



## CHAPTER I

# THE WHITE OWL

Nobody saw the owl, white in the moonlight, black against the stars, nobody heard him as he glided over on silent wings of velvet. The owl saw and heard everything.

He settled in a tree, his claws hooked on a branch, and he stared at the girl in the glade below. The wind moaned, rocking the branch, scudding low clouds across the evening sky. It lifted the hair of the girl. The owl was watching her, with his round, dark eyes.

The girl moved slowly from the trees toward the middle of the glade, where a pool glimmered. She was concentrating. Each deliberate step took her nearer to her purpose. Her hands were open, and held slightly in front of her. The wind sighed again in the trees. It blew her cloak tightly against her slender figure, and rustled her hair around her wide-eyed face. Her lips were parted.

“Give me the child,” Sarah said, in a voice that was low, but firm with the courage her quest needed. She halted, her hands still held out. “Give me the child,” she repeated. “Through dangers untold and hardships unnumbered, I have fought my way here to the castle beyond



the Goblin City, to take back the child you have stolen.” She bit her lip and continued, “For my will is as strong as yours... and my kingdom as great...”

She closed her eyes tightly. Thunder rumbled. The owl blinked, once.

“My will is as strong as yours.” Sarah spoke with even more intensity now. “And my kingdom as great...” She frowned, and her shoulders dropped.

“Oh damn,” she muttered.

Reaching under her cloak, she brought out a book. Its title was *The Labyrinth*. Holding the book up before her, she read aloud from it. In the fading light, it was not easy to make out the words. “You have no power over me...”

She got no further. Another clap of thunder, nearer this time, made her jump. It also alarmed a big, shaggy sheepdog, who had not minded sitting by the pool and being admonished by Sarah, but who now decided that it was time to go home, and said so with several sharp barks.

Sarah held her cloak around her. It did not give her much warmth, being no more than an old curtain, cut down, and fastened at the neck by a glass brooch. She ignored Merlin, the sheepdog, while concentrating on learning the speech in the book. “You have no power over me,” she whispered. She closed her eyes again and repeated the phrase several times.

A clock above the little pavilion in the park chimed seven times and penetrated Sarah's concentration. She stared at Merlin. “Oh, no,” she said. “I don't believe it. That was *seven*, wasn't it?”

Merlin stood up and shook himself, sensing that some more interesting action was due. Sarah turned and ran. Merlin followed. The thunderclouds splattered them both with large drops of rain.

The owl had watched it all. When Sarah and Merlin left the park, he



sat still on his branch, in no hurry to follow them. This was his time of day. He knew what he wanted. An owl is born with all his questions answered.

All the way down the street, which was lined on both sides with privet-hedged Victorian houses similar to her own, Sarah was muttering to herself, “It’s not fair, it’s not fair.” The mutter had turned to a gasp by the time she came within sight of her home. Merlin, having bounded along with her on the shaggy paws, was wheezing, too. His mistress, who normally moved at a gentle, dreamy pace, had this odd habit of liking to sprint home from the park in the evening. Perhaps that owl had something to do with it. Merlin was not sure. He didn’t like the owl, he knew that.

“It’s not *fair*.” Sarah was close to sobbing. The world at large was not fair, hardly ever, but in particular her stepmother was ruthlessly not fair to her. There she stood now, in the front doorway of the house, all dressed up in that frightful, dark blue evening gown of hers, the fur coat left open to reveal the low cut of the neckline, the awful necklace vulgarly winking above her freckled breast, and—wouldn’t you know?—she was looking at her watch. Not just looking at it but staring at it, to make good and sure that Sarah would feel guilty before she was accused, again.

As Sarah came to a halt on the path in the front garden, she could hear her baby brother, Toby, bawling inside the house. He was her half brother really, but she did not call him that, not since her school friend Alice had asked, “What’s the other half of him, then?” and Sarah had been unable to think of an answer. “Half nothing-to-do-with-me.” That was no good. It wasn’t true, either. Sometimes she felt fiercely protective of Toby, wanted to dress him up and carry him in her arms and take him away from all this, to a better place, a fairer world, an island somewhere, perhaps. At other times—and this was



one—she hated Toby, who had twice as many parents in attendance on him as she had. When she hated Toby, it frightened her, because it led her into thinking about how she could hurt him. There must be something wrong with me, she would reflect, that I can even think of hurting someone I dote upon; or is it that there is something wrong in doting upon someone I hate? She wished she had a friend who would understand the dilemma, and maybe explain it to her, but there was no one. Her friends at school would think her a witch if she even mentioned the idea of hurting Toby, and as for her father, it would frighten him even more than it frightened Sarah herself. So she kept the perplexity well hidden.

Sarah stood before her stepmother and deliberately held her head high. “I’m sorry,” she said, in a bored voice, to show that she wasn’t sorry at all, and anyway it was unnecessary to make a thing out of it.

“Well,” her stepmother told her, “don’t stand out there in the rain. Come on.” She stood aside, to make room for Sarah to pass her in the doorway, and she glanced again at her wristwatch.

Sarah made a point of never touching her stepmother, not even brushing against her clothes. She edged inside close to the door frame. Merlin started to follow her.

“Not the dog,” her stepmother said.

“But it’s pouring.”

Her stepmother wagged her finger at Merlin, twice. “In the garage, you,” she commanded. “Go on.”

Merlin dropped his head and loped around the side of the house. Sarah watched him go and bit her lip. Why, she wondered for the trillionth time, does my stepmother always have to put on this performance when they go out in the evening? It was so *hammy*—that was one of Sarah’s favorite words, since she had heard her mother’s