

# Bella Santini

## In the Land of Everlasting Change

By Angela Legh

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This book is dedicated to my children, Vanessa, Janice, and Steven, who let me read children's fantasy stories to them each night. The time I spent with them in this intimate endeavor was an act of pure love. And their listening and engaging was their pure love. I appreciate them more than they know, for words cannot encompass how much I love them.

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## Chapter One - Mesmerized

"Stupid camping trip," Bella Santini muttered as she left the campfire to go to sleep. "Stupid parents for making me go on this camping trip." She stubbed her toe on a rock and let out a small yelp.

"Bella?" Her mother called from the fire where she was still sitting with Bella's Dad. "Are you alright?"

"Fine, Mom." Bella lied, hobbling slightly as she made her way to her little, private tent.

"Stupid rock on this stupid camping trip." She continued under her breath.

At fourteen, Bella was an ordinary-looking girl with long wavy brown hair with a hint of red woven through. Her smile was quick and bright like a ray of sunshine, her skin always pale and never tanned. Bella's most noticeable thing was her eyes, an unusual shade of sea green, the lightest color in the curl of an ocean wave at the exact moment when the wave crests and the sun shines through.

She lived in an ordinary house with her parents and went to an ordinary school with other ordinary children. Even her school life was ordinary, she never got in trouble, but she was never the star pupil, bringing home average, ordinary grades.

But there was one subject in which Bella excelled. Art class. There, it didn't matter if the teacher asked the class to paint a bowl of fruit or a still portrait; Bella could capture the subject in a way that made it seem like you could reach into the painting itself and touch it.

Now, with classes over, Bella had been looking forward to spending the summer inside, happily painting all day without interruptions. But on the first day of summer, her parents had loaded her up in their car without warning, ignoring her protests, telling her that they were taking a fun family trip into the wilderness.

"But I wanted to spend this time painting!" Bella protested from the backseat of the car.

"Oh, Bella," said her mother. "There will be plenty of time for that when you get back."

*It wasn't fair that they were making her go on this trip. She was old enough to take care of herself! She just wanted to stay home, paint, and be with her friends.* Bella thought with a sigh, remembering how upset she had been.

Her father had smiled at her from the driver's seat.

"Sweetie, I know you had plans. But this weekend is family time, and I really want you to come with an open mind – you might just like it!"

Bella rolled her eyes; she was sure this trip would be a waste of her time. Unfortunately, it was clear, she had no choice in the matter.

Opening her tent flap, Bella crawled in, leaving her dress on, feeling too agitated to switch to pajamas. She snuggled into her sleeping bag, laying her head on the pillow. Closing her eyes, her mind whirled, thinking about all the lovely things she saw today mixed with the irritation that her parents forced her to come on this stupid camping trip. On the one hand, the trees and flowers she had seen on the car ride here had been beautiful, and she couldn't wait to paint them all. On the other hand, she would have to wait until she got home to paint anything since her stupid parents had neglected to pack any of her art supplies.

"Not like they listened to what I wanted to do anyway," she muttered as she fell asleep.

She was awakened in the middle of the night by a curious sound, tinkling like bells, though it sounded slightly muffled as if the bells were padded by soft fabric. Putting it out of her mind, she attempted to fall back to sleep. Several minutes later, the sound was repeated. Bella ignored it, once again trying to fall back asleep. She tossed and turned, but after another repetition of the sound, she resolved to investigate. Bells are not a usual noise expected in a forest, she thought. Silently, she opened her tent flap, peering into the darkness. The campfire had been put out, and she could hear her Dad snoring in the next tent like a giant bear.

Her eyes swept the forest, not seeing anything. Then out of the corner of her eye, Bella spied a flitting light, softly dancing like a leaf on the warm breeze, weaving into the row of trees to her left. *A firefly!* she thought, as she stepped into the soft carpet of pine needles, releasing the fresh scent of pine into the air. Following the darting light, she passed through trees, weaving along on the path established by the firefly. Twisting and turning, the firefly's path wound through the dense undergrowth of the forest. The moon softly illuminated the way, suddenly darkening when clouds shifted in the sky, opening again to a soft radiance that lit her path.

Without warning, the clouds covered the moon, the firefly flitted around a turn and seemed to disappear. Bella looked around in the darkness but could not find any evidence of the firefly or any landmarks to guide her back to the camp. The night around her was suddenly much more frightening. How was she going to find her way back to the camp?

"Mom? Dad? Anyone?" She called out. "Help me! I'm lost!"

She waited, listening. But there was no response. Either she was too far away, or her parents were too sound asleep to hear her.

Bella's stomach dropped, her breathing became shallow as fear crept into her senses. Panicking slightly, she twirled around, looking in vain for an easy way back. Bella had no idea from which direction she had come, but seeing one path slightly lit by moonlight, she followed it, hoping it was the way back to her tent. Once or twice she stubbed her toes on protruding roots and rocks, but still, she stumbled on, hoping that this path would return her to her campsite. After what seemed like a long time, the path finally opened into a meadow, just as the moon reappeared from behind the clouds. And as the soft, gentle rays revealed the space before her, Bella halted and took a breath, momentarily stunned by the ethereal scene.

Under the soft moonlight, the meadow was filled with what seemed like millions of fireflies, gently dancing, weaving a web of twinkling illumination that stretched into the distance. The faraway firefly lights were dulled by a mist, twinkling like Christmas lights seen through the rain. The lights of the fireflies were enhanced by the soft sheen of the moon glow. Struggling to breathe, Bella tried to memorize the scene – a meadow filled with dancing lights – it would make a stunning, ethereal painting. Excitement filled her as her creativity sparked. She couldn't wait to get home and paint, but she was entranced; she had to stay to watch what happened next.

Bella watched as each firefly settled onto the ground, almost hidden as they slowly lowered into the thick tufts of grass, though their lights softly glowed. How could insects make such a perfect circle? She wondered. Is this something they can do instinctually? Like salmon or turtles returning to where they were born? She took a careful step forward to get a better look. Something was not right with the fireflies. For one thing, fireflies didn't have delicate little hands, or faces...or human-like bodies. Bella gasped, rubbing her eyes in disbelief. That wasn't a firefly, it couldn't be – fireflies didn't wear dresses over large iridescent multi-colored wings! Nor could they dance and sing the way these creatures could! They were fairies! A whole circle of tiny, delicate fairies, moving gracefully to a song that sounded like it was played on a dozen flutes.

The fairy closest to her was clearly visible; a tiny heart-shaped face, green eyes that seemed to be lit from within, tumbled curls of strawberry blond that did not fully hide the pointed ears. The fairy's iridescent wings glowed with soft colors in the moonlight as it danced with the others. Bella watched it closely, trying to memorize every beautiful feature for her canvas.

Intent on watching the beautiful creatures before her, Bella took another step forward in the grass and unintentionally broke a stick under her foot. There was a sharp CRACK as it snapped, the sound echoing like thunder around the meadow. The fairy song instantly ceased, replaced with the high-pitched screams of fear from the crowd of fairies on the ground.

One fairy, a beautiful woman with long, golden hair, deep green eyes, and wearing a stunning dress of glittering green that made her eyes glow, even more, stepped forward out of the circle of fairies. As she did, she seemed to grow taller, and taller and TALLER, until she loomed over Bella, the size of an adult, seizing Bella's wrist.

"Human child!" She said, in a voice that was both musical and terrible at the same time. "You have witnessed our dance and heard our song without permission! Leave now or..." She frowned, looking at the hand that was gripping Bella's wrist.

Bella looked too. To her astonishment, it seemed as if her skin was lit from within like the woman in front of her, exuding a warm glow. The fairy released her, and the light immediately faded.

The fairies in the meadow were still in a panic. Turning away from Bella, the full-sized fairy raised her arm in an imperious fashion.

"Silence!" The noise immediately ceased. "The human child is not an ordinary trespasser; I will deal with her as I see fit." Turning again, she faced Bella, reaching her hand up to gently trail her finger down Bella's cheek, stepping back in surprise when Bella's skin became luminous wherever the fairy touched. "Can it be?" she asked – "Who... Who are your parents?" Bella could barely speak.

"Mmmom and Dddad?" she squeaked. Fear gripped Bella as the fairy continued to scrutinize her. "Wwwhy do you ask?"

"Your skin; it glows when I touch it; you have fairy blood in you. Yet you are unknown to us. Are you from a faraway kingdom?"

"No, I live here; I mean—we- live in the city, like 100 kilometers south of this forest," Bella said, as she wondered what this line of questioning was about.

As if sensing her nervousness, the fairy smiled, suddenly seeming much more friendly, and released her grip on Bella's wrist.

"I have been remiss. I have not introduced myself. I am Cintarra; high priestess of the Seelie Court and trusted advisor to Queen Tatiana." Then her eyes went steely as she continued,

"Who are you, and why are you intruding on our ceremony?"

"Bella Santini," Bella replied. She felt as if she should curtsy, then decided against it. "I wasn't trying to be rude; I followed a firefly, it disappeared, and I found this meadow as I was trying to get back to camp. I was watching, because I was like, this is so beautiful! The lights were dancing! I'm gonna paint this when I get back home. I wasn't trying to spy on you or anything!"

"You were drawn to and inspired by beauty; your skin becomes luminous when touched with magic. You are a puzzle to me; one that I must unravel," Turning to the gathered fairies, Cintarra commanded, "bind her, and bring her to our size with a shrinking spell – we are taking her with us."

Before Bella could react, she was surrounded by fairies, flying circles around her as they chanted a rippling staccato intonation that morphed into a sweet melody, wrapping her in sound. Bella tried to swat them away, but her body could not move. Her skin began tingling, and Bella noticed that she grew smaller with each breath, shrinking steadily until she was the height of a blade of freshly mown grass. Her hands were tied behind her back by two fairies, whose drably colored outfits and old-fashioned armor seemed to indicate they were there to protect the other fairies rather than dance with them. One of them reached up and closed Bella's eyelids while muttering another spell. Flanking her on both sides, the fairies grabbed Bella's elbows and flew off, with Bella suspended between them.

Time has a way of changing its flow – when frightened, minutes seem to stretch; when happy, minutes seem to compress. To Bella, it seemed like they spent hours flying before





landing lightly on a solid surface. Pushed forward from behind, Bella took three steps, stumbling as she moved. She felt a strange coldness as she tried to regain her balance. Bella then heard a voice emitting softly sparkling tones, sounding almost like a xylophone playing, though she still could not see anything. Chanting another lyrical spell, her jailers caused her arms to unbind and her eyes to open. Bella's heart started beating erratically as she started to panic - she was locked inside a jail cell; she was subject to the whims of these strange beings! The room was stark, with stone walls made of weathered brown blocks fitted together with crumbling mortar. The front of the room was fitted with thick metal bars. There were no windows or doors and nothing in the room to make her comfortable. The only light came from a single lamp in the ceiling that flickered like a firefly. She rubbed her arms to bring back her circulation, fearfully eyeing her jailers on the outside of her cell.

"You are a prisoner of the Seelie Court, held for trial in the city of Thessearia," Intoned one of the jailers, "Behave, answer questions with the truth, and you will have a fair chance of returning to your world. If you choose to fight or deceive us, you will never leave."

One of her captors waved his hand as he spoke a short spell that sounded more guttural than lyrical, changing her attire into the same drab grey fairy outfits that her jailors wore. Turning away, the jailers flew off down the corridor, leaving Bella utterly alone in her dark, cold cell.

Bella was stunned. She had no idea how or why she ended up here. She never really believed in fairies – they were just characters in stories, weren't they? To have one accuse her of having fairy blood, of being bound and carted off to jail for no reason – it was too much to believe!

How can she get out of here, be restored to her full size, and find her way home? Would she ever see her parents again?

"There must be a way to get out," Bella thought, resolving that nothing would stop her. Her breath heaving, she frantically searched her cell for any way to escape. Her fingers became chafed as she desperately probed the grooves between the stones, searching for a slight crack, indicating an entrance to a secret passage. Finding none, Bella slumped in a corner, wrapping her arms around her knees. It could only have been a few hours since she'd left the campsite, she thought as she huddled in the darkness, but it seemed like years. She remembered what the fairy jailers had said. If she behaved, answered questions with the truth, she would have a fair chance of returning to her world. But what if they wouldn't take her back? What if she was stuck in this cell forever? She bit her lip as tears threatened to spill over. *A few hours ago, I was angry that Mom and Dad dragged me on this trip, she thought miserably, but now all I want to do is find them and be with them again.*

She closed her eyes, remembering the car trip to their campsite.

*The drive north seemed to last forever, with her parents chatting away in the front seat, every so often directing questions or comments her way, to include her in the camaraderie. Bella answered in monosyllables, never giving an inch, staying true to her feelings. But, as the car made its way out of the city into the wilderness, Bella became aware of the landscape outside. Sure, the camping trip was lame, but she had to admit that the colors of the trees, a riotous blend of red, yellow, orange, and purple leaves, all evenly distributed between the trees, piqued her interest. As their car continued north, the view of vibrant trees gave way to a peaceful forest of evergreen.*

*Pulling into the campsite, Bella looked on in awe of the vistas surrounding her. In the backdrop, mountains stood tall and imposing, stretching into the distance as far as the eye could*

*see. The nearby mountains appeared to be a navy color, so deep they were almost black, fading into softer hues with each successive row of mountains until they blended perfectly into the grey mist. Carpeting the foreground hills was a deep, intense emerald green forest mainly composed of pine trees. The forest gave off a fresh, clean scent of earth and pine. The ground beneath the trees was padded with a thick mat of spent needles, burnt colors in umber and yellow ochre. Small clearings were interspersed throughout the campgrounds, allowing space to set up tents. The scene vibrated peace and tranquility.*

*Bella smiled inside, amused that she thought in the art world's language, equating the beautiful colors of nature that surrounded her with the watercolor hues that she loved to use when painting. But she kept the feeling inside and did not share it with her parents.*

*Her parents spent the next hour or so setting up camp, first a tent for Bella, planted next to the forest's edge, then a tent for them, situated within 15 meters of Bella's tent. After getting things organized, the adults decided to go for a hike, seeking the trail that led to a waterfall. They insisted that Bella join them. Rolling her eyes yet again, Bella started on the trail, trying to create space between herself and her parents. She did not want anyone to think that she wanted to spend time with them.*

*The trail was relatively flat, covered with pine needles and outlined with rocks; it bordered a small creek as it meandered through the woods. The twitter and flutter of birds in the trees charmed them as they walked the path. The family stopped every so often to admire the view of the trees and the mountains. After a kilometer or two, Bella paused, hearing a waterfall. It's just up ahead! She thought as she ran over to stand on the rocks, hoping to see the view. What she saw took her breath away. A pristine waterfall set against a backdrop of boulders stacked high; part of a ridgeline that probably eons ago, had crumbled down into pieces of a broken promise. The precariously placed boulders had trees growing in-between and out of them, clinging tenuously to the rocks in a never-ending battle for life. "I wish I could come back and sketch this tomorrow; I want to paint this; it is so pretty!" Bella had thought to herself.*

*After returning to the campgrounds, her parents cooked an evening meal over the campfire. Her mom had tried to get her involved in the conversation, talking about when Bella was three, she ran away wanting to play with the bunnies in the field near their house. Bella got her little foot stuck in a rut in the ground. She couldn't move, so the bunnies came to her. Bella's mom had found her after frantically searching the neighborhood. She was surrounded by bunnies; one had even lifted up on his hind legs to rub noses with Bella. The bunnies scurried off when her mom arrived. Her mom described how Bella was upset that her friends' left. Bella rolled her eyes, unimpressed by her mother's effort to include her in the conversation.*

*After an hour or so of her parents laughing and talking by the campfire, Bella was tired of listening. She abruptly stood up and stalked off to her tent, mumbling a barely audible "good night" towards her parents.*

*Remembering the day and evening that led up to her current situation, Bella groaned. She wouldn't have treated her parents that way if she had known she would lose them.*

*Taking off her jacket, she rolled it into a ball, laid down, and placed it under her head as a pillow. Despite her situation, she was exhausted, and sleepiness descended over Bella, a heaviness borne of distress that caused her eyes to close and her head to droop. Before despair overtook her, she was slightly warmed by a pleasant thought -maybe this is all just a dream, and she would wake up back at her tent in the morning.*

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In a faraway part of the castle, in the early morning darkness, the weak light of the waning moon barely illuminated two heads, bowed close together over a bowl of water that showed the image of Bella as she slept.

"You know who she is," said the one. "Find out who summoned her. This is a terrible turn of events! She was not supposed to return until I called her back when all was prepared. No one must know that she is in the kingdom. Keep the illusions in place. Her life depends on it."

"I am sorry that I did not see her true identity until now. It is my fault she is here, though I did not summon her. She will be put in a safe place, one that would not be expected. I will bind her in a cloaking spell to hide her identity. You have my word on it." The figure wrapped herself up in a cape and swooped out of the room, leaving a faint trail of lights in her wake.