

extended epilogue

The Greenwood Trilogy

cassie beebe

extended epilogue

. . .

Charlotte

A LARGE, sweaty man wearing Crocs and strapped with a diaper bag is eyeing us. It's about to happen again.

I know Arie sees him too, because he lets out a small sigh. But he slips an arm around me, resting his hand on my hip and smiling down at me, and I try to ignore the man. I stifle a smirk as my eyes travel up to the top of Arie's head.

He rolls his eyes. "You know, I never would have agreed to the ears if I had known you'd be laughing at me all day."

"I'm not laughing!" I say, laughing.

He shakes his head at me, a grin overtaking him as he pulls me closer to his side. We're in line for Peter Pan's Flight, trying to squeeze in one more ride before the fireworks start. It's the last day of our vacation, and although we've already done everything we wanted to do, we're making the most of our final hours in Magic Kingdom, doubling back to the rides we enjoyed the most the first time.

"So what's been your favorite thing this week?" I ask Arie as we wait for the line to move.

He considers it for a moment. With a sly smirk, he replies, "Well, last night in the hot tub was pretty fun."

I blush, recalling the elderly couple who unintentionally snuck up on Arie and me kissing a little more passionately than we ordinarily would in public. We thought we were alone and didn't notice their silent approach until they were stepping into the bubbling water. Arie laughed it off, but I was beyond embarrassed. And then we had to sit there with them, Arie making awkward small talk with the man while the woman gave me a stern, reproachful look, until enough time had passed that we could politely excuse ourselves back to our room.

"That was *not* fun. That was humiliating." I smack his side. "And I meant at the *park*."

"Oh, right. That." He chuckles, taking another moment to think. "Probably watching you fangirl over Chewbacca."

My mind drifts back to the photo-op and receiving a firm hug from the loveable beast. It was like hugging a piece of my childhood. One that was warm and furry and smelled like an old teddy bear.

"All of the Star Wars stuff was pretty cool, actually," Arie says.

The line moves up, and we take a few steps forward.

Without thinking, I glance back at the man with the diaper bag, and I immediately wish I hadn't. Our eyes lock momentarily, and I can tell that brief second of eye contact has given him the permission he was looking for to make his move.

I cringe as he ignores the little girl in the princess dress tugging on his cargo shorts and pushes his way around several people.

"Incoming," I mutter to Arie.

"Yeah, I see him," he says, keeping his eyes on the backs of the people ahead of us.

"I thought that was you!"

I flinch at the bellowing voice of the man now standing beside us, on the other side of the railing organizing the line. A few nearby people give him a frustrated look as he squeezes between them to talk to us.

Arie and I look at the man. With a chuckle, the man reaches up to tap on the "1st Visit" button pinned to Arie's sweatshirt. Arie's eyes go wide, and he takes a step back.

"First time, huh?" he asks. "I've lost count of how many times the ol' lady's dragged me down here."

I stare at the man, baffled by his brazenness. Arie's been recognized more than a few times since we arrived in Orlando—at the airport, in the elevator at the hotel, several times throughout the parks—but usually people at least have the good sense to keep a respectful distance, if they even approach us at all. Most of the time, people just stare or whisper or point, which I had previously thought was a little rude. Now, I see that pointing would at least be preferable to being poked in the chest by a sweaty stranger.

Arie blinks. His mouth opens, but nothing comes out.

The man, oblivious to Arie's discomfort, smiles and says, "Anyway, good to see ya," as if we're all old friends. Then he leans over the railing to give Arie a nudge with his elbow. "Think you could hook a guy up with one of them self-driving cars?"

Arie gives him a stiff smile, taking another step back. "They'll be on the market for the public soon," he says in a diplomatic tone. Nodding to the man's family, he adds, "We're working on some family models now, as well, so stay tuned for that."

The man raises his brows. "That'd be great."

"Robert!" a shrill woman screeches, drawing the man's attention to his cluster of children, none of whom are cooperating with their mother's attempts to keep them from swinging on the railing and bumping into nearby people.

"Duty calls," the man says. In lieu of a farewell, he gives Arie a firm pat on the arm and turns to make his way up the line, back to his family.

Once he's gone, Arie lets out a deep sigh.

"I think I understand why my parents never wanted to take me here," he says.

I'm about to go off about how completely obtuse that guy was, but Arie's already smiling down at me again, brushing past the uncomfortable moment. Hands on my shoulders, he guides me to stand in front of him, so he can wrap his arms around me from behind. The line moves again, and we shuffle up a few steps. I lean back into his embrace, reaching up to hold his wrists.

Rain picks up again, just as my hair finished drying from the last burst. But it's only a fine mist this time, not enough to need an umbrella. I close my eyes and settle deeper into Arie's arms, blocking out the mass of people around us and the sounds of the ride we can hear now as we near the front of the line.

"This was a great trip," I say. "I'm really glad we did this."

"Well, it's not over yet," Arie says. "We still have the fireworks, and maybe a few more rides after that. What time does the show start?"

"Nine-fifteen," I say.

He lifts his wrist to check his watch. It's almost nine, and I can feel him stiffen.

“Do you think we’ll make it on time?” he asks, turning to assess the length of the line still in front of us.

I shrug. “We might be a little late, but it’s okay. I think you can see the fireworks from here anyway.”

His arms fall and he pulls away from me.

“But . . . online it says there are only certain places you get the whole effect, with the music and everything.”

The line moves up again—we’re almost to the front now.

He looked it up online?

I take in his disappointed expression, and it makes my heart sink. I didn’t realize the fireworks were so important to him. It’s definitely too late for us to get a good spot, and if we stay in line and go through the ride, we’ll be sure to miss at least the first few minutes of the show.

I look around for an exit route. There isn’t a good one, but I grab Arie’s hand anyway and start dragging him past the people behind us in line.

“What are we doing?” he asks.

In between my murmured apologies to the people we’re squeezing past, I answer, “We’re going to watch the fireworks.”

His feet stop as we reach the end of the line and push past the crowd.

I look back at him, trying to tug him along.

“Didn’t you really want to ride this one again?” he asks, gesturing to the line we just left.

“It’s okay,” I say. “And it’s too late, anyway. We already left the line.”

The look on his face portrays his hesitance, but I squeeze his hand and give him a smile.

“Come on! We’re gonna be late.”

Arie

CHARLOTTE HAS my hand tightly gripped as she pulls us through the park. I walk behind her as she squeezes past crowds of people, and I check my watch again. It's one minute to showtime, and I can see the clusters of people up ahead, standing around to witness the magical moment. We made it in time.

It's too late to try to find the perfect spot, so Charlotte just ducks under a rope that's barricading the people watching the show from the people walking down the paths, and we stand just inside the roped-off section.

We're smashed in like sardines, and I start to panic. I can't believe I didn't pay closer attention to the time. There's hardly enough space around us to breathe, let alone to get down on one knee.

I've completely ruined the most important thing I had planned for this trip. I wanted this to be perfect, the last big, special moment of the adventure. I went to great lengths to ensure our last day be spent at Magic Kingdom, so the fireworks could serve as an epic, heart-pounding backdrop for me to finally pop the question.

I've been stressed out all day from carrying the ring in my wallet. I keep patting my back pocket to make sure it's still there, safe and sound and ready for this moment, right now. And it was all for nothing, because this isn't going to work.

I try to take a step back, testing the space for any extra wiggle room, but I earn a grunt of frustration from the sardine behind me, and he stands firm, making it clear the

only way I'll be getting extra space from him is over his dead body.

The music booms to life, and the fireworks begin, bursting spectacularly overhead. Charlotte smiles up at me, and I try to return her grin. She steps closer to me, backing up into me and taking my hands to wrap my arms around her.

Maybe I don't have to get down on one knee. It's not absolutely crucial that I get down on one knee, is it?

I sigh. Yes, it is. It's crucial. It's how I've been picturing it for months.

Charlotte turns her head, leaning further into my chest and looking up at me.

"You okay?" she asks loudly, her voice barely audible over the sound of the music and the fireworks.

"Of course," I say, giving her the best smile I can manage.

I lean down to plant a kiss on her lips. When I pull away, she turns back around, squeezing my arms tighter around her as she looks toward the sky exploding with color.

The minutes pass by quickly. I know when the show is nearing an end, because I watched recordings of it again and again online to make sure I could time the proposal with the grand finale.

My heart pounds. It's now or never. Either I go for it, sans kneeling, or I put it off and come up with a new plan.

I've hardly had a minute to consider my options when suddenly people are backing into us, the crowd making space for something a few feet ahead.

I hold tighter to Charlotte, keeping her balance steady as we both take a step back, trying not to step on any little feet in the process.

Peering around Charlotte's shoulder, my eyes lock on

the source of the issue, and I feel a pang of envy so sharp it makes my breath stop.

A young man a few feet in front of us has requested a larger bubble of space, and everyone around him has complied. He now has plenty of room to take his girlfriend's hand, turn her around, and drop down to one knee in front of her, a small box in his hand.

Her hands fly up to cover her mouth, and a commotion begins all around us as people shift their attention from the finale of the fireworks show to the couple in front of them.

I can't hear what the young man says, but we can all see the enthusiastic nod of his girlfriend—now fiancée—as he takes the ring from the box and slides it onto her finger.

Cheers erupt from all around us as the happy couple embraces. Several people are snapping photos, documenting the strangers' special moment. Charlotte turns around with a wide grin, making sure I witnessed the monumental occasion that just occurred in front of us. I give her a stiff smile.

She turns back to the couple just as the final fireworks blast in the sky, one right after the other in rapid succession.

The newly engaged woman grabs her phone out of her back pocket, pulls up her camera, and snaps a joyful selfie of herself and her betrothed.

The fireworks die down, people whoop and cheer for the show, and the massive crowd of park guests starts to disperse in various directions. Some people head straight for the park exit, no doubt trying to get a head start back to the shuttles before everyone else has the same idea and they all fill up. Charlotte turns to me, excitement in her eyes.

"Did you see that?" she asks with a tiny hop of excitement.

"I did," I say, unable to match her enthusiasm. Before

she can take note of my strange reaction, I change the subject. “So we have a few hours left. Where to now?”

“Oh. Um . . .” She pauses, thinking. “Haunted Mansion?”

“Sounds good,” I say. “Lead the way.”

Charlotte

ARIE'S BEEN ACTING weird ever since the fireworks ended. While we were waiting in line for The Haunted Mansion, I tried to go over the map with him to see if there was anything he wanted to try to hit again before the park closes, but it seemed like he was barely listening to me.

We've reached the front of the line now, and Arie offers me a hand as I step onto the ride. He takes his seat beside me and our lap bar snaps shut.

I expect him to put his arm around me, like he usually does on the slow rides, but his fingers tap against the bar in front of us.

“What's wrong?” I ask him.

The booming voice of the ride's spooky narrator blasts through the speakers of our pod, and Arie gestures in the direction of the voice, not answering my question. We've already been on this ride once, and it sounds like the narration is the same as the last time, so I'm not sure why he needs to focus so hard on it this time. Clearly, he doesn't want to talk about whatever's bothering him, so I try to let it go, but his melancholy spirit is hard to ignore. This is our last night in the Happiest Place on Earth. We're supposed to be laughing and smiling and making final memories to

last a lifetime. Like that sweet couple who got engaged during the fireworks.

All of a sudden, the ride stutters to a halt.

"Is this part of the ride?" I ask Arie. I don't remember it from last time, but it does add a bit more of an ominous feel to the spooky atmosphere.

"I don't think so," he says. "Probably technical difficulties."

After a moment, a clear, automated male voice comes over the speaker system and confirms Arie's theory. "Please remain seated. The ride will begin moving momentarily."

Arie settles back into his seat and—finally—rests his arm around my shoulder.

I lean into his side, getting comfortable for however long we're going to have to wait. Unfortunately, the part of the ride we've stopped at isn't much to look at. Our pod is facing a fake door on the wall, and the gold knocker on the door knocks on its own, presumably guided by some kind of ghost or spirit.

We can still hear the instrumental ambiance music, but it's been turned down, probably to spare our ear drums in case we're stuck here awhile.

"I think I have a new favorite part of the week," I say, although we never got around to talking about my pick earlier. I was going to say the Avatar ride was my favorite part. We almost skipped it, because neither of us had seen the movie, but the land was so beautiful, and the ride ended up being one of my favorites. We rented the movie on our hotel TV that night.

"Oh?" Arie rests his cheek against the top of my head.

I smile. "Seeing that couple's proposal during the fireworks."

Arie doesn't say anything.

"That was a once-in-a-lifetime experience," I say. "It was the perfect proposal."

"The perfect proposal?" Arie asks.

"Well, I don't mean in general. But for her? Absolutely," I say. "He really knew his lady well."

"What makes you say that?"

"Did you see how many pins that girl had on her bag?" I ask. "And she was all decked out in Disney. Her shoes, her dress, her hat. She's probably one of those people who's been coming here every year since she was a kid or something. I bet that was her dream proposal."

A few seconds of silence pass. "What would be your dream proposal?"

"I already told you, remember?" I ask, giving him a gently playful smack on the side for forgetting. "Nothing fancy. I don't want a big spectacle. Just a nice, private moment between the two of us."

Recalling the last conversation we had on this subject, I amend that last part.

"I mean . . . between me and whoever happens to be proposing to me, of course."

I giggle, but Arie doesn't follow suit. Seriously, what is up with him tonight?

I twist around to look at him. He's staring intently ahead, like he's deep in thought about something. His eyes scan the dark, sequestered space around us, finally landing on mine.

"Is everything okay?" I ask him again, hoping to get an answer this time.

He appraises me for a moment, and a slow smile spreads across his face.

"Perfect," he says. His eyes are bright and alive, sparkling in the blacklight of the ride.

His sudden change in mood confuses me, but I can't help but return his contagious grin.

Pleased to see him happy again, I turn back around and snuggle deeper into his arms. It's actually kind of peaceful, cozing up to Arie in the darkness, blinded to the rest of the world by the sides of our pod. My feet are grateful for the extended rest, too.

Arie shifts beneath me, leaning uncomfortably into me as he reaches behind him, fishing something from his back pocket.

I wonder how long we'll be stuck here. I go through my mental map of the park, trying to recall which rides we still have left. I'm about to cross Fantasyland off my mental list when I remember the Cheshire Cat mug I saw in a shop there this morning. I wanted to grab one for Aunt Mel, but I didn't want to carry it around all day, so we decided to come back for it later.

Arie lifts my left hand from his knee.

We should probably go get that mug after this ride, so I don't forget.

"Hey, don't let me forget to grab that mug for—"

My words are cut short when Arie places something small and round in my palm and closes my fingers around it.

I look down, open my hand, and my breath catches. My eyes have adjusted to the darkness enough to see the tiny circle of gold resting in my palm.

I twist around to look at Arie. With both arms around me now, he holds me a little closer.

"I had a speech prepared," he says. "But . . . I'm afraid the firework metaphors won't make much sense anymore."

I frown, confused for a moment. But then it hits me. That's why he was so insistent on making it to the fireworks on time. He must have been planning to propose, and

instead, he got upstaged by that other couple. No wonder he's been a grump since then.

A tear slips out when I think of how much effort he must have put into his plans, only for them to be ruined. But when I look back at him again, he doesn't look disappointed. His warm gaze pierces me, and it's all I can do not to skip straight to saying yes and pulling his lips to mine.

Arie takes the ring from my hand, holding it between his fingertips. I can see it more clearly at this angle, and I take a moment to marvel at the large, center diamond, surrounded by delicate, golden, geometric latticework. More tiny diamonds circle the middle gem, somehow managing to sparkle even in the dim light of the ride. We've never discussed what kind of ring I might want, and if we had, I'm not sure I would have even known what to say. But this intricate, vintage setting is exactly my style. I couldn't have picked anything more perfect.

"Charlotte," Arie whispers.

I look up at him. He takes in a preparing breath and lets it out slowly.

"From the moment you walked into my study and gave me the courage to press play on that video, you changed my life," he says.

A lump forms in my throat, and I have to blink back my tears.

"You gave me the strength to forgive my father and to search for Alex. Your compassion and friendship . . ." he pauses, clearing the emotion from his throat. He takes a moment to compose himself, then continues. "You inspire me."

The tears come in earnest now, flowing down my cheeks. I blink them away as quickly as they come, so I can see his face clearly.

Meeting my eyes and taking my hand in one of his, he holds out the ring with his other.

"I want to spend the rest of my life learning from you, growing with you, and having adventures with you." He takes a deep breath and holds my gaze with his. "Will you marry me?"

I beam at the words. Ever since I returned to Greenwood from Paris and Arie asked me how I would feel about an upgrade to my promise ring, I've been waiting to hear them. I don't leave him waiting long for an answer.

"Yes," I say.

A breath somewhere between a laugh and a sigh of relief falls from his lips, and it makes me giggle. Did he really think there was any chance I would say no?

He takes my left hand in his and I flex my fingers for him to slide the ring into place. I only take a second to appreciate the beauty of the yellow gold and shimmering diamonds against my skin before I turn back to my fiancé.

My cheeks break into a grin again at that new title, and I lean into him, trying to contain my smile enough to kiss him with my lips instead of my teeth.

When our lips meet, the spark of excitement in my stomach grows. Arie weaves his fingers through my hair, stroking my cheek with his thumb as his lips glide along mine, and the spark settles into a steady burn.

Just then, a booming voice interrupts the moment.

"The spirits will materialize only if you remain safely seated with your hands, arms, feet, and legs inside. And watch your children, please."

We both flinch at the sudden sound from the speakers, and then laugh at ourselves for being so easily startled.

The ride starts up again, and we can hear the other riders around us cheering from their pods. I look down at

the new ring on my finger, and for just a moment, I pretend they're cheering for us.

Arie pulls me close to his side, joining me in my examination of the ring. I lift up my other hand, holding my promise ring up beside my new one.

"Does this mean I have to give this one back?" I ask Arie.

He chuckles, his breath tickling my ear. "Of course not. That promise still remains. It's just been surpassed by a better one."

His lips move to my neck, and I'm definitely not paying any attention to the ride at this point.

My hand is starting to tire already from being weighed down by such a prominent ring.

"It's heavy," I say, letting my hand fall to my lap.

Arie chuckles against my neck. "I could get you something smaller, if you'd like."

"No, thank you," I say, and he laughs again.

I lean into his side, resting my head on his shoulder as we travel through a ghostly graveyard full of flying spirits and singing busts. I never imagined I would get engaged in a dark, haunted mansion to a man wearing Mickey Mouse ears. But just like with my ring, I couldn't have asked for anything more perfect.

I turn my head to look up at Arie. "I'm kind of glad the fireworks didn't work out."

To my surprise, he smiles and squeezes me tighter. "Me, too."

The ride is coming to a close soon, and I don't want it to end. I snuggle deeper into Arie's arms and sigh. A thought occurs to me and I bite my lip.

"Hey," I say.

"Hmm?" he murmurs.

I look up at him with a smirk. "Do you think if you slipped them a little something, they'd let us go around one more time?"

He laughs, raising his eyebrows at me. "You want me to bribe the Disney employees?"

"I think they call them 'cast members' here," I correct him.

He shakes his head at me, but he can't stop the smile tugging at his lips. "I'll see what I can do."

We get lucky when our pod reaches the end of the ride and the ride stops again. Normally, we would only have a brief moment to exit the ride via the moving walkway, but the person in front of us uses a wheelchair, so the ride has to be stopped for them to exit safely.

While one cast member is helping the man with his chair, Arie waves the other young woman over to us.

She approaches us with a grin, ready to help.

I'm confused when Arie doesn't reach for his wallet. Instead, he leans toward the woman and greets her with a smile.

"How can I help you, sir?" she asks.

He reaches to take my hand. "My lovely fiancée and I just got engaged on this very ride."

My heart swells at hearing him call me his fiancée. The woman's face lights up with joy.

"Oh, my! Congratulations!"

She looks down at my hand, and I offer her a look at the ring. Her eyes widen at its extravagance.

"We were wondering if we could take one more lap around," Arie asks. "We're not quite ready to leave."

The woman smiles from ear to ear. "Of course!"

Arie answers her smile with his own. "Thank you."

She rushes off to the other cast member working the

ride, and by the look of excitement on his face, I imagine she's informed him of the reason we've been granted a second ride. He looks our way and gives us a little cheer of celebration.

With the man in the wheelchair safely exited, the ride starts moving again, and the booming voice returns to our speakers. I relax into Arie's arms and settle in for the start of our next adventure.

