

SNOW



Two girls. Two worlds.
One wish that must be undone.

MEERA*TREHAN

SNOW

Also by Meera Trehan:

The View from the Very Best House in Town

SNOW



MEERA TREHAN



WALKER
BOOKS

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FOR CURT,
WHO LOVES SCIENCE AND SNOW





Announcement of the Royal Birth

Let it be known in every corner of the great and noble Kingdom of Mistmir – from the tallest highland peaks to the lowest riverbanks, from the bustling city to the fertile farmlands – that today, on the first day of winter, our esteemed and beloved King and Queen have welcomed a healthy baby girl,

KARINA.

May the Mists protect our new Princess always!
May her every wish come true!



Part One

The Princess
and the
Snow

The Princess

A VERY ODD FOOT

You've likely heard a million things about the Princess, all bad, most true, and the fact that she's a liar is just one. But it's the King's honest truth that she is simply digging one last shovelful of Snow for the evening when out of nowhere appears a giant foot. To be precise, there is a leg attached to the foot, and it comes through the Boundary Mists, which is possibly not nowhere.

The Princess blinks. She squints. She rubs her eyes, certain that the Snow or the loneliness or the endless digging has finally led her to start seeing things. But the foot is still there. It drops in the Snow, then lifts back up, leaving a large print. For a split second, the Princess holds completely still. She wills the Snow to do the same. As always, it ignores her. With a hiss and a whine, it fills the footprint back up, erasing it. But it was there. Just because the Snow covered it up doesn't mean it wasn't. Enough Snow can conceal anything.

The Princess blinks again, and the foot reappears, sinking in just a finger's-width from where it first stepped. On second glance, she realizes the foot itself is a normal size, but it's encased in some sort of garishly coloured contraption with a metal frame that makes its print very large. It moves carefully, like whoever the foot belongs to doesn't trust the Snow. Which means they might be smarter than you'd guess from their ridiculous footwear.

The Princess stares into the thick Mists, waiting for the whole person to come through, forcing her eyes to focus and her stomach to settle. She knows it can't be one of her subjects. First, she's not naive enough to think that any of the people who fled the Snow – or, really, her – would return on a whim. And second, no self-respecting citizen of Mistmir would wear a shoe that silly in public. But the idea of having anyone visit, anyone to talk to, makes the Princess a little giddy.

To be clear, she would rather have all her subjects return, her kingdom restored to what it once was. That is what she truly wants – to be a real princess again. Of course it is. It's what she was born to do, it's what she's been trained to do, it's what she's been working for, tirelessly and endlessly. It's her duty and her prize, as the King likes to tell her. (True, he's also her father, but you'd call him the King too, even if he were your flesh and blood.) But the idea that she might not be alone while she works... She knows she's

not supposed to make wishes anymore, but she may have secretly wished for that.

She waits for the visitor. No one comes. Instead, the foot disappears again, and the Princess is struck by the fact that she may never see its owner – or anyone else – ever again.

She sprints after them. The Snow behind her wails, and the Mists get closer and closer until they're swirling instead of solid, and she realizes she might actually make it through the passing point. It doesn't matter that it's supposed to be impossible; she's going to leave, she's going to see this person, and she—

—lands squarely on her bottom. The Mists repel her like she's some sort of pest.

She sits in the Snow for a moment to let her head clear. The Snow buzzes against her coat and gloves, sending her small reminders of where she is – her kingdom. Of who she is – the Princess. Of what she almost did – abandon the Kingdom of Mistmir to chase a very odd foot. Put it that way, she has to laugh. A foot! Even a princess can be silly, see?

She stands up, dusts off, and plasters her royal smile on her face, just as she's been taught to do. It's muscle memory. She bends down to pick up her shovel. It's then she realizes that the odd foot has been replaced by a hand in a fat mitten rummaging through the Snow. The person it belongs to can't be more than an arm's-length away. If it

weren't for the solid fog, she could look them in the eye or squeeze their shoulder or beg them to stay. Even if she has been taught better than to beg.

"Please come in," she says.

The hand freezes in midair. The Princess holds her breath the way she sometimes does the moment after she digs a hole, before it can fill, and thinks: *This is the moment the Snow will change back to ordinary snow. This is the moment when winter ends. This is the moment when our kingdom goes back to what it once was. This is the moment when I'll be forgiven.*

But, sure as the Snow, the hand draws back as if it's been burned. The Princess doesn't have a chance to say another word, not "wait" or "stay" or even one more "please", before the holes in the Snow and the holes in the Mists close up and she's left alone against the edge of her kingdom. She stands in the moonlight, surveying the endless, relentless, perfect Snow. Not a flake out of place. Just what she wished for.

Her gift to herself, right?