of Texas was equivalent to the eighth deadly sin. With his gold-framed glasses, soft facial features, and a tall, slight frame, he looked like an academic and just plain out of place. He helped Susan with the bookkeeping and smaller chores around the farm. But his main profession was teaching history at a college in Odessa, the closest larger city.

I looked at Susan and caught a glimpse of the way she looked at him, accompanied by a little smile that crinkled the delicate skin under her eyes. She loved him. Probably also

because it was for her sake that he took on the plant and animal life that seemed to have it in for him every day anew.

“I’m sure you’re going to like it here, Ariana,” said Susan. “After all, you’ve hardly been here a week.” The forced optimism in her voice couldn’t be masked even by her beaming smile. “That gives me an idea. What would you think about taking care of one of our horses from now on? I could imagine that would be a good way for you to get more familiar with life on a ranch.”

The thought made me uncomfortable. “Uh...” Me, responsible for a horse? In New York people had little pets like cats or dogs. Personally, I had never had anything larger than a hamster. Susan’s American Quarter Horses, on the other hand, were enormous, majestic animals, and to be honest, they intimidated me.

“I’ll think about it,” I answered as noncommittally as possible.

Richard, who apparently sensed that I was uncomfortable with the idea, filled the gap and abruptly changed the subject before Susan could pursue the topic. “We’re going to have to buy more water.”

Susan pushed her half-full plate away, as if she had suddenly lost her appetite. “How on earth can this go on?”

“Does this have to do with the algae problem?” I had overheard Susan and Richard whispering about it several times, but hadn’t grasped how serious the situation was. The only algae I knew about sometimes clogged the fountain in Central Park, but were otherwise harmless.

Susan’s expression became serious. “The red algae are highly toxic and the horses take them in when they drink. Even the slightest bloom can be deadly. They pass through every filter, even the most innovative systems. We have no idea where they came from all of a sudden. And weirdly, the other towns in this region don’t seem to be affected. In the meantime, we’re pumping groundwater, even though it’s forbidden. But that’s the only water that doesn’t seem to be affected.”

I wanted to say something, but the words stuck in my throat.

Susan took a piece of toast from her plate, broke off a piece, and crumbled it between her fingers, lost in thought. “For us, it’s a catastrophe. We usually draw most of the water for the ranch from the rivers. We need it to water the animals, to clean the stables, for all kinds of things. It’s very expensive to buy additional water, and not a solution for the long term.”

“But isn’t the government doing something about it?” I interjected.

Susan gave a tight smile. “The county government is already informed. Members of the environmental protection agency were already here and took samples. But we haven’t heard anything from the officials since then.” When Susan saw my concerned expression, she seemed to flip an internal switch. “But enough of that! Those are our worries, and not yours. Tomorrow is your first day of school, and that’s what we wanted to talk about.”

She took her plate, stood up and shook the crumbs into the garbage, and put the plate in the sink. “Little Creek High School has a great reputation. I’m sure you’ll make friends there quickly. All the teenagers on the farms around here go to school there. I promise you, it will be easy to get acclimated.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it will be.” Inwardly, I sighed. The cowgirls, the farmer boys, and me... we’d become the best of friends.

Or I would finally wake up from this nightmare. In our chaotic apartment in the middle of Brooklyn. Surrounded by my parents, my friends, and the familiar sounds in the streets.

I was so deep in these wishful thoughts that I jumped when Susan put her hand on my shoulder. I hadn’t even noticed that she had come over to me. “Are you finished eating? We have a little surprise for you.”

Susan, Richard, and I walked across the neatly swept farmyard. The unbearable heat of the day was slowly receding, and the horses had already been brought to the stables. The only sounds were the quiet chirping of crickets and the muffled voices of ranch hands from the adjacent building. We headed for an old barn. On my first tour of the ranch, Susan had told me that’s where the ranch workers parked their cars and some larger farm tools were stored, but I had never been inside it. Susan opened the latch and with Richard’s help pushed the big wooden doors apart. Soft rays of sun fell inside the barn and illuminated a pickup truck. A beast of a vehicle, painted frog green, with enormous tires. The truck looked like it had already seen some action, but was still impressive to behold. The chrome had been polished and the rust was cleverly concealed by paint. Instead of two headlights, it had four. Two were mounted up on the roof, and even the brackets holding them gleamed in that remarkably vivid green. For a split second I stared at the front of the truck and asked myself who or what it reminded me of. My eyes were drawn again to the protruding headlights on the roof, which looked something like ears. Then it occurred to me: Shrek. I loved the adventuresome ogre from the DreamWorks films. He was the same color, and his ears looked just like that, sticking out just like the headlights on the pickup. This vehicle simply had to be called Shrek.

Susan came over to me and pressed something cool and metal into my hand. “For you.”

I looked at the car key in the palm of my hand. “For me?” I asked in disbelief. I was supposed to drive Shrek?

Richard nodded, pleased. Susan grinned at me expectantly. “Do you see anyone else out here?”

“Oh,” I whispered, completely taken by surprise. “I mean...” I looked at both of them. “Thank you. Thank you so much. This is so generous.” I wanted to smile and be excited, but the memories overtook me like a black wave. Until now, I had only driven with Dad. We had practiced in the insane traffic of New York City, and he had grabbed the dashboard tight when I tried to back his beloved car into a parking space. Since my parents had died in the accident, I hadn’t sat behind a steering wheel. The thought of driving around in Shrek and being mobile in this backwoods was surely tempting, but... I straightened my shoulders with determination and held the car key out to Susan. “I’m sorry, but I can’t accept this. I don’t know if I’m ready yet... and anyway, the horses are more important. Buy water with the money, and I’ll take the school bus.”

The corners of Susan's mouth turned down. She had probably thought I'd throw my arms around her neck in gratitude. She and Richard stared at me without saying a word, and since Susan didn't want to take the key, I crossed my arms awkwardly across my chest. "Nonsense," Susan suddenly exclaimed. She seemed to have caught herself again. "The truck belongs to the ranch; we didn't buy it just for you. When you go to college in a couple years, it will be used as a backup, just like it was before." She came toward me and placed a hand on my shoulder. Instinctively she seemed to know that I wasn't ready for a hug yet. "What happened with your parents was a terrible accident, and I know you're scared. But here on the plains, a car is essential."

I looked into Susan's eyes, so familiar and yet unknown, and nervously played with the key in my hand.

"How about taking it for a test drive first?" Richard smiled at me encouragingly, his thumbs hooked into the pockets of his jeans.

I looked back and forth between him and Susan again. They both meant well, and I didn't want to disappoint them. "Okay."

"Then let's go." Susan nodded at me confidently. "The truck doesn't have individual seats, it has a bench. We can all fit next to each other with no problem."

With trembling hands, I opened the door and we all clambered into the front. It smelled like a mixture of beeswax and lemon cleaner, and the worn leather of the seat tugged on my jeans as I scooted back into position.

"All the important addresses in Little Creek are already saved in the navigation system," Susan explained, pointing to the little device attached to the front windshield with suction cups. She leaned all the way across Richard, opened the glove compartment, and pointed inside. "In here you'll also find a credit card for the gas station in Little Creek. That way you won't need to pay with cash, unless you have to fill the tank somewhere else."

"That's incredibly generous, thank you," I repeated somewhat stiffly. They had really thought of everything.

"Do you want to start the engine?" Susan prompted me.

"Sure." I sounded more optimistic than I felt. Mom and Dad's accident had been just four weeks ago. Although I hadn't been in the car, I had felt sick every time I'd been in a car since then. When Richard and Susan had picked me up from the airport, it had taken all the strength and will power I had to force myself to get into their unfamiliar car. I took a deep breath. *You can do this. You are strong. You will not let the fear win.* I buckled my seatbelt, then turned the key firmly in the ignition and put my sweaty-palmed hands on the steering wheel. *I will not let fear win. I am strong. I can do this.* Shrek sounded like an airplane taking off. It rumbled and growled, bucked once, and then the motor chugged along like a beating heart. Astonishingly, my heart also seemed to beat in its normal rhythm again. *Hi Shrek,* I thought. *We'll make a good team, won't we?*

I drove a few tentative circles around the farmyard before I dared turn onto the narrow road that led to the ranch. Even if Shrek had never heard of power steering, the motor packed quite the horse power. Steering felt like turning the stubborn wheel of a huge ship. Nonetheless, I managed the test drive without incident and felt happy and relieved

when it was over. Susan and Richard also seemed to be pleased. I had faced my fears head on, and this time when I thanked them again, I meant it from the bottom of my heart.

Both of them waved away my thanks modestly, sending me off to bed with a laugh, reminding me I had school in the morning. That was only a joke, of course, but it felt less forced than things had so far. Susan wanted to check on a pregnant mare one more time, Richard needed to prepare for his classes in the coming week, and I texted with my best friend Tammy while watching a Netflix series. Almost like a normal family.

That thought brought a twinge of pain, but I didn't let grief get the upper hand again. Susan and Richard would never replace Mom and Dad, but maybe we could figure out a way to live with each other, when we got to know each other better. When it stopped feeling like I was just a visitor here.

Although I had texted Tammy from my room several times, she didn't answer. I scrolled through Instagram for a while, but there were no pictures of her there, either. Weird. That wasn't like her at all. Tammy liked to post energetic pictures of her martial arts moves, and had earned herself a four-digit number of followers. That was probably in part because at barely 4 feet 11 inches tall, with long black hair and a doll's face, she didn't look like a stereotypical, muscular karate master. She looked more like a martial arts elf, who could take on just about anyone. Because she had been doing martial arts basically since she could walk, she was impressively good and she deserved each and every like. I wrote her one last time and then went to the bathroom to change into my pajamas.

The small room smelled like freshly washed towels and recently installed plumbing fixtures – Susan had had the bathroom renovated just for me. If she had told me that beforehand, I would have assured her that I didn't need that kind of luxury. Our bathroom at home in New York felt like one of the oldest in the world, with squealing copper pipes, chipped porcelain fixtures, and faucets that had long since been rubbed bare. Mom and Dad always talked about having it renovated, but never had the money for it. And I had loved our chaos.

This bathroom, in contrast, seemed as new and sterile as in a hotel. Only the pink towels gave it a cheerful splash of color. I slipped into my pajamas, consisting of shorts and one of Dad's old band t-shirts, and brushed my teeth before padding back to my room.

Still no reply from Tammy. Frustrated, I dropped my phone back onto the bed and looked around indecisively. It was only a little past nine, but I couldn't reach my best friend and the new episode of *Shadow Hunters* wasn't really grabbing my attention either. And maybe it wasn't such a bad idea to go to bed earlier than usual. I was supposed to meet with Principal Carmack for a short talk before classes started. And I didn't know my way around the school at all and had no idea where my classrooms or locker would be. So I pulled the blinds down and nestled into the pillows. In the semidarkness, the room felt especially unfamiliar. I had hardly been able to bring any of my beloved vintage furniture from New York. It wouldn't have fit under the slanted ceiling here anyway. Susan apparently knew a creative carpenter, because all the shelves and cabinets fit perfectly in the space beneath the roof. The room was cleverly organized so every corner could be used to the fullest. But most of the moving boxes still stood against the wall, untouched. The first nights at the

ranch I had woken up in the middle of the night and didn't know where I was. I pulled the covers up to my nose. The sheets were my own and still smelled like the fabric softener Mom always used. My heart hurt.

There had been too many 'last times' lately: the last night in our apartment, the last visit to my parents' grave. A last walk through the familiar living room. A last peek into Mom's closet. A last container of homemade lasagna in the freezer.

Fortunately, we didn't have to empty the apartment, because my parents had bought it years ago, when Susan had paid Mom her share of their inheritance. Now it seemed like too much stress for Susan to rent out the apartment, since she wouldn't be nearby if there were problems with the renters.

So she had only cleared out the closets and cabinets, given it a thorough clean, and offered the houseplants to a neighbor so they wouldn't die. We had tossed white sheets over the furniture and given a copy of the key to the building manager so he could check on things once in a while. Mom and Dad had opened a savings account when I was born so I could go to college someday. I was relieved that I wouldn't have to sell the apartment to pay for that, either. Because I swore to myself: someday I would live there again. In New York, my city, in my home.

A nervous restlessness overcame me and I sat up to drink another sip of water. But that wasn't enough to soothe me. I had to do something with my hands. I had to occupy myself with something to keep my mind from constantly thinking about Mom and Dad. Tomorrow was my first day of school, and although I wasn't interested in the new school and classmates and teachers I didn't know, I still wanted to make a good impression. My plans for college and beyond required a high gpa, so I would have to maintain my good grades.

I swung my legs over the edge of the bed, switched on the lamp on the nightstand, and stood up. I let my gaze sweep the room again until a dark wood box caught my attention. Mom and I had found the box at a flea market in the Bronx, and the seller had claimed it was an antique. I didn't care if what he said was true or not, I just fell in love with it immediately. It was big, fairly heavy, and solidly crafted. The hasp was made in the shape of a large bronze fish that encircled the lock. The inside of the box had given off a faint scent of sandalwood, and I had polished the dark, red-brown wood again and again to breathe new life into it. I crouched down and gently opened the box's heavy lid. Countless little brown glass bottles were lined up in neat rows inside. Dad had jokingly called this my very own personal poison cabinet. He always thought the tiny dark bottles with black caps looked like something a serial killer would have. That was absurd, of course. The little bottles weren't filled with poison, but with essential oils.

Other girls were interested in expensive clothes and make up, worked out every day, or spent all their money on books. My world was scents.

Dad had been a chemist for a big company and part of his job was creating scents for cleaning products so they would smell like freshly washed laundry or clean bathrooms. I had inherited my sensitive nose from him. I perceived the world not only in colors and sounds, but also had an especially keen memory for smells. I could still remember how the air had smelled the last time I was in Central Park with Tammy, and the exact aroma of the hot

chocolate with cinnamon my parents had bought for me years ago at the ice skating rink at Rockefeller Center. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. The potpourri of various oils filled my nose, as thick and rich as a concert at Carnegie Hall. I gave my sense of smell regular workouts with these bottles. I closed my eyes, unscrewed one of the caps from a bottle chosen at random, and named the scent. I didn't want to follow in Dad's footsteps and sell people cleaning products, but I did want to study chemistry like he had, and then get training to become a perfume maker. Not at a big company like Dad, but in one of the famous French schools. That was my dream, and I had known what I wanted to be long before most kids were even thinking about that.

Although the box seemed to weigh a ton, I closed the lid and carried it over to my desk, where I carefully set it down. I didn't want to make any noise, because I didn't know if Susan and Richard had already gone to bed. Then I turned to one of the moving boxes and rummaged through it. I sighed with relief when I found the soy wax flakes. Quickly, I turned on the desk lamp as well, and reached into another box to pull out a few glass jars and a premade wick.

But then I paused. What would Susan think if I made scented candles in her kitchen in the middle of the night? I sighed softly, organized the wicks neatly on the desk pad, and actively pushed those thoughts aside. I wasn't going to burn the whole house down or anything. I'd been making my own candles for over a year and selling them through my Etsy shop. The monthly earnings weren't a lot, but it helped some. I had of course taken the shop offline after the accident with Mom and Dad.

Tonight I didn't want to make anything to sell, anyway. I took a little mixing container out of the box and laid a spatula next to it. Then I sat down and let my gaze wander over the little bottles of essential oils. I decided on cypress. Evergreen cypress, a sign of everlasting life, was just the right base note. With a sad smile I unscrewed the cap on the bottle and closed my eyes. The scent was resinous, aromatic, and straightforward. I let a few drops fall into the little bowl and reached into the box again. Vanilla was the soft, smooth complement to cypress – sweet, harmonious, and gentle. It smelled like warm pudding and homemade cake. As their counterpoint I chose wormwood. The strong, pungent aroma of black tea rose into my nose and roused memories of my Dad, who so loved the typical British Earl Grey tea. The little bottle labeled "Rose" made me think of Mom's favorite perfume, which consisted of five different kinds of rare rose essences. Even though it cost a fortune, Dad insisted on giving her a new bottle of it every year on their wedding anniversary. My eyes welled up with tears as the delicate fragrance unfurled. And finally, I added my favorite scent to the mix: sandalwood. I stirred gently and then had to delve into the moving box one last time to find the tray I would use to carry the three jars with their wicks and the bowl of mixed essential oils. I also set out a little flask I would use to store the leftover oil. I didn't want to waste any of the expensive essential oils. I left my room as quietly as I could.

The rest of the house was already dark, but I was surprised to find light still on in the kitchen. I peeked through the door standing ajar. Macy stood at the counter, scrubbing the countertop.

"Can't you sleep, honey?" I flinched and almost let the tray fall. Macy seemed to have the eyes and ears of an eagle; she had noticed me immediately.

I pushed the door open with one foot and went into the kitchen. “You caught me,” I said jokingly and grinned when I saw the critical expression on Macy’s face. She examined the tray in my hand with a furrowed brow and then reached for the soy wax flakes with her fingertips.

“Please don’t tell me that’s some new-fangled thing people in New York are eating now. Don’t you dare throw that stuff in my granola!” She pointed her index finger at the three big glass containers with her very own homemade granola mixtures that stood ready for tomorrow’s breakfast.

“I would never do such a thing,” I replied in mock horror, and Macy and I both laughed.

“So what has you roaming around so late at night?” Macy wanted to know when we had caught our breath. I set the tray on the counter and looked at Macy thoughtfully. She studied me with a smile. Her dark hair fell in soft curls down to her chin. She wore a slightly old-fashioned dress that stretched tight across her chest, and gold sandals. My gaze paused a moment on the green nail polish on her toenails, which was quite a departure from her cool, retro style. In spite of her stressful job on the ranch, she seemed to always be in a good mood and was willing to listen to everyone. Even when you showed up in her kitchen at ten o’clock at night and looked like you’d raided the laboratory of a mad scientist.

“I’m just a little nervous about tomorrow.” Even with Macy it was hard for me to talk about my parents. “I thought it might distract me to pour a few candles.”

“So that’s what all this stuff is for,” she remarked, pointing to the fully loaded tray. She seemed to notice that there was more on my mind, but she didn’t push me. I was very grateful to her for that.

“Exactly. Is it okay if I heat the wax in a water bath quickly?”

Macy looked at her spotless and brightly polished cooking pots that were stacked neatly in one of the big kitchen cabinets with glass doors. I raised two fingers. “I swear, you won’t find any wax on your pans.”

“All right.” She capitulated and pulled out a pan from the furthest back corner of the cabinet. It had a noticeable dent in one side and scratches marred the polished surface. I had to grin, because it looked like she didn’t trust me at all. “Do you always make candles in your pajamas?” she asked, as she let some water run into the pan. That made me smile more.

“That’s the only time I’m creative.”

Macy made an expansive gesture with her free hand and sighed. “Artists.”

She placed the pan on the stove and I watched with fascination as she lit the gas flame. At that moment, I was glad I had run into her, because I definitely couldn’t have figured out the professional gas stove with its eight burners.

“This will heat up pretty fast, because gas heats a lot faster than electric,” Macy explained. “Do you want me to stay here, or do you have to be alone for your creativity to flow?”

I shook my head. “Not at all, I’d be happy if you’d stay and help me. I probably couldn’t even have turned on the stove.”

While we waited for the water to boil, I handed Macy the bowl with the scent I had created. “Would you like to smell it?”

She bent over the container and sniffed. “Mmmmm...” She sighed with pleasure. “I definitely smell vanilla, but it also has an earthy note.”

I nodded excitedly and explained which oils I had used. She looked at me with admiration. “I would never have come up with that combination. You’re really talented.”

“Thank you! I really enjoy this and...,” I hesitated, then suddenly the memories came flooding back. The last time I had stood in a kitchen talking in such a familiar way and trying out different scent combinations had been with my dad. Tears welled up in my eyes and I quickly turned away. *Pull yourself together, Aria.* With practiced movements I placed the wicks in the center of the glass jars. Then I felt a warm hand on my back.

“Don’t put yourself under so much pressure. You’re not a machine, you don’t have to function. Give yourself and your heart some time to process what you’ve been through.” Macy let her hand fall and stood next to me. “It’s good that you have an outlet. That you can be creative to deal with everything. There are people who let everything eat away at them inside until they explode. Or they just become more and more quiet and withdraw completely.”

I felt more than saw her gentle smile and nodded. “Thanks.” At that moment the water in the pot began to bubble and I focused on the next step. I took the pan from the stove, turned off the burner, and let the water cool for a moment.

After taking a good look at the clock, I placed the jars in the pot. The wax flakes melted almost immediately. Macy watched with fascination. “You could almost think it was ice.”

I nodded. “When the wax has melted completely, we’ll take the jars out and let them cool for a minute. The wax can’t be too hot or it will ruin the fragrance in the essential oils.”

“There is a real art to this.” Macy handed me a pair of pot holders. I carefully lifted the glass jars out of the hot water. With a little spoon I measured the scented oil and quickly stirred it into the wax before it hardened again. I carefully poured the rest of the oil into the little flask. A gentle fragrance began to rise from the jars.

Macy closed her eyes. “So beautiful! The candles you can get in stores all smell like chemicals somehow.”

“I only use natural essences, preserved in oil.”

“That sounds kind of expensive.”

I nodded. “True, but I’ve been collecting these little bottles for almost three years. I’ve got more than sixty different essential oils now. If you like, I’d be happy to show you.”

“Another time I’d like that very much. But now I really have to get to bed. My alarm will go off in exactly six hours.” Macy yawned behind a hand held to her mouth.

How insensitive of me. I knew that she woke up before everyone else to make breakfast. “Of course, I’m so sorry. Thanks for your help. I’ll clean up a little here and then get to bed myself.”

“Sleep well.” Macy squeezed my shoulder encouragingly, then turned around and left the kitchen.

I emptied the hot water from the pan, dried it, and put it back in the cupboard. After I had put the little spoon in the dishwasher and placed my finished candles and other

Lovely Curse, Band 1: Erbin der Finsternis  
Lovely Curse (Vol. 1): Heiress of the Darkness  
by Kira Licht



© 2019 Ravensburger Verlag GmbH, Ravensburg  
[www.foreignrights-ravensburger.com](http://www.foreignrights-ravensburger.com)  
© English sample translation by Tammi Reichel

paraphernalia on the tray, I was ready to go. The wax was already beginning to harden in the glass jars, and the scent filled the entire kitchen.

Carefully and as quietly as possible, I went back up to my room. I set the tray down on my desk and considered it thoughtfully for a while before I sat down. Then I pulled a sheet of sticky labels out of my desk drawer and searched through my pencil case for a calligraphy pen. I didn't plan to give the candles away or sell them in my Etsy shop. I separated three labels from the sheet, then closed my eyes for a brief moment and relished the scent taking over my room. Cypress for the unwavering love between parents and child. Vanilla for the security of a home. And then us. Black tea, rose, and sandalwood. Dad, Mom, and me. I didn't hesitate for a second when I saw the three labels. I called this fragrance "Family".