

Kris Nedy

**THE FAIRY OF
THE ENCHANTED LAKE**

Stories from the Stars

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Part One
Michaela

Chapter I

Michaela Finds the Lake

High in the mountains, nestled at the foot of the snow-white peaks and surrounded by the aged pine forests, lay a small village named Summerscent. Winter was long and harsh there, making its dwellers tough, patient, enduring, and helpful to each other. In contrast, summer was short but magnificent, bursting with the bright, vibrant colours of the thousands of flowers scattered around the glades. Birdsong, the chirping of crickets, and the buzzing of bees filled the woods, and the air was so crystalline and rich in fragrance that every breath made the heart flutter with happiness.

Michaela was born during that fleeting sunny season, and her character bore the radiant imprint of summer magic. She was a good, kind-hearted child, friendly and smiling. Her parents waited on her hand and foot, and Michaela was very fond of them. Her mother, Mika, was a delicate, nimble woman with long, dark hair and a lined, worried face. As for Peter, her father, he was a big, stout man with a black moustache and jet-black eyes.

Michaela adored the place she lived—the majestic mountain, the woods so full of life, the motley flowers, and especially the roe deer with their fawns, which sometimes

came so close to her that she could feed them and even touch them. She loved chasing butterflies and crickets or picking flowers and herbs, which she would draw afterwards in a small parchment book, a gift from her mother. She would run and play tag, hide-and-seek, and blind man's buff with her friends from sunrise to sundown, and when they were not around, she played a special game of her own invention: she was a healer, saving her sick dolls from all manner of disease.

But as Michaela grew up, she realised she was somehow different from the other girls. She had noticed that they would avoid her, conspicuously falling silent whenever she was around. Sometimes, as she approached a group of her peers, they would swiftly break up, only to gather later in another place. Poor Michaela did not understand what was going on. Occasionally, she would hear words amid the giggles and whispers—names like 'big-headed doll', 'dwarf', 'runt', and 'bandy-legs', and when she finally realised that all these terms were directed at her, it truly hurt her feelings. Sometimes, when she played alone with her dolls, she would also catch a glimpse of her mother's glances, or the pitying looks of their relatives and family friends. But she didn't fret too much, as young children rarely worry about anything related to the adult world.

By the time Michaela discovered what was wrong with her, she had almost reached the age of six. One gorgeous sunny day, she was playing alone in the backyard when the most beautiful butterfly she had ever seen fluttered past her and alighted on the nearby blossom spray. Spellbound, she admired its outspread, slightly twitching wings, dappled in blue, red, and yellow spots, which combined in incredible, technicolour harmony. She tried to snatch at it with a swift

swipe, but it was faster and flew off, floating in the air like a colourful flower. Burning with excitement, she rushed after it, her eyes wide with wonder, having completely forgotten her parents' explicit warning not to go into the forest alone.

Trying her best to keep the butterfly in her sight, she went deeper and deeper into the woods, following the old winding paths, which interwove like a spider's web in all directions, before meeting and merging into one another at the heart of the forest. Enthralled by the beauty of the thing, she quite lost track of time, and when the butterfly finally disappeared into the dense greenery, she realised with terror that she was alone, lost in the woods and surrounded by an ominous silence. Shocked by the sudden emptiness, she started to cry, rushing forward in sheer panic, wandering between the enormous trees, stumbling over gigantic roots, and scratching her limbs against the dense undergrowth. The overhanging, tangled branches lashed against her face, turning it red and puffy. After roaming for a considerable time, she finally noticed a spot where the forest thinned out and the path grew larger. Gradually, the trees gave way to small, thick bushes, followed by a large grass band, and as she moved into the clearing, she found herself in a small valley.

She stopped dead and gasped, delighted at what she saw. In front of her, bathed in sunlight, lay a small, round lake, its crystal-blue water mirroring three snowy peaks, whose steep slopes were densely covered with age-old pines. The sunbeams of the late afternoon danced on the lake's shimmering surface, giving off a golden hue, and the scent of pine and resin wafted through the air, carried by the gentle breeze. Utter silence reigned over the place, broken occasionally by the splashing of a surfacing fish, or the

piercing cry of a bird. Enchanted by the magical view, Michaela, who had never seen a lake before, forgot her fear in an instant, dried her tears, and walked down and along the shore. Soon, her attention was drawn to a huge flat rock sticking up from the lake's edge and jutting out slightly over the water.

She stepped gently onto it and looked down. To her surprise, from the shimmering water, a lean little girl with short arms and legs, wavy hair, and a large head was looking back up at her. Her face, scratched and swollen, was so densely covered with freckles that the natural colour of her skin was almost invisible. Michaela did not like the girl. She bent down, picked up a small pebble and threw it in the water, shouting, "Go away, you ugly child!"

The stone formed rings and ripples, distorting the image, but the girl returned in the water after a while, stubbornly staring back at her. Michaela raised her hand. Her reflection did the same. She gasped and touched her mouth. Again, the girl in the water mirrored her. A sharp pain stabbed Michaela's heart.

"But that's actually me," she whispered and slumped down over the rock, her eyes filled with tears. "No wonder my friends call me names and don't want to play with me. I'm so ugly! So hideous! Oh, how I wish to be pretty like them..."

Her body jolted with sobs, and she began wailing loudly. After a while, exhausted from the emotions of the day, her eyelids grew heavy. She stretched out on the boulder and, warmed by the sun, drifted off to sleep.

Then, something incredible happened. Suddenly, as light as a feather, she rose in the air and looked back to see her little body lying on the rock. As she looked around, she found

herself on the shore once more, in full control of her senses. She wondered if it was a strange dream or an even stranger reality. She strolled around the lake, enjoying the light breeze that caressed her face, when she heard a rustling on her left and turned sharply. From the bushes emerged a rotund brown beaver, walking on his hind legs towards her. Michaela gasped in amazement. He was big, almost as tall as she was, waving his short front paws comically as he moved. Something glinted in his left eye, and when he drew near, she realised it was a round piece of glass.

“Do not fall asleep on the old rock, little girl!” cried the beaver in a deep bass voice, his two snow-white buckteeth gleaming in the sunlight. “Never, ever stay there, especially at sunset. This lake is full of magic. Don’t hang around it; it’s very dangerous here! Go home, sweetie!”

“Well, first of all, beavers don’t speak,” said Michaela haughtily. “Secondly...” she paused for a moment, looking him over, “... they don’t wear glasses; and thirdly, I might not know *how* to get home.”

“Oh, you’re lost!” exclaimed the beaver before mumbling to himself, “Of course she’s lost; no one comes here otherwise.” He looked back at her. “So, I suppose you want to find your way back home. Well, let me have a think.” He raised one paw to scratch his head, then jumped for joy. “Yes, I know how you can find your way! Come with me!” He waddled towards the forest, and Michaela followed him until he slipped into the thick bushes, returning a moment later, dragging a long stick.

“Take this stick,” he said, panting. “When you say the word ‘*home*’, it will show you the way back. Once you get there, hide it, and every time you want to come back here, just

take it out and say ‘*Lacrima*’. But if you’ll excuse my bluntness, I strongly advise you never to do this. Instead, throw the stick into the nearest river and never return. And remember: hold it tight with both hands, ‘cause it bucks and kicks sometimes.”

With these words, the beaver dropped the stick and slipped back into the bushes, disappearing from sight. Instead of immediately reaching for it, Michaela looked around and spotted her own body, still lying on the rock, fast asleep. Without even thinking about it, she detached herself from the ground and rose into the air. She floated slowly over the lake, up and down, overwhelmed with joy, lightness, and happiness, wishing she could feel this way forever. She had almost reached the centre of the lake when she saw an elongated shadow gliding beneath the water surface. She watched interestedly at how the water was stirring slightly toward the flat rock on which she slept. The shadow vanished beneath the rock and, a moment later, she was dismayed to see a long black snake crawl out from the water and slowly enter her sleeping body at the chest. Fear and anxiety overwhelmed her. In a flash, she turned into a ball of bright yellow light and sped towards her prone body.

Michaela felt the wind blowing through her nostrils and woke up. The sun had nearly sunk, and the golden lake had turned black. The area all around her seemed to pulsate with danger. A chilling fear paralysed her, but she gradually recalled her dream and jumped to her feet, looking around feverishly. The large grass strip around the lake remained,

with the bushes and trees of the forest lying behind. Everything was an exact replica of her dream; only the beaver was nowhere to be seen.

She ran towards the spot where they had met and there, she spotted a long stick on the ground. She squatted and picked it up cautiously. It was sleek, without a single knot, and its bark had peeled off as if it had been whittled or chewed. The surface of the wood that remained was white and polished, and to her surprise, although it was twice her size, the entire thing was as light as a feather. She turned it over in her hands for a while, and then the beaver's words from her dream rang in her ears: "*Say 'home' and it will show you the way back...*" She clutched the stick with both hands and cried, 'home!' It came to life at once, rocked and bucked as the beaver had said it would, and dragged her off into the forest, picking up speed and forcing her to run faster and faster. It led her between countless looming trees and dry gullies, making her head spin as the wind blew into her face until she finally emerged in the yard behind her house.

Twilight was falling upon the village, and the first stars were peeping shyly out into the darkened sky. Michaela dropped the stick behind the shed and entered the house, staggering all over the place.

Inside, her parents were mad with fear. They had been searching for her most of the afternoon and had just returned, so the moment Michaela entered, her mother let out a cry of relief and dashed over to hug her.

"Where were you, sweet child? Look at you, all covered in scratches and bruises! What happened to you? We turned the whole village upside down to find you!"

“I was in the woods, chasing butterflies,” Michaela replied, almost surprising herself with her matter-of-factness.

“Without warning? Without a word as to where you were going?” shouted her father angrily. “You know perfectly well that you’re not allowed to go into the woods alone!”

“And that’s exactly why I did it!” snapped Michaela, quick to anger. “And you know what? From now on, I’ll do whatever I want!”

“What is this? I don’t even recognise my own daughter!” her father yelled, purple in the face. “What is this talk, young lady? You will be punished for your behaviour! Go to your room and stay there until you learn to behave!”

“I don’t care!” Michaela shouted back and ran upstairs, slamming the door behind her.

“What’s wrong with her?” whispered Mika and brushed a single tear from her eye. “I’ve never heard her speak like that.”

“I don’t know,” muttered Peter back. “Maybe she got scared in the woods. I suppose it will have blown over by tomorrow morning. Let her have some rest for now. Go fetch her some food; she must be hungry after roaming all day.”

A while later, her mother knocked on the door with a tray of food, but to her surprise, it flew open and Michaela appeared for an instant, snatched the tray and slammed the door back in Mika’s face. She didn’t understand why she was acting that way; the only thing she knew was that, for the first time in her life, she hated her parents. Something boiled, hissed, and stirred in her chest, telling her what to do and what to say, and she had no power to resist. She stayed up late that night, unable to get a wink of sleep. Gradually, she calmed down and, realising how awfully she had behaved, she burst

into tears, crying for a long time before drifting off to an uneasy sleep.

The next day, as her father had predicted, everything was back to normal. Michaela apologised for her behaviour, promising to be an obedient child and not to go anywhere without her parents' permission. Satisfied with her remorse, they relented and let her play outside in front of the house. Soon, she noticed one of the other girls, Mary, crossing the street with two of her friends. When they saw her, they nudged each other, whispering and nodding in her direction. Michaela felt something stirring in her chest again, and a wave of fury rose within her. She jumped up and set off towards the giggling girls as they walked past her house.

"Hey, you!" Michaela shouted, and they turned to face her. "What are you cackling about? What's so funny, eh?"

The girls stared at her in dismay. They knew her to be meek and timid, but what they were looking at now was a completely new person, angry and mean, her brows knitted, her eyes a slit of flashing light, her face distorted, and her fists clenched. Despite her small, delicate size, she looked menacing, and the girls' grins faded.

"Well, maybe it's none of your business," said Mary, who was two years older and drew herself up to the very extent of her superior height.

"I know you're making fun of me, but you'd better stop it!" said Michaela darkly.

"What if we don't?" said Mary derisively.

“Then *this* will happen!” shouted Michaela, hurling herself at Mary. She snatched at her hair and flung her down in the dirt with such force that the girl rolled over twice as her friends looked on, screaming. Michaela started kicking her fiercely, raising a cloud of dust around them, and it was only the intervention of Peter, who came running out of the house at the sound of the girls’ cries, that saved the poor victim from much worse than a few bruises.

After the incident, her parents grounded her for a fortnight, but Michaela felt no regret.

They will learn to respect me, she repeated to herself, filled with spite and anger. And true enough, the rumour of her belligerent behaviour spread like wildfire through the village, and nobody dared make fun of her in her presence anymore.

Chapter II

The Fairy's Gift

After Michaela visited the lake, nothing was the same. The change in her was so dramatic that even her parents did not recognise her anymore. From a kind and affectionate kid, she had turned into an insolent, cocky girl who constantly snapped at her mother and disobeyed her father. She had become decisive and bold, and did not hesitate to impose her will on the other children in the village. Where she had once cried, suffered, and felt hurt by their cruel jokes, she now treated them with total disregard and contempt, mixed with a fierce hatred. In return, although afraid of her, they continued to gossip and ridicule her, but behind her back. Thus, Michaela ended up alone, with no friends to play with. But worst of all, while her peers were gradually turning into beautiful slender youths, her body did not grow even an inch in height. Once, she asked her mother why she was so different from the others. Mika sighed and came out with a lot of complicated words, but the only one that Michaela remembered was 'syndrome' (she had heard that one before), whatever it meant. Despite posing what had seemed like a simple question, she understood nothing of the answer, so she stopped asking about anything related to her appearance.

Instead, she retreated into her shell, lonely and sullen, and by the time she was about to turn ten, she was convinced that she was the unhappiest girl in the world.

On the eve of her birthday, Michaela had a dream. She was on the shore of the same lake where she had met the talking beaver. The dream was so vivid that she once again felt the wind gently caressing her face and smelled the aroma of the ancient pines surrounding the valley. She focused on the small scattered pebbles glittering under the water and squatted to pick up a particularly bright one. But the moment she touched the water, it turned into shining gold. Michaela gasped, surprised. She advanced a little and stepped carefully onto the golden surface. It was firm and slippery, as if the entire lake was covered with a thin layer of ice. She looked down and gasped again. From beneath the shiny surface, a gorgeous, slim girl watched her. She was perfectly built, with splendid blonde hair, striking green eyes, and milk-white skin. Her stunning face radiated such beauty that Michaela could not take her eyes off her.

“Who are you?” she whispered.

“I’m you, silly. Don’t you know what a reflection is?” answered the girl.

“It’s impossible! I don’t look like that!” cried Michaela.

“Oh, I’m you, believe me!” the blonde beauty assured her. “I’ve been waiting for you since you came here.”

“But how come you’re so gorgeous?” asked Michaela.

“When you fell asleep on the rock, part of you remained here and evolved into me,” explained the girl. “Now, the only thing you need to do is come back to the lake and claim your true looks. Just call me once you get here, and you’ll transform into me.”

“How do I call you when I don’t know your name?” Michaela asked.

“You don’t need my name. All you need is a wish. If I were you, I’d wish to be the most beautiful girl in the world. And if you really want it, it will come true because this lake is magical. A great many miracles have happened here!”

“The beaver said the same thing, but I think he meant that the lake is dangerous. He even said I should never return here,” said Michaela.

“Oh, that old misery! Don’t mind poor Mister Monocle! I call him Professor Bubble-Head,” the girl giggled from the water, revealing a flash of brilliant white teeth. “You know, he is entirely lost in the labyrinth of his own tangled mind. Just imagine, he told you *not to come back* here, but a second before, he actually explained to you *how to do it*. Don’t you find that strange, eh? I think he’s so crazy that he doesn’t even know what he’s babbling on about most of the time. So, what are you waiting for, girl? Just take the stick and come and see me, so we can finally be united.”

“I don’t remember where I put it; it was so long ago,” said Michaela desperately.

“Of course, you know! Don’t play the fool!” chirped the girl from the water. “And don’t forget the magic word, ‘*Lacrima*’, which will bring you here!” She tilted her head playfully to one side, as if she was listening to something.

“I think it’s time for you to go now,” she said with a charming smile. “Mister Bubble-Head has crawled out of his pit and is heading this way. I assume you’re not too keen to meet him, right?”

“No, wait, I actually wanted to ask him something...” started Michaela, but the girl from the lake cut her off.

“Just find the stupid stick and come here!” she hissed in a harsh, commanding voice. The next moment, the lake turned black, and Michaela had the feeling that she was sinking into an abyss.

When she came to her senses, it took her a while to realise that she was back in her bed, as short and ugly as she had ever been. It was her tenth birthday, but she did not feel like celebrating. She sat up abruptly in the bed, a fierce hatred shimmering in her chest, and her inner spite tortured her eyes into narrow slits. Her insides were like an active volcano, ready to erupt. She loathed everything—her parents, who had brought her into the world so ugly, the pretty girls with their friends and normal lives, her small village with its gossip and narrow-mindedness, but most of all, she hated herself.

“I have to go to that lake *right now!*” she spat through clenched teeth. “I won’t put up with this anymore! And if this dream is a lie, I’ll drown myself in the lake, and that’ll be it!”

She jumped out of bed, frantically pulled on her tiny brown skirt and drab blouse, stormed out of the room and rushed out of the house. Dawn was breaking, chasing the gloom away. Her parents were nowhere to be seen, which suited her perfectly. As though drawn by an invisible force, she ran to the backyard and stopped precisely on the spot where she had arrived after her visit to the lake. And then, in the twinkling of an eye, she recalled that terrible evening—the row with her parents, the sleepless night, the crying in bed... and where she had dropped the stick. She dashed behind the shed and started digging, her heart racing; and, sure enough, she found it buried beneath the grass alongside the wall, covered with dry leaves from the autumn. She let out a happy cry and picked it up with a coy smile. Without a second

thought, she clutched the smooth butt firmly with both hands and shouted, “Lacrima!”

The stick bucked and lurched forward as it had done before, pulling her into the forest and dragging her feet into a wild run. In no time at all, as though the scenery had flown by, she stood before the lake she remembered so well.

Without wasting another moment, she rushed to the rock where she had fallen asleep before and looked into the water, expecting to see the girl from her dream. Instead, she only saw her own round, freckly face framed with wavy, bushy hair.

“Pretty girl! Where are you, pretty girl?” she cried. “Come out! I know you exist! I’m sure you’re real! I want to be gorgeous like you! Transform me into you! You promised me! Don’t hide! Where are you?”

As she shouted, she glanced at the water now and then, hoping that her appearance would change, but nothing happened. Finally, she gave up, realising how unrealistic her wish was. She collapsed onto the rock, rocking with sobs, her heart filled with despair and anger at the world.

“Why did I have to be born so ugly? Nobody wants me except my parents! Why is life so unfair? Oh, what I wouldn’t give to be normal and beautiful like the others!”

While she was lamenting her misfortune, she heard the lake stir and felt a gentle waft of wind ruffle her hair. She looked up and jumped to her feet, open-mouthed. In the middle of the lake, the water had begun churning and whirling with a gurgling sound, and from the very bottom, a gorgeous woman slowly emerged. She was in her twenties, tall and slim, clad in a stunning long white dress that trailed over the water. Her raven waist-length hair spilt in large locks over her shoulders, framing her pale and sad, but enchantingly

beautiful face. The woman glided graciously across the water and stopped in front of Michaela, who watched her, stunned, mesmerised by her sparkling black eyes. “Hello, little girl. Why are you crying, my dear? Tell me, what’s your name?” The woman in white smiled at Michaela, her voice soft and friendly, resembling a babbling brook.

“My name is Michaela. And who are you?” she inquired, oddly unafraid of this strange woman who had mysteriously appeared from beneath the lake.

“I am the Fairy of the Lake. I think I’ve seen you here before, haven’t I?”

“Yes, I came once, a long time ago.”

“And what made you come back?”

“I’m looking for the gorgeous blonde girl who lives in the lake. Do you happen to know her?” Michaela inquired hopefully.

“Why do you need her?” asked the fairy quietly.

“Well, she told me she would be waiting for me here,” explained Michaela. “Actually, she mentioned something about a wish... If you are a fairy, does that mean you can grant wishes?”

“Of course I can!” the fairy replied gleefully. “You can ask for whatever you want, but be careful, as every wish comes with a price.”

“I want to be the most beautiful girl in the world!” cried Michaela, not even hesitating to hear the fairy’s last words. “This has always been my dearest wish! Make me gorgeous like you or the girl from my dream. I want everyone to be green with envy because of my looks, to admire me, and talk about how wonderful and pretty I am! Can you do that for me, please?”

“Oh, Michaela, you do not realise the scope of your desire. You are so young and so naïve. Now, you may think that physical beauty is the most important thing in the world, but believe me, it isn’t. Nothing is what it seems, my dear. Outward appearance counts for nothing; inner harmony, goodness, and love are the values that truly matter. You already have that goodness in you—it’s a gift you were born with. And I can assure you that one day you will get your reward because of your kindness.”

“But look at me!” cried Michaela. “I’m an ugly dwarf with an enormous head. Nobody loves me, and everyone makes fun of me. I can’t take it anymore!”

“Well, I’m sure your parents and relatives love you very much.”

“It’s not enough for me. I have no friends, and nobody wants to get to know me...”

“I understand how difficult it is!” the fairy sighed. “Believe me, I know how it feels from my own experience. But you have to be strong and get through it. And if you patiently endure all the humiliation and misery, you will eventually be rewarded for your choices. Remember, being beautiful is not so important, but it *is* essential to be a good person.”

“What do you mean ‘from my experience’ and ‘it’s not so important to be beautiful?’” Michaela mimicked the fairy. “You are so gorgeous! How could you ever understand what I’m going through? I want to be beautiful, like you! That’s my first and only wish! Please do it for me... *please!*”

“So be it!” said the fairy. “Now remember, the moment I transform you into a beauty, I will break the law of nature and disturb the force that has made you the way you are. You need

to understand that everyone comes into the world with a strictly defined destiny that has to be fulfilled during one's life. When I grant you this wish, I will change more than just your physical appearance. Your inner state and destiny will also alter. You will deviate from the path intended for you, so one day, you will have to pay the price for your request.

"I am asking you now, Michaela; are you ready to deal with the consequences that will come with your decision? If you are unsure, think about it for a day or two, my dear; there is no rush to give me an answer right now, for I can grant you only one wish. I recommend you go home, think it all over, take your time, and come to see me again when you are ready with another, more reasonable wish, like a long healthy life, a good husband, or beautiful, talented children."

"No, no, no, I'm not going *anywhere!*" shouted Michaela. "I'm not even sure if you're real or I'm dreaming. What if I can't find you again? No, you promised to change me, and now you're trying to back out!"

"Are you willing to pay the price?" the fairy asked again, this time more solemnly and quietly.

"Yes, I'm ready to pay *any* price to be beautiful, whatever it is. For sure, it can't make my life any worse than my ugliness does now."

"Well then," replied the fairy after a brief pause, "step back from the shore!"

Michaela took several steps backward and froze. In front of her appeared a shining yellow line.

"This is the border between the worlds," said the Fairy of the Lake. Her voice had changed now—it was harsh, but tinged with sadness. The lake became rough, and the trees and plants around Michaela seemed menacing. "Crossing this line

is an irreversible process that means that you accept all the consequences that may come from changing your appearance, and the shift in your destiny.”

Gradually, Michaela began to understand what was going on. By the time the fairy had uttered her final words, an ominous foreboding had pierced her heart, and she realised without a shred of doubt that accepting the fairy’s gift would be a terrible mistake. She hesitated for a moment, but as she was about to change her mind, the same thought that had been nagging her for years resurfaced.

“The worst already happened when I was born so hideous,” she muttered. “What do I have to lose? Even if I die, I’d rather that than put up with my horrible appearance!”

No sooner had she spoken these words than an invisible force pushed her in the back, and she crossed the line.

Nothing happened.

Michaela turned around. The lake had calmed, the sun shone brightly once more, and there was no trace of the beautiful young woman dressed in white. Utter silence reigned around the lake—no birdsong, no crickets chirping; only the wind whistled in the crowns of the aged trees. Michaela’s lids grew heavy. She stretched out on the rock and closed her eyes, just as she had done four years ago.

From far away, she heard the voice of the beaver. “Never fall asleep on the old rock, little girl...”