



Regency
Fairy
Tales

Her

PRINCESS

at

MIDNIGHT

ERICA RIDLEY

HER PRINCESS AT MIDNIGHT

REGENCY FAIRY TALES



ERICA RIDLEY

CONTENTS

Also by Erica Ridley

Her Princess at Midnight

Back Cover Description

Acknowledgments

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Epilogue

Thank You

Free Books for you

The Perks of Loving a Wallflower

Sneak Peek

Thank You For Reading

About the Author

Copyright © 2023 Erica Ridley

Original anthology: *Pride Not Prejudice*

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Cover design © Dar Albert

All rights reserved. Except as permitted under the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, no part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, or stored in a database or retrieval system, without the prior written permission of the author.

ALSO BY ERICA RIDLEY

The 12 Dukes of Christmas:

Once Upon a Duke

Kiss of a Duke

Wish Upon a Duke

Never Say Duke

Dukes, Actually

The Duke's Bride

The Duke's Embrace

The Duke's Desire

Dawn With a Duke

One Night With a Duke

Ten Days With a Duke

Forever Your Duke

Making Merry



The Wild Wynchesters:

The Governess Gambit (FREE!)

The Duke Heist

The Perks of Loving a Wallflower

Nobody's Princess

My Rogue to Ruin



The Heist Club series:

The Rake Mistake

The Modiste Mishap



Rogues to Riches:

Lord of Chance

Lord of Pleasure

Lord of Night

Lord of Temptation

Lord of Secrets

Lord of Vice

Lord of the Masquerade



The Dukes of War:

The Viscount's Tempting Minx

The Earl's Defiant Wallflower

The Captain's Bluestocking Mistress

The Major's Faux Fiancée

The Brigadier's Runaway Bride

The Pirate's Tempting Stowaway

The Duke's Accidental Wife

A Match, Unmasked

All I Want



Gothic Love Stories:

Too Wicked to Kiss

Too Sinful to Deny

Too Tempting to Resist

Too Wanton to Wed

Too Brazen to Bite



Regency Fairy Tales:

Bianca & the Huntsman

Her Princess at Midnight



Magic & Mayhem:

Kissed by Magic

Must Love Magic

Smitten by Magic



The Siren's Retreat Quartet

A Tryst by the Sea by Grace Burrowes

An Affair by the Sea by Erica Ridley

A Spinster by the Sea by Grace Burrowes

Love Letters by the Sea by Erica Ridley



The Wicked Dukes Club:

One Night for Seduction by Erica Ridley

One Night of Surrender by Darcy Burke

[One Night of Passion](#) by Erica Ridley

[One Night of Scandal](#) by Darcy Burke

[One Night to Remember](#) by Erica Ridley

[One Night of Temptation](#) by Darcy Burke



Lords in Love

[Beguiling the Duke](#) by Darcy Burke

[Taming the Rake](#) by Erica Ridley

[Romancing the Heiress](#) by Darcy Burke

[Defying the Earl](#) by Erica Ridley

[Matching the Marquess](#) by Darcy Burke

[Chasing the Bride](#) by Erica Ridley

[Undressing the Duke](#) by Erica Ridley



Missing an Erica Ridley book?

Grab the latest edition of the free, downloadable and printable complete book list by series here:

<https://ridley.vip/booklist>

HER PRINCESS AT MIDNIGHT



What if Cinderella fell for the handsome prince's... sister?

Cynthia lives a life of drudgery, toiling for her stepmother and stepsisters without receiving gratitude or pay. Every day is the same... until a royal retinue sweeps into town, inviting every unwed maiden to vie for the hand of the visiting prince. The moment she lays eyes on the prince's beautiful sister, Cynthia is smitten. She's never been to a ball, and she's determined not to miss this one. But when her family refuses to allow her to attend—not that Cynthia even has a gown to wear—it will take a miracle to escape the attic and catch the eye of the princess who holds the key to her heart!



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, I could not have written this book without the invaluable support of many others. Huge thanks go out to Elyssa Patrick and Erica Monroe. You are the best!

I also want to thank my wonderful VIP readers, our Historical Romance Book Club on Facebook, and my fabulous early reader team. Your enthusiasm makes the romance happen.

Thank you so much!

CHAPTER 1



Miss Cynthia Talbott's muscles ached from spending the hours since dawn down on her hands and knees, scrubbing the floor spotless whilst her stepmother and stepsisters lay abed.

Task complete—for now—Cynthia hurried to the scullery to begin the preparations for their breakfast. The sun was rising high, and the sleeping ladies usually awoke by noon. No two of them ever wanted the same dish, causing even more work in the kitchen to keep them from berating her or flinging the unwanted delicacies to the floor. Again.

Cynthia had never dreamt she should one day be an exhausted, bedraggled maid-of-all-work in her childhood home. As a young girl, she had never even wondered how their French chef created his masterful sauces and marvelous *pâte à choux*. She certainly hadn't imagined that after the death of her beloved, humble-born mother five years prior, Father would remarry a widowed lady with expensive tastes and two daughters of her own... Or that the following year, after Father's subsequent death, the three women would spend every penny of his life savings with breathtaking speed, until every servant had gone elsewhere and Cynthia was forced to become a scullion in her own home.

She would have left without hesitation if she had any money to her name—and if she could bear to abandon her parents' home and the remaining

memory-imbued furnishings and keepsakes to the careless hands of her stepmother and stepsisters.

“Cynthia, you snail!” screamed a voice from the dining room. “Where are my eggs?”

That was Dorothea, the elder of Cynthia’s two stepsisters and impossible to please—making her the darling of her mother. The screaming was often more to appease Lady Tremaine than to torture Cynthia, although it generated the same result. Had the eggs and kippers been ready five minutes earlier, Dorothea would have pronounced them “old” and “too cold” and sent Cynthia to begin all over again.

“Coming!” she called out as she hurried the heavy tray into the dining room.

Stasia was seated at the table as well, her pale face propped up by both hands, and her red curls awry. The sisters had spent the past night at a ball, and Stasia appeared the worse for wear. Perhaps the provided supper had not agreed with her. Their mother, Lady Tremaine, appeared to still be abed.

A small blessing. As was the trio’s absence from home the evening before. As much as Cynthia dreamed of attending a fancy ball one day, dressed like a princess, a few stolen hours of peace and quiet in which to catch up on her work and take a much-needed nap felt like a gift from the heavens.

She served generous portions onto the sisters’ pre-warmed plates. “Here everything is, hot and fresh, as you like it.”

Dorothea poked at her eggs with her fork, testing their consistency for some failing to report back to her mother—who always asked for the latest ways Cynthia had failed to live up to expectations.

Stasia simply groaned and dropped her face lower into her hands, ignoring the repast altogether.

Cynthia’s stomach growled as she set the remaining dishes on the sideboard, though she knew better than to take a seat at the table.

Dorothea's black cat, Morningstar, darted out from beneath the sideboard. "Rowr!" he screeched, clawing at Cynthia's slipper as he passed.

"Leave Morningstar alone!" Dorothea scolded Cynthia, despite her not having stepped anywhere near his paws or tail, scooping the demon feline onto her lap in order to feed him bits of her kippers.

"Please scream at her *quietly*," Stasia mumbled into her palms.

The sound of trumpets blaring at a distance startled Cynthia from arranging the dishes. "What was that?"

Dorothea rolled her eyes. "The royal parade."

"How dare they," Stasia moaned. "It's barely past noon."

"How dare who?" Cynthia asked, befuddled. "The Prince Regent?"

"Not Prinny, you featherwit. The visiting royalty from Italy. Prince Azzurro's hunt for an English bride is the only thing anyone has been talking about for months."

Cynthia was no featherwit. She had once boasted the finest tutors in London. It was not her fault that once the staff had been dismissed, there was no one left for Cynthia to chat with. Her only interaction with the outside world came from reading scraps of discarded newspapers and overhearing snippets of gossip between her stepmother and stepsisters.

"Come on, Stasia." Dorothea threw a bun at her sister. "We cannot miss him!"

"Cynthia didn't brush my hair," Stasia protested, lifting her face from her hands.

"Put on a bonnet," Dorothea snapped. "Or stay here with her, whilst the prince falls in love with *me*."

"Is he meant to select his bride this afternoon?" Cynthia asked.

"At tonight's grand ball, unless he falls in love beforehand." Dorothea dragged her sister out through the front door to the street, where a crowd was already forming.

Cynthia followed, careful to stay a few feet behind, lest the duo notice her

presence and send her back into the kitchens.

Luckily, Dorothea and Stasia—like the rest of the gathering crowd—were too busy jostling each other and raising up on tiptoes to notice a scullery maid in a patched and tattered blue-and-brown dress lagging shyly behind.

Soldiers and musicians marched by first, followed by eight white stallions pulling an enormous, gilded open carriage. The crowd roared its approval at their first glimpse of the royal passengers. Several women shrieked in excitement. A few young ladies swooned at the sight of the Italian prince.

Even Cynthia's mouth fell open in awe.

"Who is *that*?" she blurted, slack-jawed and blushing.

"Prince Azzurro," a young woman to her right breathed dreamily. "He's come to select a bride from the best England has to offer. I hope he chooses me. Have you ever seen eyes so blue, hair so black, and shoulders so wide?"

"Not *him*." Cynthia pointed as surreptitiously as she could. "There, seated *next* to him."

"That's his spinster sister, Princess Ammalia. She's here to help him find his match."

Dorothea spun about and caught Cynthia staring. "Don't think for a second that his royal highness will spare a glance for the likes of you. At that ball, either Stasia or I will win the hand of the prince. *You* won't even leave the scullery."

Cynthia couldn't care less about the prince. Her eyes dazzled and her stomach filled with butterflies at the sight of the resplendent Princess Ammalia...

Whose black-lashed, bright blue gaze had just locked with Cynthia's.

CHAPTER 2



The horses, like Princess Ammalia's heart, came to a sudden stop. She did not know what had impeded the progress of the royal stallions this time, but she did know exactly what had caused her own heart to fail, then to burst back into motion, beating twice as swiftly as before. She gazed out of the carriage in wonder.

Thousands of onlookers flooded the streets in the hopes of glimpsing visiting royalty. The teeming masses were what had clogged the escape path—er, parade route—the horses had been following. But it wasn't fear of a surging crowd that set Ammalia's blood pumping faster.

It was a woman.

She was toward the back of the throng, half-hidden from view. It didn't matter. She had the sort of ethereal beauty that could be *felt* from yards away and in the pitch black of night, if necessary.

It wasn't the golden blond hair or the plump rose-petal pink lips that had caught Ammalia's eye. It wasn't even the high cheekbones or the becoming flush of color rising up her peaches-and-cream skin.

It was the wide blue eyes that had latched onto Ammalia's own, as if this woman, too, had felt the connection between them as strong as a thick metal chain capable of hauling a ship back to shore.

Anchored in place by eyes like those, Ammalia couldn't dream of going

anywhere else. If the mass of jostling onlookers parted enough to let the horses trot anew, Ammalia would throw herself down from this carriage and elbow her way through the crowd until she reached—

“What are you looking at?” her brother Zurri asked with interest.

“Nothing,” Ammalia said quickly.

But she could no more tear her enthralled eyes from this captivating woman than she could rip her pounding heart free from her chest.

Zurri followed the direction of his sister’s gaze. “Who? Where?”

She didn’t answer.

Their father, the king, was in the carriage behind theirs, no doubt watching his children closely. Not because he feared scandal—this entire spectacle was because the king loved to be the center of attention, at any cost. The bigger the drama, the better.

Nor did his majesty worry about the future of his only daughter, whom he’d given up caring about at the disappointing moment of her birth. Neither Ammalia nor her theoretical children were of import. It was the male line that counted. Her brother was the future king. Rather than arrange a political alliance, Father was even allowing Zurri to select the most beautiful bride in all of England and align the two nations that way.

Ammalia, as the elder sibling and worthless female, was supposed to be finding this enviable match for her brother.

Zurri was, as always, the center of attention—just as he liked it. He needn’t even be charming. Being a prince was more than enough for women everywhere to fall in love on sight.

“I don’t care to know who’s caught your eye,” Zurri said petulantly, as though he were a child of six years, rather than a man of six-and-twenty. “I don’t want anything or anyone that pleases *you*. You have terrible taste.”

That was the rumor, anyway. Ammalia wouldn’t have had to be the twenty-seven-year-old spinster sister, if she’d bothered to accept any of the many offers for her hand that cropped up repeatedly over the years, often

from highly sought-after gentlemen.

Duke of this, Lord of that, His Royal Highness such-and-such. Ammalia was bored by them all, no matter how handsome and wealthy and well-connected they were. She didn't *like* men, and never had. Fortunately, as a royal princess, the one concession afforded her by her father was that she needn't marry any man against her will.

Of course, what Ammalia *willed* was to marry the woman of her dreams. This scenario was not a thing that existed—a publicly condoned Sapphic royal match wasn't even the stuff of fairy tales—but that hadn't stopped her from wanting it viscerally. She longed for love. To find a happy-ever-after with a woman who made her feel not unlike the one whose celestial gaze was still locked on Ammalia's.

Outside of her family, however, no one knew about her preferences. Although a princess could get away with almost anything, Father had warned her not to embroil the family in gossip or to draw attention away from her brother until after Zurri was safely wed, and the alliance with England secure.

Until then, Ammalia's wishes didn't come second—they didn't matter at all.

“All right, I give up,” Zurri grouched. “*Please* tell me who it is you cannot look away from.”

Because her brother had said please, Ammalia gestured in the general direction of her mystery woman. Not too precisely, of course. With luck, one of the other screaming young ladies flanking her should catch Zurri's eye.

Unfortunately, Ammalia was not in luck.

“The one with the handkerchief tied to her head and the smudge of dirt on her face?” he asked in disbelief. “I suppose she'd be halfway passable, if she weren't dressed in rags.”

To be honest, Ammalia hadn't noticed the smudge or the handkerchief or the patched and tattered gown. Even now, after Zurri had so uncharitably pointed it out, Ammalia could not make herself care about such

inconsequential details. She wanted to know all the things that *did* matter. Like, what was this woman's name? Was she spoken for? Did she like good wine and ocean sunsets and focaccia fresh from the oven and the smooth feel of cold mosaic tiles beneath one's bare feet on a warm summer's day? Would she like to experience all those things with Ammalia?

"Maybe your pauper is just the trick to add sparkle to my image," he mused thoughtfully. "A pet project, for the public's sake. Like the time I adopted that dog."

"I adopted the dog. You held that Pomeranian in your lap long enough to get your portrait painted, and then never gave the poor wretch another glance."

Zurri's stunt had generated the desired effect: young ladies all over the Parmenza region of Italy purchased penny copies of that portrait, and acquired Pomeranians of their own out of solidarity with the prince.

"It was furry," her brother protested. "I don't like things with fur. I might not mind—"

"No," Ammalia said firmly. "That woman is a person, not a Pomeranian. She's not to become your pet, even for a moment."

Zurri was not listening to her. His head was cocked to one side, his eyes narrowing with calculation. "She does have good bones, does she not? Perhaps with a bath and a better dress, she might become the English rose I've been looking for."

"No," Ammalia said again, the word coming out strangled.

Her relationship with Zurri was like this. Though they loved each other, he and Ammalia had sniped and fought with each other for so long, they didn't know any other way to interact. If Zurri saw something his sister wanted, he took it from her. Ammalia didn't even *have* this woman, and already her brother was plotting how to take possession.

Interest from her brother could only spell disaster. For the poor young woman, who would either be leg-shackled to a spoilt brat—or publicly

discarded by him in front of all her peers, with no more thought than he'd given the Pomeranian.

Ammalia wouldn't be able to gather the gorgeous woman up and take her home. Not after a public rejection by the prince. Instead, Ammalia would be forced to leave her behind...

Or else watch her become Parmenza's next princess and future queen. Living under the same roof, yet untouchable. For the rest of Ammalia's life.

CHAPTER 3



“*H*e’s looking at us!” Stasia squealed. “The prince is looking right at us!”

Cynthia didn’t even flick a glance in his direction. She couldn’t have moved if she tried. It was as though she and Princess Ammalia stood at opposite ends of a glass tunnel. The rest of the world was still out there, muffled and distorted, but the only object of perfect clarity was off in front of her, tantalizing and out of reach.

Longing shot through Cynthia, sharp enough to steal her breath. She swayed forward toward Princess Ammalia’s piercing blue gaze.

“It’s me.” Dorothea flipped her long brown hair with confidence. “He’s looking at *me*.”

The crowd surged closer, squeezing around Cynthia and her stepsisters like a human boa constrictor, each vertebra made up of unwed young women, desperate to insert themselves in view of the prince’s gaze.

With a jerk, the carriage moved forward once again. The prince grabbed his sister’s elbow, forcibly turning the princess to face him.

Her attention lost, the spell was broken. The glass tunnel, shattered. Cynthia’s unsteady limbs wobbled adrift without the incessant swell of the crowd to prop her up.

“When is the grand ball?” she gasped, once she could draw breath.

“Tonight,” Dorothea replied absently, still waving her arms at the retreating prince. “Nine o’clock.”

Cynthia could see no more of Princess Ammalia but the back of her glossy black chignon as the eight white horses pulled the gilded carriage out of view.

This could not be Cynthia’s last sight of her. It could *not*.

She spun toward her stepsisters. “You have invitations to the ball?”

Dorothea rolled her eyes. “Unnecessary. *All* unmarried young women are invited, at the prince’s bequest. How is he supposed to select the prettiest flower if his garden is incomplete?”

“Where are the festivities to be held? At the assembly rooms down the street?” Excitement bubbled in Cynthia’s veins. “That’s walking distance from our house.”

“Stasia and I won’t be *walking*,” Dorothea snapped. “Obviously we’ll hire a carriage.”

A carriage! A grand ball! That magnificent princess!

“I’m going with you,” Cynthia whispered.

That got both sisters’ attention.

Dorothea wrinkled her nose as though Cynthia were something rancid found on the bottom of her shoe.

Stasia’s pitying expression was not much better. “Dressed in... rags?”

“One of you could loan me a gown,” Cynthia said in a burst of inspiration. “Any gown at all, no matter how unfashionable, so long as it hasn’t any holes or—”

“No,” Stasia said flatly, and turned toward the house. “Mother would never allow it.”

“Unthinkable,” Dorothea agreed with a haughty sniff. Her nose lifted into the air as she strode away from the crowd. “I won’t have your dirty hands grubbing my silk. Even one I never intend to wear again.”

Cynthia’s lye-raw hands were rubbed clean every few minutes, given that

her many daily chores included preparing the family's meals, cleaning the family house, and washing the family's clothes.

Dorothea was not afraid of dirt. She was afraid of Cynthia, and what her presence might accomplish.

"I don't want the prince," she assured her stepsister in a rush. "I just want to attend the ball, like everyone else."

Stasia gave a dismissive wave of her hand. "Well, you can't go unless you manage to look as presentable as everyone else."

Dorothea slanted her sister a scorching glare.

"It's not going to happen," Stasia said defensively. "She doesn't *have* anything presentable to wear."

Dorothea gave a long-suffering sigh.

"But... if I did find a dress," Cynthia said hesitantly. "I could go to the ball then?"

Stasia glanced at Dorothea. "I don't mind if she comes along."

Dorothea shrugged. "Me neither. It's not as though she'll outshine us. But despite the Prince explicitly inviting all unmarried young women, Mother will never allow Cynthia to join us."

Stasia bit her lip. "I could say I need a maid to look after my hair."

"Your hair *does* require constant intervention," Dorothea agreed dryly. She turned to Cynthia. "We'll tell Mother we need you in order to look our best. You may accompany us for an hour or two, but you must return home by midnight. No matter what Stasia and I say, Mother will expect a fresh hot bath waiting for the three of us when we return home. And a full breakfast on the table first thing in the morning, ball or no ball. Midnight, and not a moment later."

Cynthia nodded eagerly. "Midnight. Thank you."

Stasia sent her a look of warning. "If you fail to do even one of your chores to Mother's satisfaction, she won't allow you to leave the house for frivolous activities again."

Cynthia swallowed hard. “Understood.”

They reached the door just in time to hear Lady Tremaine shriek, “My kippers are cold! Where *is* that lazy wench?”

Shite.

Cynthia rushed into the house to prepare her stepmother a fresh meal. Between now and tonight’s ball, she had to perform each task impeccably, lest Stasia’s begrudging permission be snatched away before Cynthia could attend tonight’s ball.

She cooked and cleaned with more vigor than ever before, but there wasn’t a spare second to even think about where to find a gown for another hour, until Lady Tremaine and her daughters left for their customary early-afternoon promenade in Hyde Park.

Home alone at last, Cynthia finished her final chore and rushed upstairs to her relocated room in the attic to search for something to wear. The ladies were right. Cynthia’s clothes were fit for nothing but rags. She didn’t need any of the carefully folded items inside her broken wardrobe. She needed a miracle.

A rustle of feathers sounded in the small open window. Cynthia gave a wan smile to the pair of magpies she’d named Jack and Gus. Cynthia wasn’t sure who had befriended whom first, but she was deeply grateful for their company. Oftentimes, the only nice thing she heard all day was the sound of their happy chatter.

She crossed to the window. “You didn’t happen to bring me a ball gown to wear, did you?”

They dropped their offerings in her palm: a sparkling pearl button, a shimmering satin ribbon, a shiny new penny, a beautiful red leaf.

“Thank you,” Cynthia said as she always did, and added the new treasures to the growing trove heaped inside a dilapidated old bucket.

Jack and Gus twittered and preened in pleasure.

Cynthia slumped to the scuffed wooden floor and rested the back of her

head against the windowsill. From this angle, the attic looked even smaller than usual. Most of it was piled to the rafters with old household detritus. The battered wardrobe next to the lumpy mattress. A cracked clock, a broken table, a hatbox that looked as though it had been run over by a herd of bulls.

The remains of a life Cynthia and her beloved parents had once had. If her mother were still here, she would help Cynthia find a way to the ball.

Wait a moment.

Hatbox.

She scrambled over to it on her hands and knees and pried open the lid. The paper inside the box fell apart in her hands. The hat it was meant to protect was crushed and soiled beyond repair.

But where there was a hat... might there not also be other attire?

With frantic energy, she set about moving each old item from one side of the attic to another, searching for something, anything, that could aid her cause.

And then she found it: a scarred valise that used to belong to her mother.

Hands trembling, Cynthia brushed the cobwebs aside and eased the creaking hinges open. It was part of her mother's wedding trousseau! Fragile linens and embroidered handkerchiefs and... a plain white gown thirty years out of style, and slightly yellowed with age.

Cynthia clutched it to her chest and danced about the attic in gleeful circles. The gown was old and desperately in need of a good cleaning, but it was free of holes and patches.

How long would the rest of her family be gone? An hour? Two? They would wish to prepare for the ball, as well. Cynthia raced down the stairs to wash her new gown, then hung it outside in the sun to dry. With the July heat and constant breeze, it wouldn't take long.

But it wasn't quick enough. Her stepmother and stepsisters arrived home just as Cynthia was taking the dress down from the line.

"What do you think you're doing with that?" Lady Tremaine demanded

in alarm.

“It’s my gown for the ball,” Cynthia explained. “Stasia said—”

“*Stasia*,” Dorothea spat, casting a nervous look over her shoulder. “Mother told us that kindness is always a bad idea.”

“She won’t catch anyone’s eye in that thing,” Stasia said. “Except as an object of pity, perhaps. That dress looks older than we are.”

“There’s no holes or patches,” Cynthia said quickly, hugging her mother’s gown to her bosom. “That was the agreement. I could fix it up a bit more, if one of you were to loan me—”

“I need my hair washed,” Dorothea announced. “And dried and set into ringlets.”

“All three of us ought to be washed before the ball,” Lady Tremaine added.

Stasia flashed Cynthia a look of apology. “I really was counting on you running to the cobbler to reheel my dancing slippers before it’s time to leave.”

Cynthia’s heart sank. There would be no time to work on her own appearance. The best she could hope for was to wear the gown as-is and dash a brush through her hair.

“Of course,” she said with resignation. “I’ll do all those things straight away. Let me take this dress up to my room, and I’ll be right back down.”

“Leave it there for good,” Lady Tremaine snapped. “It belongs in an attic.”

“Just like you do,” Dorothea informed Cynthia, earning a smirk of appreciation from her mother. “You smell as musty as that old dress.”

Cynthia had bathed herself and cleaned the dress less than hour prior, so she knew this comment was meant to wound rather than be truthful. But her heart had long since grown calloused to scathing remarks such as these. Her step-family’s biting tongues did not matter to her in the least.

The only opinion that mattered was that of Princess Ammalia.

And the only way to look her best for the princess was to complete her new spate of tasks as briskly as possible.

She dashed up the shallow steps and skidded into the attic so quickly, the side of her foot brushed the old bucket and sent the gifts from the magpies skittering across the wooden floor.

“Blast!” She cursed her clumsiness and poor timing. “It will take ages to —”

The entire floor glittered as though strewn with diamonds. Cynthia was fairly certain that none of Gus and Jack’s baubles were more valuable than bits of glass, but some of the items certainly *appeared* to be real silk ribbons and pearl buttons.

If she adorned her mother’s gown with trimmings such as these...

“Jack! Gus!” She set the gown atop her pallet and scooped up a pearl and a length of pink ribbon. “Can you bring me more treasures like these?”

The magpies chirped as if they understood the mission and its urgency, and soared off from the windowsill in tandem.

Spirits buoyant, Cynthia hurried through the washing of hair, the serving of afternoon tea, and the five additional tasks her stepmother and stepsisters dreamt up before she could finally break away to take a moment for herself.

“Dawdle at your own risk,” Stasia warned her under her breath. “The ball begins promptly at nine, which means less than three hours until we join the queue!”

“We leave with or without you,” Dorothea called out as Cynthia barreled up the stairs on exhausted feet.

“Hopefully without,” Lady Tremaine added fretfully. “I know she’s your lady’s maid, but how fashionable will you two look if you’re seen toting a bedraggled scullion about like a pet?”

Cynthia ignored them all as she hurried back to the attic.

There, atop the smooth folds of her mother’s ivory gown, rose a mountain of colorful ribbons and sparkling baubles.

“Jack and Gus, you clever scamps!” she breathed in wonder, dropping to her knees to sift through the trove of pretty ornaments.

In no time, she had her sewing kit in hand, and briskly trimmed the sleeves and hem and bodice with bright pink ribbons, giving the ivory gown a gorgeous splash of color. She dotted the bodice with pearl buttons and added a faux diamond to the clip in her hair.

When she made her way down the stairs, her stepmother and stepsisters weren’t merely horrified at the sight of her.

They were furious.

Lady Tremaine pointed a knobby finger at Cynthia’s bodice. “So *that’s* where the ribbon of my riding bonnet went!”

“My missing pearl buttons,” Stasia gasped. “*You* have them.”

“Is that...” Dorothea dropped the black cat from her arms. “Is that the diamond from my lost earring?”

Oh, no. Oh, oh, oh *no*.

“You thief!” Lady Tremaine slapped Cynthia’s cheek. “Did you think we wouldn’t notice?”

“*Rowr*,” added Morningstar, racing up Cynthia’s legs, claws out, scratching her skin and shredding her mother’s gown. Her stepsisters joined in the fray.

“I... I didn’t...” she managed, but it was too late.

The dress was ruined. It didn’t matter whose fault it was. There was no time to make a new one.

Cynthia wouldn’t be going anywhere.

CHAPTER 4



*A*mmalia's heart beat faster as the royal carriage drew up the cobblestone street. The parade had long since ended, though hours remained before the ball. All of the prior onlookers had returned to their homes to prepare. There were only a few souls in sight to give her curious glances. A street sweeper, a stray dog, a hunched woman carrying a basket of apples.

As usual, without Zurri by her side, Ammalia was of no interest. The woman with the apples didn't spare her a second glance. Even the puppy had better sticks to chase. And the street sweeper simply sighed, as he waited for one of the eight white stallions to deposit a royal mess to be cleaned up.

She lowered herself from the carriage and accepted a pretty box from Fabrizio, one of the footmen.

"Stay here," she told him. "I won't be long."

Fabrizio glanced askance at the humble houses before her. "And if you do not return swiftly?"

"Then you wait here until I appear," she said firmly. "I trust you brought a book?"

He grinned and held up the volume Ammalia had loaned him. "I'm on chapter seven."

"Good man." She smiled back, then turned toward the row of residences,

in the hope that her hunch was right, and the woman she had seen lived nearby.

She was in luck—at the second door, the butler recognized Ammalia’s description as that of one of the neighbors, a sweet girl who lived three doors down with her family, the Tremaines. Ammalia’s spirits rose, and she hurried down the street to the indicated home.

The residence was old, but sturdily built. Three stories of pretty brick. It was nothing like the Parmenzan castle back home, but then, how many English houses were? The important thing was not the exterior. If Ammalia’s luck held, the pretty maiden she hoped to find was somewhere inside.

Box tucked under her arm, she marched to the front door and prepared to knock.

Doing so was unnecessary. The front door was already ajar, and swung all the way open at the first brush of Ammalia’s knuckles.

Inside was a scene of utter chaos.

A pair of magpies flew about the parlor in wide, swooping circles, as though caught in a tempest. A black cat with a loud hiss and sharp claws tore over the furniture to give chase, leaping and swiping at the air and skidding on the hardwood floor, only to sprint and leap after the birds all over again.

In the center of the room stood the young woman who had caught Ammalia’s eye earlier, looking even more memorable now than she had before. Two well-dressed young ladies about Ammalia’s age tugged at the mystery woman’s ivory gown, which hung from her slender frame in tatters. The—sisters?—crowed with delight as they yanked pearls and bits of ribbon from what might once have been a pretty dress. An older lady in an extravagant ball gown reared back her hand as though set to strike Ammalia’s angel’s face... which already bore a red mark.

They all froze at the sight of her.

Her mystery woman gasped and dipped into an immediate curtsy, the torn strips of her skirts flying. “Princess!”

Ammalia inclined her head, then glared at the other three. “And you are?”

“This is my house and these are my daughters,” babbled the older woman. “Well, not that one. That’s just Cynthia. But these two jewels are my darlings Dorothea and Stasia. And I am Lady Tremaine.”

“Welcome to our home,” chorused Stasia and Dorothea, curtsying in unison.

Ammalia stared back at them impassively.

“Cynthia, go and get cleaned up and fetch some tea for the princess,” Dorothea hissed under her breath. “Where are your manners?”

“Where are the manners, indeed,” Ammalia said dryly.

Cynthia looked stricken and her eyes took on a suspicious shine.

“Not you, dear heart,” Ammalia assured her. “You are the only one who did not appear to be perpetrating violence on other people when I arrived.”

“It wasn’t violence,” Stasia blurted. “Not exactly. That is, Mother *might* have slapped her, but that was only because—”

“Now, now,” interrupted Lady Tremaine. “Let’s not bore the princess by airing our dirty linen, shall we? Cynthia, you heard Dorothea, did you not? The tea shan’t fetch itself.”

“She stays,” said Ammalia.

Lady Tremaine and her two daughters froze.

“Then... how will we have tea?” asked Stasia hesitantly.

For God’s sake.

“Cynthia, do you work for these ladies?” Ammalia asked.

“I...” Cynthia bit her lip and glanced at the others out of the corner of her eye, as if torn between loyalty and honesty. “I don’t get paid, no. I live here because this is my home.”

“My home,” Lady Tremaine corrected her. “Settled on me when I married your father.”

“May he rest in peace,” Cynthia murmured, her eyes lowering in pain.

“I see.” Ammalia sent Lady Tremaine her iciest glare.

“I’m afraid I do not see,” said Dorothea. “With all due respect, princess, why are you here? Has your brother come, too?”

“He had better things to do, I’m afraid.” Probably a nap. Or a glass of *vin santo* and a rubber of whist. “His royal highness sent me in his stead.”

Or would have, if he’d thought of it. This visit was Ammalia’s idea. She was the one who could not stay away from her mystery woman. Not if there was the slightest chance—

“Prince Azzurro sent you to do what?” Lady Tremaine asked, bewildered.

“My brother wishes to ensure that this family will be attending tonight’s royal ball. As you may know, our father is increasing ties with England, which will soon include a royal wedding to unite our two countries. That is why tonight’s ball is open to all unmarried women. The king believes my brother deserves no less than the prettiest English rose in all the kingdom.”

Stasia and Dorothea exchanged delighted glances, rolling back their shoulders and puffing out their chests in preening self-satisfaction.

“I told you he was looking at us,” said Stasia.

“At *me*,” Dorothea said smugly.

“Of course we’ll be there,” Lady Tremaine assured Ammalia. “Not Cynthia; she’s needed here. Someone has to do the chores. But my daughters and I would not dream of missing an opportunity to—”

“The entire family is to be present.” Ammalia enunciated each syllable, ensuring her accent did not hinder their comprehension. “Which appears to include Cynthia.”

Who, Ammalia realized, had clearly been in the midst of a lively struggle to attend the ball, only to meet with familial resistance. For the fight to have progressed to a level that left Cynthia’s gown in tatters only underscored just how badly Cynthia had hoped to dance with—and perhaps enamor—the prince.

Ammalia tried not to be disappointed. She should not have expected otherwise. Young ladies in both countries would tear each other apart to be

the one to wed Zurri. Ammalia had just hoped Cynthia might be different. That she might see beyond the prince's façade to the sister that stood in his shadows.

"Well... I mean, yes, technically, Cynthia is a part of this household," Lady Tremaine conceded, "but she's wearing the finest gown she owns, and as you can see, it's barely fit to sweep the cinders from the fireplace, much less rub shoulders with royalty."

Cynthia pressed her rosy lips together, as if forcing a retort back down her throat.

Perhaps something like: *This gown was perfectly serviceable until you three ripped it apart with your bare hands.* Or perhaps: *If the family coffers have money enough for your modiste, surely you could have spared a coin or two for me.* Or even: *I could open your wardrobes right now and find two dozen acceptable gowns you could have loaned me.*

None of it mattered. Even if Cynthia was destined to wed Zurri, Ammalia didn't want her to have to endure disrespect from the Tremaine women ever again.

"As it happens," she said coldly, "his royal highness, in all his wisdom, has already provided the solution."

All four women stared at her.

"S-solution?" stammered Lady Tremaine.

Ammalia held up the be-ribboned box she'd been carrying. "My brother sent this gown, in case one of the young ladies needed it. It sounds to me as though that lady in need is Cynthia."

Stasia gasped in horror. "The prince... But *I* want..."

Dorothea whirled around. "Mama, you *cannot* allow that scullion to outshine us!"

Ammalia stepped forward and handed Cynthia the decorated box.

The tips of their fingers touched, sending a jolt of electricity crackling along Ammalia's skin.

She swallowed hard, to hide how badly the brief touch had affected her. “Good luck with my brother tonight. Mayhap your maid can help you don the gown.”

Cynthia lifted her long eyelashes, her voice shy and her expression wistful. “I *am* a maid. I no longer have one.”

“In that case...” Ammalia straightened her shoulders as an undeniable burst of wickedness rushed through her. “Do allow me the honor.”

CHAPTER 5



Did the princess just say... *she* would be Cynthia's handmaiden?

The stunned expressions on her goggling stepsisters' faces mirrored Cynthia's own dazed reaction. Once she picked her jaw up off the floor, all she could do was stutter, "I... You needn't..."

"I'll tell you what we need," said Princess Ammalia, turning toward Lady Tremaine as if it had been Cynthia's stepmother who had offered to play lady's maid. "A hot bath, posthaste. Instruct one of your footmen to take it to Cynthia's dressing chamber at once."

"Er..." said Stasia.

"We haven't—" began Dorothea.

"Of course, your highness," Lady Tremaine interrupted, all scraping curtsies and saccharine smiles. "The girls will see to it personally. Won't you, girls?"

Stasia and Dorothea stared at her in horror, though neither breathed a word of protest. Both were more terrified of their mother than of making a poor impression on visiting royalty. They would not refuse any request.

"Go and ready Cynthia's bath," Lady Tremaine commanded her frozen daughters. "*Now.*"

Stasia and Dorothea scurried off, too rattled even to remember to dart accusing looks over their shoulders at Cynthia as they hurried toward the

kitchens.

Cynthia wondered if they knew how to boil water.

Lady Tremaine gestured toward Dorothea's bedchamber. "Show the princess to your rooms, dear."

"But that's not my room." Anger flashed through Cynthia's veins. "You gave my room to your daughter and sent me upstairs to live in the attic."

Lady Tremaine looked as though she could happily throttle her, but settled instead on visibly grinding her teeth behind a tight smile.

"To the attic, then," Princess Ammalia said briskly. "I'm certain there will be no trouble carrying the hot bath upstairs."

No one had ever brought Cynthia a hot *anything* up to the attic. If she wanted a bath or even a cup of tea, she boiled the water herself down in the kitchen. The cramped wooden tub in the pantry was where she'd had the most stolen moments to relax.

"Of course, your highness," Lady Tremaine said, curtsying low, her tone fawning. "My girls will be right up."

Princess Ammalia inclined her head as though all of this was as it should be. Without further comment or attention to Lady Tremaine, the princess turned to Cynthia with her eyebrows raised. "Now then. Why don't you lead the way?"

"Of... course," Cynthia stammered, as used to leading the way to her attic bedchamber as her stepsisters were used to manual labor. Which was to say: not at all. In the years since she'd been installed there, the only living souls to visit her were her magpies, Jack and Gus.

Even Morningstar the devil-cat didn't bother climbing multiple flights of stairs to torment Cynthia by scratching at her door and her shins. It was just as easy to wait to attack until she was making her careful way down the steps with a heavy basket or precarious tray in her hands.

She hated that the princess was seeing her this way, bedraggled and browbeaten. But Cynthia could not help but want to please her, and Princess

Ammalia's low rich voice with its Italian accent was too delicious to deny.

Cynthia hurried up the stairs at her usual *must-accomplish-everything* brisk pace before realizing the princess was likely unused to racing up and down flights of stairs. Most likely, Cynthia had left the poor woman in the dust back on the first step.

But when she paused, Princess Ammalia was right behind her. Due to the difference in their heights, and because Cynthia had not given warning that she was about to turn around, her bodice swung directly into the princess's path.

The princess had no time to slow her forward momentum before her startled face smushed directly into Cynthia's bosom.

"Oh," Cynthia gasped, her face flaming with heat. "I'm so sorry. I..."

She jerked backwards, rescuing the princess from suffocating in Cynthia's cleavage, then spun around and dashed up the final steps as though her slippers were on fire.

When she reached the top of the stairs, she flung open the door to her bedchamber and launched herself a safe distance inside.

Probably it was a safe distance. Maybe. She wasn't quite sure what she was running from—the princess, or her own reaction to having her so close.

If it was the latter, things were not about to get easier.

The princess glanced around the dim attic, taking it all in. The ceiling was low, but the wide chamber covered the full length of the house. Almost every inch was full of decades-old trunks and boxes and furniture, save for the small area Cynthia had claimed for herself, with just enough room for the broken wardrobe where she kept her few items of clothing, the straw pallet upon which she slept, and the heap of strings and sparkly bits the birds had brought her.

"Er," Cynthia said, then decided to forge ahead without further mention of accidentally force-feeding her bosom to the princess. "I'd offer you a seat, but as you can see, I've no chairs. The wooden crates are sturdy, if you'd like

me to dust one off for you.”

“You used to have a proper bedroom?” the princess asked.

Cynthia nodded. “It’s Dorothea’s now.”

“This three-story house only contains three usable bedchambers?”

“No, there are others. But they’re reserved for guests.”

“Guests,” the princess repeated. “Not to be used by the one person who grew up in this house, prior to the others’ arrival.”

“I get by, by trying very hard not to think about that,” Cynthia said softly. “And by pretending I don’t care how I’m treated.”

“You should never have to pretend not to care,” the princess replied. “I care how you are treated.”

And now Cynthia would have to pretend that her insides weren’t turned upside-down because of *that*. Her heart fluttered.

Before she could return the conversation to safer topics, such as which of the warped crates would be most suitable to dust off for a princess, a ruckus sounded at the foot of the stairs. Cynthia rushed to the open doorway to see what had caused the commotion.

CHAPTER 6



Here on the landing below were Dorothea and Stasia, red-faced and sweating, as they tried semi-successfully to lug Lady Tremaine’s fancy bathtub up the stairs, rather than the shallow wooden tub left in the scullery for Cynthia. Their mother hovered right behind, candle in hand..

Cynthia hurried toward the stairs to help them, but Princess Ammalia caught her elbow before Cynthia could take more than a single step.

“They made it this far,” the princess said quietly. “Allow them to complete their task—and allow yourself to enjoy it.”

Cynthia *might* have enjoyed seeing her stepmother and stepsisters pitch in for once, if it signified anything other than what was about to come next. A tub meant a bath, and a bath meant disrobing—in front of Princess Ammalia, who had already experienced an unexpectedly close encounter with Cynthia’s bosom.

The thought of being fully naked in front of the princess was almost too much to bear. And, if Cynthia was being honest, the effort was wholly unnecessary. She had bathed earlier, and was already perfectly clean.

She could not quite bring herself to voice this tidbit of information, however. Cynthia *liked* baths. And the sight of Princess Ammalia taking charge and ordering the others about was simply too delicious to pass up.

In relatively short order, the pallet and a few crates were moved, and

room made for the pretty tub. Dorothea and Lady Tremaine hurried out of the attic and back down the stairs to help Stasia bring up the first buckets of hot water.

“This would go faster if I helped,” Cynthia said to Princess Ammalia. “At this rate, we’ll be late for the ball.”

The princess cocked an eyebrow. “Does anyone help *you* bring the water up the stairs when it is time for their baths?”

Cynthia shook her head.

“Then let them appreciate your efforts.” Princess Ammalia leaned her shoulders against the wall next to the open window as though they had all the time in the world.

“And if we’re late to arrive?” Cynthia ventured.

“Are you in a hurry to see my brother?”

“No,” Cynthia admitted. “What I really... Who...” She cleared her throat. “I mostly wanted to see *you*.”

“And here we are, in arm’s reach of each other.” Satisfaction flitted at the corner of the princess’s lips. “Two wishes granted.”

Cynthia frowned. Although it was undeniably true, she hadn’t *said* she wanted to be in arm’s reach of the princess. Was the princess simply assuming closer proximity was Cynthia’s second wish? Or was Ammalia saying she, too, had been looking forward to a second meeting?

“Water,” gasped a voice from the doorway.

Cynthia hurried aside as Lady Tremaine and her daughters staggered into the attic with the first round of brimming buckets. They dumped the steaming water into the tub, filling it halfway, then slumped back down the stairs for more.

“They’re not used to physical labor,” Cynthia explained. “Their muscles will be sore tomorrow.”

“Good,” said the princess. “Mayhap tomorrow they will appreciate you even more.”

The truth was, Cynthia didn't want to think about tomorrow. Today was the magical day. Tomorrow things would be back to normal. Worse than normal. If Cynthia had to guess, *appreciative* was not the word anyone would use to describe her step-family on the morrow when there was no princess in the room to command acts of kindness.

"I presume you have footmen at home who deal with such tasks?"

The princess snorted. "We have footmen everywhere. I could have snapped my fingers outside this window and summoned a full retinue of royal footmen to bring up enough water to form a waist-high thermal spring right here in your attic."

"Bathing in a natural thermal spring must be magical," Cynthia said wistfully.

"Have you never visited one?"

Cynthia shook her head. "The most popular thermal waters in England are in Bath, one hundred and twenty miles away. I'm afraid I've not had much opportunity to venture so far from home."

"Italy has many such thermal waters. Not just in Parmenza, where I am from. Hot, luxurious waters are found naturally around the base of several of our volcanoes. I think you would like them."

"I know I would," Cynthia said with feeling. "I've dreamt of traveling widely. But I'll likely never leave here."

"Won't you?" The princess's expression was unreadable. "I wonder."

Heavy steps sounded on the stairs, followed by loud panting and muffled swearing, then the appearance of Lady Tremaine and her daughters hauling the final buckets of steaming water.

Flushed and sweating, they dumped the water into the oversized tub, then turned to Princess Ammalia rather than to Cynthia. "Anything else, your highness?"

"That will be all for now." The princess's expression was now aloof and imperious. "I will summon you if I have need of your aid."

Stasia and Dorothea exchanged pained glances, but scurried down from the attic before Princess Ammalia could change her mind. As much as they despised being treated like servants, the abrupt dismissal was a relief too precious to ignore. They exited in such a hurry, a candle was left behind.

After depositing soap and a towel next to the tub, Lady Tremaine gave a final curtsy before closing the door and hurrying after her daughters.

“Now then,” said the princess. “Where were we?”

Cynthia swung her alarmed gaze toward the clean, hot bath with a mixture of excitement and trepidation. She’d never undressed in front of a stranger before, much less a woman who set her pulse racing. Now that the time to disrobe had come, the moment seemed sharper and more real than anything she had ever experienced before. She did not want to disappoint the princess.

“I hope *you* know what we’re doing,” Princess Ammalia said in a conspiratorial whisper. “I’ve never remained on the outside of a bath I summoned before.”

Cynthia laughed, and the moment was suddenly bearable. Whatever happened, the princess wouldn’t judge her. She was in fact just as lost in this new landscape as Cynthia was. They were both on the same side.

“Fear not,” Cynthia assured her. “All of my gowns are designed to be donned and doffed without aid of a lady’s maid.”

“That might have been a gown once,” said the princess with a dubious expression, “but the material is now hanging from you in strips and tatters. I fear it is fit for the fireplace or the rag bin.”

Cynthia nodded tightly. Her mother’s gown... but she would not think about how Morningstar’s claws and her stepsisters’ hands had rent the once-fine fabric into fraying shreds. Over the past five years, there’d been a surplus of heartbreaking moments in which Cynthia had weathered some form of torture or another.

This moment was about Princess Ammalia. Cynthia was determined to

make it a memory to cherish.

She stripped the ruined garments from her body with as much dignity as she could manage, then quickly stepped into the hot water before her nakedness could overwhelm her.

Only once she was immersed in the water up to her knees and shoulders did she realize she had neglected to retrieve the scented soap from its position nestled atop the folded towel.

“Er...” She cleared her throat. “Would you be so kind as to hand me the soap?”

Rather than drop the soap into Cynthia’s outstretched palm as expected, Ammalia paused, then dropped to her knees and began to suds Cynthia’s curved back. Soon the bubbles rose to her shoulders.

The sensation was incredible. A mix of the relaxation that came from long-tight muscles being massaged into putty, and the sense of connection that came from another human being taking the time to care for her, with her full attention and gentle sweetness.

“Is this... all right?” asked the princess.

“I could marry you,” Cynthia said on a sigh.

The princess stopped sudsing.

“Figuratively,” Cynthia blurted out. “Metaphorically. All I meant was... Yes, it’s all right.”

“All you meant,” the princess murmured. “Of course.”

The sudsing of Cynthia’s back resumed, this time in silence.

The resulting bathing experience was both more than she ever dreamt and yet not quite everything she wanted. Princess Ammalia was touching her, but not in the way Cynthia most desired—and only one of them was naked. There was a moment when Cynthia almost thought... but no. The princess was simply being extraordinarily, improbably *kind*.

When every inch of her back had been massaged into languid bliss, Cynthia forced herself to take the soap from the princess.

“I’ll continue from here. You can... look about the attic, if you like.”

The princess relinquished the soap, then rose from her knees. She dried her hands before turning her back discreetly and feigning great interest in the piles of rotted crates and the dismal view outside the window at the brick wall opposite.

Cynthia washed the rest of her body in haste.

She didn’t bother with her hair because there wasn’t enough time for it to dry. And by now, the water had begun to turn tepid.

Cynthia gripped the sides of the tub and pushed to her feet. At the sound of the sluicing water, Princess Ammalia spun around. Cynthia’s face went bright red.

Unperturbed, Princess Ammalia wrapped Cynthia in the towel, and allowed her to pat herself dry whilst the princess opened the box she’d brought into the house.

Cynthia gasped to see a folded gown of rich blue satins and silks take up most of the interior, topped by a matching blue diamond tiara and a pair of dazzling slippers that glittered brightly, even in the fading sunlight. She used her stepsisters’ forgotten candle to light the wall sconce in order to see the items more clearly.

“Are those slippers covered with bits of decorative glass?” she asked in wonder.

“Thousands of gemstones,” the princess replied, as if such an extravagance was perfectly normal for a shoe that would be half-hidden beneath one’s skirts and dashed against hard terrain all night.

“I couldn’t possibly,” Cynthia stammered. “Each of those gems must have cost... If I lose even one of them...”

“No one will know but you,” the princess answered. “If even you can tell the difference. These shoes are yours now. You needn’t return them. They’re yours to do with as you please.”

“Until midnight,” Cynthia murmured. She had to be home by then, or

she'd never get her chores completed on time—and she couldn't risk infuriating her stepmother and stepsisters any worse. They were already fuming. Once they caught sight of Cynthia in this gown and with these slippers...

“May I help you with the dress?” Princess Ammalia asked. “I fear it is indeed the sort that requires the assistance of a lady's maid.”

“Please, that would be lovely.” After sliding on her shift, Cynthia held perfectly still as the princess laced the cords along Cynthia's spine.

She'd expected the dress to be too big or too small, too long or too short, but it fit her as though it had been custom-tailored to Cynthia's exact measurements.

An appreciative smile flitted at Princess Ammalia's lips. “You look breathtaking. Even more beautiful than you did before. The blues bring out the bright cerulean of your eyes, and the cut of this gown...”

“It is a truly astonishing fit,” Cynthia admitted in awe. “Your brother picked this out after a single glance at my stepsisters?”

“*I* directed the creation of this gown,” Princess Ammalia corrected her softly. “After gazing at *you*.”

Cynthia's throat went dry. Her heart beat faster—then sank. Those ambiguous moments, during the bath...

Had she wasted a golden opportunity she would never have again?

CHAPTER 7



All Princess Ammalia wished to do was ogle Cynthia. Well, ogle her, hold her, kiss her, touch her, have her. Ogle with sensual flourishes.

Cynthia had piled her long blond hair high on her head with nary an escaping ringlet. Her bosom was plumped to perfection inside a low bodice of shimmering ocean blue, matching the underskirt below. The puffed sleeves of robin's-egg-blue complemented the sweeping, overskirt of flowing pale blue gauze. The lines accentuated Cynthia's lush hips and narrow waist and long legs, right down to the tips of the sparkling crystal slippers poking out beneath the floor-length hem.

Essentially, Ammalia wanted to engage in activities that would ruin their coiffures and wrinkle both their gowns beyond repair, so that the only solution would be to stay here in this room with Cynthia and not exit each other's arms for any reason until the morning light.

Unfortunately, the second Cynthia opened the attic door, her step-siblings pounced. From that moment on, they conspired to keep Ammalia separated from Cynthia by inserting themselves between the two.

They peppered Ammalia with an unceasing and utterly exhausting barrage of inane questions, every one of which was about Ammalia's brother Zurri.

"Has he got a castle of his own?"

“How tall is he?”

“What’s his favorite color? Is it blue?”

“Is he considering staying in England to live?”

“Does he prefer women who purse their lips like *this* or like *this*?”

“How many balls does he throw a week?”

“Must I learn Italian if I marry him?”

“Do Italians drink tea?”

“How many servants would I have if I were Queen?”

“Is the prince a good dancer?”

“Does he like pudding?”

It was enough to make Ammalia wish to scream.

The ball would begin at any moment, and she was supposed to be arranging her brother’s dances with the prettiest of all the young ladies present.

Cynthia did not take part in the questioning. She simply gazed at Ammalia from the corner of her eye or from beneath her long lashes, and then blushed becomingly every time Ammalia caught her at it.

That was enough to make Ammalia wish to throw Cynthia over her shoulder and charge out of the house to the carriage, knocking over the mother and the two sisters like so many bowling pins.

“Come,” Ammalia commanded, interrupting the endless litany of questions. “We can continue this conversation—” Such as it was. “—in the carriage.”

“In the *royal* carriage?” squealed Stasia. “We can ride with you?”

“If we all fit,” Ammalia said quellingly. “You may have to sit on each other’s laps.”

“I’ll sit on the driver’s lap if I must,” Stasia said gamely, linking her arm with her sister. “Don’t dawdle so, Dorothea.”

Dorothea sent a triumphant glance over her sister’s shoulder toward their mother. “See? I told you Stasia wasn’t queen material. A queen would *never*

sit on her driver's lap. I would never behave so indecorously. The prince should marry *me*."

"As long as he marries one of you." Lady Tremaine shooed them both ahead with her gloved hand. "Go on, we haven't got all night for him to fall in love with you."

As long as he didn't marry Cynthia...

Once Ammalia had entered the carriage, Lady Tremaine should have been next—there was an order of precedence to such things, in Italy as well as in England—but Ammalia pretended no awareness of such a custom, in order to ensure Cynthia sat by her side.

After all, once the uncommon beauty arrived at the ball... Ammalia should be lucky to steal a sideways glance, much less a spare moment of Cynthia's time.

"Doesn't your sister look marvelous?" Ammalia asked the other two, who had conspicuously refrained from commenting upon Cynthia's stunning transformation.

"Step-sister," said Stasia.

"I'm still prettier," said Dorothea, then cast a nervous glance at Lady Tremaine. "Aren't I, Mother?"

"Even a toad is prettier than a scullion," Lady Tremaine assured her daughter, without so much as a glance in Cynthia's direction.

Porca miseria, Ammalia could not allow Cynthia to return to a life of thankless servitude with these people. But while Ammalia might be princess to a population of half a million Parmenzans back home, she did not have the authority to govern Cynthia's choices or command a better home life for her here.

At least she'd given her the shoes. With luck, tonight's momentary escape would be enough for Cynthia to take stock of her unhappy surroundings and sell as many of the gemstones as it took to finance her much-deserved independence.

“Wait a minute.” Dorothea spun to face Ammalia. “The Prince intends to dance with all three of us, not just the scullion, right?”

Ammalia smiled tightly. Her brother had indicated no such intention, because he hadn’t even known of their existence. But as far as Ammalia was concerned, he owed her that much, in exchange for suffering through their company without breaking down in tears or shaking some sense into them. After all, Ammalia was supposed to be in the ballroom at this moment, lining up the prettiest young ladies for Zurri to dance with.

“Yes, of course,” she promised an elated Stasia and Dorothea. “He is absolutely agog with anticipation to dance with each of you. In fact, he has specifically requested to dance with both of you the minute we arrive.”

Stasia and Dorothea clapped their hands with glee, then began to tussle amongst themselves over which sister ought to have the first dance.

Ammalia didn’t much care which one went first. The distraction at least gave her two full sets before Zurri set eyes on Cynthia...

And decided that the woman Ammalia wanted was the one he would take as his bride.

CHAPTER 8



From the moment the princess's royal carriage pulled up before the open door to the grand ball, Cynthia was unbearably overwhelmed.

The assembly rooms were the largest in London, and filled with so many people already that she could not fathom fitting a single additional soul inside, much less all five of the women scrambling out of the carriage.

That was, Dorothea and Stasia were scrambling. Princess Ammalia did not scramble. She floated to the ground regally, as if thousands of exquisitely dressed lords and ladies in a single room was just another Tuesday back home in Parmenza.

Cynthia, on the other hand, had never been anywhere so fine, or around so many people this rarefied. Everything was so much *more* than she had expected. The colors were brighter. The lights, dazzling. *How* many chandeliers were overhead? And with hundreds of lit candles burning on each one?

All the doors and windows were wide open, allowing in the frigid British night breeze, which was immediately vanquished by the crush of so many warm bodies swarming like bees in a hive. Despite the lower temperatures out-of-doors, the ballroom was suffocatingly warm.

Even the smells were overwhelming. Acrid smoke from pungent cigars

being smoked by well-dressed gentlemen standing just outside the open doors and windows permeated the breeze. Cynthia couldn't even make out the scent of the hectare of thick trees and fresh flowers in the gardens surrounding the assembly rooms because of the competing odors of thousands of different soaps and perfumes and pomades and eaux de toilette.

And the sounds—good God, the sounds! Thousands of voices talking over each other was more than a dull roar, and the thunder of so many feet pounding the wooden parquet in rhythmic patterns hammered its way into Cynthia's skull.

Yet the orchestra managed to be louder than all of it. The violins' soaring melodies and the cellos' complementary low tones vibrated the walls and the floor and the panes of glass and Cynthia's very bones.

It was, in short, magnificent. Despite her dizziness at the sensory assault, Cynthia was determined to commit all of it to memory. She had never seen such a spectacle, and could not imagine herself taking part in a circus like this ever again.

"Ah, there's my brother now," said the princess.

Stasia and Dorothea clutched each other and bounced up and down. "Where? Where?"

"Do you see the three empty chairs near the dance floor?" The princess gestured. "I'm to send his dance partners there. You two, take your mother and arrange yourselves conspicuously. I shall send my brother over straight away."

Stasia was the only one of the trio to hesitate. "What about Cynthia?"

"Yes," Cynthia said, hurt. "There's no chair for me? Should I assume there's no dance for me, either?"

Princess Ammalia's lips tightened. "Of course you shall have your dance. I cannot matchmake my brother to the most beautiful woman in England if you do not number amongst his partners. If you prefer being first to being third—"

“Third is fine,” Cynthia said quickly. “I just thought—”

“I’ve not forgotten you. I thought we might play companion to each other whilst your sisters have their dances.”

“Yes, Cynthia,” said Dorothea, her voice cajoling. “Do let your beloved stepsisters have our chance with the prince before you flutter your lashes and try to ensnare him.”

“If he falls for you, I won’t stand in your way,” Cynthia murmured.

“Thank you,” Stasia said fervently. “Wish me luck.”

“Wish *me* luck,” Dorothea objected. “I’m older, which means—”

“Make haste,” Ammalia interrupted. “The minuet is ending, and there is a waltz to come.”

“A waltz!” Stasia looped her arm through her sister’s and the two ladies barreled through the crowd, elbowing higher ranking lords and ladies out of her path like a pair of bulls charging through a field of flowers.

Lady Tremaine hurried in their wake without sparing a single glance for Cynthia.

Not that Cynthia minded. Her eyes were only for Princess Ammalia. And her hands and her mouth and her bosom and everything else. Cynthia would joyfully provide anything the princess asked of her—if only the princess should ask.

After exchanging a few words with a footman, Princess Ammalia took Cynthia’s hand and expertly threaded her through the crowd to the rear of the ballroom, as far from the voluminous orchestra and turbulent dance floor as it was possible to get whilst still remaining in the same large chamber.

“Is this where you saw your brother?” she asked, as soon as conversation was possible.

“I never saw my brother,” said the princess without remorse. “I wanted to be rid of your family.”

Cynthia’s cheeks flushed with embarrassment and pleasure. Her stepmother and stepsisters could be mortifying, and it was a dream come true

to have a few more moments alone—well, semi-alone; as alone as two people could be in a crowded ballroom—with Princess Ammalia. And yet...

“They’ll be crushed if they do not get their dances with the prince,” she told the princess.

“They’ll get their dances,” Princess Ammalia replied. “Did you not wonder why there were still three empty chairs in a chamber filled with this many people? Those seats were reserved for marriageable young beauties.”

Cynthia tried not to be hurt. “I am to stay in the back of the ballroom because I do not qualify?”

“You’re the prettiest of them all, no matter where you’re standing. Are you angry that I did not lead you directly to the first chair in line? We can go there now, and—”

“No,” Cynthia said quickly. “I would much rather be here, with you.”

I would much rather be anywhere you happened to be.

Princess Ammalia smiled as if Cynthia had voiced this last secret aloud, and with enough volume to be heard over violins and stomping feet and the noise of all the other voices.

That the princess should have a mystical gift to see into the depths of Cynthia’s soul would not surprise her at all. Cynthia still couldn’t quite fathom that the princess had picked her out of the parade crowd to begin with, much less any of the bewildering events that had followed.

“It’s the Prince!” blurted an excited feminine voice. A clump of young ladies were walking past Cynthia and Ammalia’s chairs. “He’s selected his first dance partner of the night. Who is that? Have you ever seen her before?”

Cynthia lifted her eyes and straightened her spine, but there was no hope of seeing the dance floor from this angle.

“One of your sisters,” Princess Ammalia murmured. “Their seats made them next in line.”

Vicarious excitement filled Cynthia on her stepsisters’ behalf. “Which one did he choose?”

“I don’t know.” The princess started to shrug, then gave Cynthia a piercing look. “Would you like to go and see?”

“No,” Cynthia said softly. Her hand was still in Princess Ammalia’s. Between the crush of people and the volume of their skirts, no one could see their entwined fingers. The hidden touch was a secret in plain sight. “I’m happy here with you.”

Princess Ammalia’s gaze warmed. “As am I.”

She motioned to a footman, who arranged for a pair of armchairs to appear.

Cynthia was impressed. “Do you do this sort of thing often?”

“Suffer through ballroom after tiresome ballroom stuffed with starry-eyed women fawning over my brother in hopes of becoming his bride? *Far* more often than I’d like. No one is happier than I am that he shall finally make his selection and we can have done with this infernal wife market.”

But the princess did not look entirely happy.

“No,” Cynthia said. “I meant pluck a scullion out of obscurity and bring her with you to one of those tiresome balls?”

“Ah.” Princess Ammalia’s cheeks turned pink. “No, this is the first time.”

Cynthia was inordinately pleased by this answer as well as the princess’s charming embarrassment. It felt nice to be seen, to be thought of as special. She certainly thought the same about Princess Ammalia.

“Do you wish you were fawned over in the same way?”

“*Col cavolo*, I would throw myself into the boiling lava of Mount Etna before I’d want to wade through a sea of salivating gentlemen intent on bedding me.”

That was how Cynthia felt as well... but that was because she didn’t wish to marry a man. She hadn’t mentioned pursuing gentlemen suitors at all.

Did the fact that men were Princess Ammalia’s first thought mean that she did not view Cynthia in that way after all? After all this, were she and the princess only meant to be... friends?

Silly scullion, she scolded herself. *Not even friends. At midnight, you must return to your world, and the princess shall return to hers.*

The thought squeezed Cynthia's lungs. She wanted to pull the princess out of her chair and run away with her then and there.

But even that was a hollow dream. Run away where? The princess was royally bound to her own homeland—or to the prince she inevitably married. They could no more run off into the sunset together than they could fly to the moon.

"Do you ever dance at these things?" she forced herself to ask.

"When I must," the princess replied. "If you can keep a secret, I'd rather be in the orchestra than on the dance floor."

"You play an instrument?" Cynthia asked in surprise.

"Several," the princess admitted. "Most string instruments. My favorite is the violoncello."

"I love string instruments," Cynthia exclaimed with delight. "I used to play the violin, back when I still had tutors. I miss it."

"If I had known, I would have brought you one in the box with your gown."

"I already cannot repay you. And yet, if I could ask for anything, it would be to hear *you* play."

"Sadly, all of my instruments are at home in our castle. Dare I suppose the promise of a private performance is bait enough to lure you there?" The princess wiggled her brows comically.

Cynthia laughed. "If I had the means to travel, your music room is the first place I'd visit. And since I do not have the means... Pray, pay no attention if one of your valises weighs ten stone more than expected. I'm certain it's definitely not a fugitive scullion, stowing away in a princess's traveling trunks."

"And if it is, I won't tell a soul," the princess promised. She rubbed the soft pad of her thumb against the back of Cynthia's hand, and sighed ruefully.

“Madonna mia. My brother is absolutely going to adore you.”

At this pronouncement, Cynthia’s stomach twisted into knots. “W-what?”

Princess Ammalia dropped Cynthia’s hand and rubbed her own temples instead. “You and Zurri have little in common, but he’d be a fool to choose anyone else. And Parmenza could use a kindhearted queen on our court. Father will definitely approve.”

Cynthia’s spirits sank. The princess was sweet and thoughtful and generous. Both women shared unexpected things in common, from standing in their siblings’ shadow to an affinity for making music. They’d be a perfect match...

If Princess Ammalia weren’t determined to match-make Cynthia to the princess’s brother.

CHAPTER 9



*A*mmalia hated the thought of her brother inevitably choosing Cynthia as his bride. Yet she could not block his path. Not because he was her brother, and the heir and future king. But because all the unmarried English women in this ballroom had come to the gala specifically in the hopes of being chosen as Zurri's future wife.

Whether her brother himself was the attraction, or the allure of becoming royalty, if it was what Cynthia wanted, Ammalia would not stand in her way.

Of course, she also had no wish to stand in the shadows of the happy couple, watching their connubial bliss unfold to the delight of the entire kingdom. Cynthia's dream of traveling widely was a good one. If the woman Ammalia desired married Zurri, Ammalia would take the first boat out of Parmenza and never return.

The music shifted. The previous set had completed. Whichever sister Zurri had chosen to dance with was now being returned to her mother, and the second sister led to the dance floor in her stead.

Which meant Ammalia had twenty minutes left to enjoy Cynthia's company before Zurri came to collect her. Thirty, if Ammalia was lucky.

After that... Once all of the other gentlemen present caught sight of the gorgeous woman in Zurri's arms, Cynthia's round *derrière* would not find itself relaxing in a chair the entire rest of the night. There would be no more

time for Ammalia at all.

“You look fierce,” said Cynthia. “Is something the matter?”

Not yet. Soon enough.

Ammalia schooled her features into a smile. “Wool-gathering, I’m afraid.”

“What were you thinking about?”

“When you said you’d love to travel. So would I.”

Cynthia looked surprised. “I assumed you *were* well-traveled.”

“The more one travels, the more one realizes that there are more places to visit than even possible to experience in a single lifetime. I have traveled, but I will never have traveled *enough*. It is an infinite adventure.”

“I love that,” said Cynthia. “How I would adore to embark on an infinite adventure. And you’re right. I don’t think a day would ever come when I’d had ‘enough’ and never wished to have another new experience again.”

“Perhaps you might begin with Parmenza,” said Ammalia.

“I would adore *that*,” Cynthia replied in Italian.

Pleasantly surprised at the smooth pronunciation, Ammalia responded in kind. “You speak Italian?”

“I told you I had tutors once.”

“*Italian* tutors?”

“Italian, Greek, Latin... I’m fairly certain my father wanted a boy, but when he had me instead, he saw no reason to curb my education.”

“But that’s splendid! Speaking—or at least muddling through—the local language makes travel all the more enjoyable.”

“Then should we switch back to English?”

“Beh. Deuced few of your countrymen speak Italian as well as you. If we continue like this, our secrets cannot be understood by uneducated passers-by attempting to eavesdrop.”

Cynthia’s expression was droll. “Are we going to share many secrets?”

“We can if you’d like. What’s your worst memory?”

“The deaths of my parents,” Cynthia replied without hesitation. “Yours?”

“Any occasion with Zurri in it. Which are, ironically, also some of my favorite memories.” Ammalia wrinkled her nose. “Having a brother is complicated.”

“As is having step-sisters.” Cynthia made a face.

Ammalia laughed. “It’s a good thing we’re not in competition for the most complicated family ties. It’s difficult to say which of us would win.”

“Perhaps it would be a draw.” Cynthia tilted her head. “Then again, you’ve had to live with your brother your entire life, whilst I’ve only had step-sisters for five years.”

“Eh, I was only in the company of your step-family for five minutes, and I’m already tired of them.” Ammalia made a faux shudder. “You might win the obnoxious sibling competition uncontested.”

“I’d rather win... A night with you at the opera.”

Ammalia grinned. She loved how easy it was to talk with Cynthia. They could both just be themselves. “Do you like the opera?”

“I don’t know. I’ve never been. But my old voice instructor used to be a famous soprano, and she would sing all her favorite parts for me. That’s the main reason I learnt Italian to begin with. I wanted to understand the words I was trying to sing.”

Ammalia leaned forward with interest. “Do you sing?”

“I *try* to sing,” Cynthia repeated with a self-deprecating smile. “You’ll notice *I* am not a famous soprano.”

“Forgive me if I doubt your family would let you join the opera even if you had the best lungs in all of Europe.”

“If I had a talent like that, I wouldn’t wait for permission,” Cynthia said. “I’d run away and never look back.”

“Would you?” Ammalia said in surprise. The sentiment was too close to what she had just been thinking herself. “I suppose joining the opera is better than joining the circus.”

“I wouldn’t assume the opera isn’t a circus of its own,” Cynthia said with a smile. “But I wouldn’t mind either one. Both get paid to travel.”

“A fair point. What other tutors did you have?”

“Dance, watercolor, embroidery.”

“Embroidery! There are specific tutors who specialize in that?”

“Do you not know how?”

“Good God, no. It’s too close to manual labor. My father would expire on the spot before he’d allow me to pick up a sewing needle.”

“Then he’d be pleased to know I’ve spent the past five years not embroidering a single thing.” Cynthia’s eyes twinkled mischievously.

Ammalia narrowed her own. “I suspect you’re leaving something out.”

“Only that it’s possible to wear out a sewing needle,” Cynthia confirmed with a laugh. “For half a decade, I’ve sewn more buttons and let out more hems than you can likely imagine. I could take apart this dress and put it back together before the end of the ball.”

“Don’t you dare,” said Ammalia. “Also, it sounds to me as though you *do* have a talent. Several of them, in fact.”

“I suppose I could apprentice to a seamstress,” Cynthia agreed. “But I’ve not been offered any paying positions for multilingual violinists.”

“That is because the world is not a fair place,” Ammalia agreed. “If I were queen, the first thing I would do is enact a law requiring every kingdom to employ a well-hemmed violinist conversant in English, Greek, Italian, and Latin. I’d make it the best paid of every possible royal post.”

“Let me know when you’re queen. I’ll apply that same day.”

“I’ll never be queen,” Ammalia said with a sigh. “The real reason Father wants Zurri to pick a bride is because he can’t wait for grandsons.”

“Create your own kingdom,” Cynthia suggested. “I’d move there.”

“Without knowing where it is?”

“*You’d* be there.”

“Perhaps I’d be the only constituent. The Kingdom of Ammalia,

population one.”

“Population two,” Cynthia corrected her. “The queen and her multilingual violinist, with her sewing-calloused hands and questionable singing voice.”

“No more sewing,” said Ammalia. “It’s outlawed in my kingdom.”

“Will we wear rags?”

“Why wear anything? Parmenza is very warm. And when it is not, the problem is easily solved by a dip in a thermal spring. You haven’t known true ecstasy until you’ve relaxed in hot water on a gloriously drizzly day.”

“I didn’t know drizzle could *be* glorious,” Cynthia admitted.

“Maybe it’s the nakedness, and not the drizzle.” Ammalia stroked her chin as though deep in thought. “We will have to research this carefully.”

“I cannot wait,” Cynthia said with feeling. “Can’t we start now?”

“How I wish we could! But I fear we’ve missed the opportunity to run away.”

“Have we? I’m not too busy.”

“You will be in just a moment,” Ammalia said grimly. The music had shifted yet again, and a familiar royal form was striding in their direction, a pair of footmen parting the crowd ahead of Zurri as he took each purposeful step.

“What is it?” Cynthia whispered. “You look as though you’ve seen a Kraken.”

“Worse.” Ammalia groaned. “A future king.”

Before she could say more, Zurri was right there in front of them, visibly gobsmacked at the resplendent sight of Cynthia dressed in the gown Ammalia had designed for her.

Porco cane, Ammalia should have clothed Cynthia in burlap and shaggy fur—anything to hide her beauty from Zurri.

But it was too late for such stratagems. Zurri was clearly smitten. All thanks to Ammalia. And he hadn’t even *talked* with Cynthia yet.

Once he did so, the game would be over. Cynthia was sweet and

resourceful and clever. Any man—or woman—would want her by their side. And Zurri was no fool.

Watching her brother make Cynthia his wife would break Ammalia's heart. No... That wasn't quite true. Who Zurri did or did not fall in love with was beside the point. What was destined to rend her in two was watching Cynthia fall for Zurri.

Like every other woman before her.

CHAPTER 10



Cynthia glared at the man before her in vexation.

This must be the prince. She vaguely recognized him as person in the carriage next to Princess Ammalia during the parade, but she hadn't paid much attention to him then and wished she needn't pay any attention to him now.

Oh, he was perfectly attractive and all that. Tall, black-haired, well-built—the masculine version of Ammalia.

Cynthia preferred the female version.

“You look ravishing,” said the prince, lifting her fingers to his lips as he sketched a sweeping bow. “My sister has chosen well.”

“Perhaps she wasn't choosing for *you*,” Cynthia muttered.

“Of course she brought you for me.” He looked bewildered. “Everything in this assembly room is for me.”

Cynthia bit back a snort of derision. Was the dripping candle wax for him? The stray spiderwebs? But she was being petty and unreasonable. This ball *was* in his name. Most females present *had* donned their very best out of an explicit desire to catch Prince Azzurro's eye.

She was the odd one who didn't fit the mold. Bitterly resentful that attracting the prince's attention meant losing Ammalia's.

Cynthia said quickly, “You needn't dance with me if you don't wish to.”

Ammalia's eyebrows shot up.

"Of course I do," Prince Azzurro assured her. "Tonight and every night, for the rest of our lives."

For the rest of their... *Oh no*. He was speaking as though they were already betrothed!

"I really think—" she began.

He pulled her up and out of her comfortable armchair before she could complete her thought.

Cynthia stumbled. Prince Azzurro caught her. And swirled her into his waiting embrace in a move so smooth and graceful, Cynthia would swear he'd spent a lifetime practicing it.

The onlookers closest to them *ooohed*.

Most of the crowd, minus four notable exceptions. Princess Ammalia, who was inspecting her fingernails as though the state of her cuticles was far more interesting than anything or anyone in this ballroom.

And Cynthia's step-family, who had elbowed their way forward. All three of them were staring daggers at her, despite Stasia and Dorothea having just had their turn with the prince scant minutes earlier. Their jealous suffering was tangible.

A novel turn of events that was gratifying enough to spur Cynthia into smiling at the prince and responding, "In that case, I accept this dance with pleasure."

"I never doubted," said the prince, and led her onto the smooth parquet.

Cynthia regretted her compliance at once. Not because the prince was a poor dancer. He was uncommonly graceful, and could have doubled as a dance-master himself. Perhaps he hadn't even practiced the sweep-her-into-his-arms maneuver from earlier. He might just be naturally talented at such nonsense.

The real reason Cynthia didn't want to dance with the prince was not because of the proximity or the movements, but because of the *prince*. His

single, unforgivable, insurmountable fault was that he was not and would never be Princess Ammalia.

That, and he made Cynthia's skin crawl.

"Once we're married," he said as they danced, "I shall throw balls like this every night. I will install you in a golden throne atop a dais so that everyone can gaze upon your beauty, but allow none of the spectators close enough to touch. Only I shall dance with my future queen."

Wonderful. When he looked at her, he saw a possession that he could not wait to put on a shelf and trot out for special occasions. He didn't want a wife. He wanted a new acquisition to show off.

Marrying the prince would be a disaster. Being close enough to see her true desire whilst Ammalia remained forever untouchable would be nothing short of torture.

That was it. There was no possibility she could go through with a courtship. Cynthia didn't want the prince or any man. She wanted Princess Ammalia, who was the only royal Cynthia cared to spend time with.

Which left Cynthia no other recourse but to make the worst possible impression on the prince. By the time this dance was through, he'd prefer to marry a candlestick rather than Cynthia.

"What's a throne?" she asked.

He blinked. "A large chair. The sort royals sit in."

"Why is it gold?"

"Because gold is expensive. That's how people know it's a royal throne and not for them."

"What if a non-royal asks me if they can sit in it? Can I let them?"

He looked horrified. "A non-royal would never ask you if they could sit in it."

"My step-sisters will definitely ask," she said with confidence. "Unless they *don't* ask, and just go and sit in it. In which case, I suppose I can sit in your chair until they're done with mine."

“You can’t sit in *my* throne. The king’s throne is for the king, and the queen’s throne is for the—never mind. We can go over the finer points later. I’ll employ a royal tutor to instruct you in any customs you may be unfamiliar with.”

“And a mathematics tutor?”

“Mathematics is not a feminine pursuit, *tesoro*. You’ll be queen because of your looks, not because I need you to do any thinking.”

“I like mathematics. I’ll probably do some while I’m sitting on my golden chair. I could use the Pythagorean theorem to determine the angle between our chairs.”

“There’s no angle. Our chairs will be side-by-side and perfectly parallel.”

“I could utilize cubic equations to determine the volume of space beneath my chair.”

“Why would you need to?” he asked in confusion. “Why would anyone need to?”

“To ensure my pet fits.”

He looked less than thrilled. “Is it a furry pet? Have you a kitten? Or a puppy?”

“A long-eared bat. He likes to hang upside-down. Are there good footholds beneath my chair?”

“For a *bat*?”

“Technically, I have five bats.”

“Five bats!”

“One for each of the chairs.”

“There are only four thrones!”

“Then two will have to go under mine. Do you see now why cubic equations and golden footholds are of utmost importance?”

“My parents would never allow rodents like bats inside the castle, much less...” He took a deep breath. “We’ll discuss it later. This is not the time or place.”

“Of course not,” Cynthia agreed. “Bats aren’t rodents. I will need some time to put together a proper natural philosophy presentation to explain the difference to your family. Perhaps we can invite renowned experts to give instructional speeches on the subject throughout the kingdom.”

The prince stared at her. “Perhaps we can skip the speeches. Everyone’s speeches. Including yours.”

Cynthia widened her eyes. “Do you dislike conversation?”

“I adore conversation. I am not certain that’s what we’re in the midst of. I find myself more confused with every word you say.”

“Oh, dear,” said Cynthia. “I can start at the beginning. Pay attention. Natural philosophy began in ancient Greece, although it wasn’t until Aristotle posited the categorization of objects based on shared traits rather than—”

“Might we just... Can we simply dance? In silence?” the prince begged. “Perhaps we can play a game, wherein every time we’re together, we see how long we can maintain the silence between us.”

“I don’t like games,” said Cynthia. “And it’s much easier to perform mathematical equations aloud.”

He grimaced. “You shall certainly be a... unique... princess.”

“I don’t like royalty, either,” Cynthia said cheerfully. “Or primogeniture.”

To her surprise, the prince looked wistful rather than appalled at this.

“It’s probably heresy to admit that I feel the same,” he said with a crooked smile. “When the Cispadane Republic unveiled its tricolor flag symbolizing the unification of Italy, I was elated. Some other prince would be tapped to lead, and I could become a regular mortal.”

“Really?” Cynthia was intrigued despite herself. “A royal prince felt that way?”

“Viscerally.” His expression turned grim. “Imagine my reaction when Napoleon fell, and the Congress of Vienna restored the prior system of independent governments. Instead of one hegemony to rule them all, we were back to Habsburgs and separatists, each with their own set of thrones and

heirs.”

“Run away,” she suggested. “Don’t take a bride at all.”

“I have responsibilities,” he said simply. “And I would never disappoint my father. He’s the one who announced the ridiculous contest for me to acquire the continent’s prettiest bride. I shall win it, because that is what sons and princes do. It’s what my people want.”

“Why not find a bride that *you* want?”

He tilted his head and regarded her with intensity. “To my surprise, I think I might have done just that.”

Oh, shite. Cynthia should have kept to bats and algebra.

Prince Azzurro wasn’t as bad as she’d first thought. Perhaps there was nothing bad about him at all. But she still did not want him.

“I like you more than anticipated, too,” she admitted. “Which is why I’m about to tell you the truth: I don’t want to marry you. I shall *not* marry you.”

“I’ll change your mind,” he promised. “I’ll install footholds for your bats if I must. At least they’re not furry.”

“I also have magpies,” she muttered. “Very feathery. Every sparkling gem in the castle will disappear by morning.”

The orchestra finished the set. Prince Azzurro tucked Cynthia’s hand around his elbow. “Come. I’ll return you to Lady Tremaine, so that she can hear the good news from me, first. I’m determined to make you my bride. I’ve arranged fireworks for midnight. Join me on the parquet, and we’ll do the official announcement then, arm-in-arm.”

No. None of that.

“I told you,” she said. “I won’t be your wife.”

“And I told you—”

She wrenched free from his grasp and launched herself into the crowd, losing a shoe in the process. He tried to chase her, but without his footmen, the unwed debutantes converged, allowing Cynthia safe passage whilst they swarmed around the handsome prince.

There, in the back of the ballroom, was the open garden door leading far away from royal matrimony and certain despair.

All Cynthia could think about was escape...

And Ammalia.

CHAPTER 11



*A*mmalia hid deep within the garden, her back against the rough bark of a wide tree. She'd slipped away the moment her brother took Cynthia's hand. No—that wasn't quite true. She'd sat there, in deepening horror, until Cynthia smiled her dawning-sunlight smile at Zurri and fluttered her eyelashes the way all women inevitably did when in the presence of Ammalia's irresistibly charming brother.

Sadness had filled her, a deep hollow ache, kneading her insides until she could barely breathe. She needed more than fresh air. She needed to see anything at all—or nothing at all—so long as whatever was before her eyes, was anything but Cynthia smiling happily at Zurri.

With everyone's attention on the radiant couple, it had been simple to slip out through the rear door undetected. Ammalia had dropped heavily and unceremoniously onto a fallen log amongst the flowers, and then when that still seemed too close, she'd stood and moved deeper among the trees and the bushes, until she could no longer see the light spilling from the open ballroom door.

The moon was her only companion, a skinny sliver curving high overhead, adding a faint sparkle to the leaves as the moonlight trickled through the trees to the empty garden below. It was peaceful, out here all alone.

Too peaceful. Without the distraction of thousands of merrymakers and the noise of the orchestra, Ammalia was alone with her own thoughts, which had turned decidedly maudlin.

She might have evaded any additional glimpse of Cynthia in Zurri's arms tonight, but what about tomorrow and every day after that? Unless she planned to run away—impractical, if tempting—she would likely have to travel back to Parmenza in the same carriage, on the same ship, dining in the same room across from the newly betrothed pair.

It could not be borne. And yet, what choice did she have? If wishes were raindrops, Cynthia would fall right into Ammalia's eager embrace. But the chances of that happening were—

Footsteps. Panting. A sound somewhere between a sigh of relief and a sob.

Ammalia peeled her spine from the tree and peeked around the trunk.

Cynthia. Wearing just one shoe.

Their eyes met at the same moment. Cynthia sprinted forward at a crooked run, launching herself into Ammalia's arms for a heartfelt hug. Ammalia fell to the grass, bringing Cynthia with her. Ammalia wasted no time turning them both around so that Ammalia was atop Cynthia, who stared up at her with wide, startled eyes.

Impulsively, Ammalia kissed her.

To her shock, rather than push Ammalia off, Cynthia grabbed on tight and kissed her back, as if she had been waiting her entire life for this precise opportunity.

She smelled like the soap from her earlier bath. A visual that had not strayed far from Ammalia's memory ever since she'd had the good fortune to glimpse Cynthia nude. And touch her bare skin. And massage her muscles. How Ammalia had longed to climb into the tub with her! Or take Cynthia to private thermal waters, where they could bathe naked beneath stars like these.

For now, she would settle for a kiss as sweet as *panettone*. In response,

Cynthia sank her fingers into Ammalia's hair and held on tight.

This kiss made every lonely moment that Ammalia had ever suffered worth it. Cynthia's lips against hers was a lifetime of happiness, all in one kiss. It was a connection that grew deeper, stronger, with each brush of their lips and taste of their tongues, twining them together from the depths of their hearts.

Cynthia's embrace was like exploring new worlds and coming home all at once. Excitement and adventure and comfort and rightness. It was as if Ammalia's arms had waited for this very moment with this very person. Now that they were finally together, Ammalia never wished to part. She wanted more. Wanted everything. Cynthia's body, Cynthia's heart... now and forever.

As their kisses grew ever more passionate, Ammalia gave in to temptation and allowed her eager hands full rein to explore every one of Cynthia's warm, soft curves.

Fully clothed was not the same as nude, but Ammalia would take Cynthia any way she could have her. In or out of a gown, in or out of the water, as long as she remained in Ammalia's arms and out of Zurri's reach.

At the thought, Ammalia's kisses became imbued with urgency and desperation.

Cynthia responded in kind, utterly destroying what was left of Ammalia's chignon and the pouf of her sleeves. They rolled around the grass, wrinkling—and likely ripping—every inch of fabric as their fingers sought each other's most sensitive areas beneath the inconvenient layers of their pesky skirts.

Ammalia allowed her legs to part and gently did the same to Cynthia, devouring her with kisses as their fingers explored and teased and dipped.

Her heart pounded as the pressure built within her, rising all the way up to the sliver of moon and threatening to explode around them in a spray of shooting stars.

Ammalia could scarcely breathe between kisses, so invested was she in

bringing Cynthia the same pleasure that she was stoking in Ammalia. The more she tried not to climax, in order to extend the moment, the more impossible restraint became. She tumbled over the edge, gasping into Cynthia's mouth as the rhythmic spasms overtook her.

But they weren't finished yet. Now that the heavens had heard Ammalia's prayers and delivered Cynthia into her arms, Ammalia had no intention of letting her go without first giving her a memory to last a lifetime.

CHAPTER 12



Cynthia's pulse raced and her blood sang. She'd fled to the garden, desperate to free herself from the prince's clutches, and found joy in the arms of Princess Ammalia instead.

She hadn't been running away after all. She'd been running *to*. Ammalia was everything Cynthia wanted. She could barely think. Her mind was too full of exhilaration, and her body too close to release.

As if sensing this, Ammalia pushed Cynthia's skirts up to her hips and lowered her face between Cynthia's thighs. An incoherent gurgle of pleasure escaped Cynthia's lips.

Good God, she could not possibly marry a prince. Cynthia didn't want him. She wanted *this*. And she could not bear to spend the rest of her life one throne away from the princess yet unable to touch her.

But by not marrying the prince, the future was just as bleak. Refusing his suit meant no betrothal, and no betrothal meant staying home for the rest of her days. Lady Tremaine would never again allow Cynthia to attend a "frivolous" activity like a ball. With no glowing employment references, she would remain a scullion in her own home until she was too old and bent and brittle to scrub a floor or lift a bucket.

Princess Ammalia wouldn't be seated beside her, but rather thousands of miles away, in a far-off country. Out of sight and out of reach forevermore.

But Cynthia could not dwell on this. Refused to allow the bleak truth to ruin this beautiful moment.

With every breath, she concentrated on inhaling every detail about Princess Ammalia, to carry her essence inside her always. The scent of Ammalia's hair, as sweet and floral as the flowers in the garden surrounding them. The taste of Ammalia's kisses, still hot and sweet on Cynthia's tongue. The feel of her warm soft body. How it had felt pressed against her, beneath her, above her. Its position now, between Cynthia's legs, with Ammalia's firm fingers gripping Cynthia's hips, holding her in place. As if there was anywhere else Cynthia would rather be.

She couldn't even keep cataloguing the moment. The pleasure was too acute, and release too imminent. She was no longer lying in the grass but floating with the stars above.

As the climax overtook her, the night sky filled with fireworks. Reds, greens, blues, orange. As if each of the delicious contractions were echoed in brilliant color overhead.

Fireworks.

Midnight.

As the booming explosions ceased, she heard the last of a distant clock tower ring the final bell of midnight. The night was over. Hadn't the Prince wanted to make his betrothal announcement at midnight? And Cynthia was supposed to already be back home at her post. There was no time to waste. If her vindictive stepmother arrived first and discovered the house and its comforts were not waiting for them as promised... There was no telling what retribution would await.

Cynthia scrambled to her feet, her limbs still trembling and weak. Princess Ammalia did the same. Cynthia gathered her into her arms for the briefest, tightest of embraces. She pressed a heartbroken kiss to the princess's temple, then let her go.

"Forgive me," she whispered into Ammalia's hair, then turned and ran as

swiftly as she could with one shoe on and one shoe lost, stumbling and scrambling her way back home.

The night—and the princess—had been perfect.

Surviving on the sweetness of the memory would have to be enough.

CHAPTER 13



The next morning, Cynthia swept ashes into a dustpan before the fireplace. Her stepsisters gasped in unison when Stasia shook out the morning newspaper.

Cynthia turned in time to see them both abandon their hot breakfasts in order to peer in shock and dismay at whatever was written on the front page.

“What has happened?” she asked nervously.

Her stepsisters were too distracted by the upsetting news to remember to shoo Cynthia back to the cinders.

Stasia gaped at her like an awestruck fish. “It says... It says...”

Dorothea snatched the paper out of her sister’s limp hand and shook the headlines at Cynthia. “It says the prince fell in love last night, and will be announcing his future bride today.”

“Maybe it’s one of you,” Cynthia said hopefully. Perhaps she could travel to Italy as Stasia or Dorothea’s handmaiden, and steal snatches of time alone with Princess Ammalia.

“It is not me.” Dorothea stabbed her finger at an illustration sketched further down the page.

Cynthia crept closer to look.

The caricature was recognizably a portrait of the handsome prince... holding a sparkling glass slipper in his large palm.

Cynthia's missing slipper.

"It cannot be," she said in horror, clutching the wooden handle of her broom like a defensive weapon as she reflexively backed away from the sketch in the paper. She'd *told* him she wouldn't marry him.

Princes apparently did not understand or accept the word no.

Dorothea and Stasia were just as appalled—and they blamed Cynthia.

"We have both *our* shoes," said Dorothea. "It's all your fault."

"It's my fault you have your shoes?"

"It's your fault you left one of yours behind, to stand out from all the other young ladies dropping handkerchiefs in Prince Azzurro's path."

"That's not what I was trying to do," Cynthia protested. "I wasn't trying to tempt him or be mysterious. I was trying to disappear."

"Well, you did so in the most slovenly way possible," said Lady Tremaine, entering the dining room in time to glimpse the infernal illustration on the front page of the morning newspaper. "I would have locked you in that attic if I'd known you had no intention of fighting fair. To think, you weaseled your way into his sights by behaving like a slattern—"

"Lock her in the attic now, Mama," suggested Dorothea. "Keep her in there whenever she's not cleaning or cooking."

"Excellent idea, daughter." Lady Tremaine glared at Cynthia. "Make haste with the sweeping and the dishes, then hie upstairs without delay. From this day forth, I've no wish to see your face unless I've specifically—"

A knock sounded at the front door.

All four women froze in place.

"Well?" snapped Lady Tremaine, waving her fingers at Cynthia. "You're the servant. Answer it."

Cynthia leaned the broom against the mantel and hurried to the door.

The prince stood on the other side.

She choked on her breath and scurried backwards, nearly tripping over the broom in the process.

He stepped into the house as if invited to do so, followed by his father the king, then half a dozen royal footmen... and Princess Ammalia.

Before Cynthia's startled gaze could meet Ammalia's, Lady Tremaine jerked her out of the way, pushing her back toward the unlit fireplace so that her daughters could step forward, blocking Cynthia from view.

The king raised his brows at Prince Azzurro, then spoke in Italian. "You're certain about this, son?"

The prince shrugged and glanced at his sister, who sent him a furious look. Prince Azzurro blew her a kiss, then turned back to the king. "I'm certain, Father."

The king held up Cynthia's lost shoe and muttered in English, "This item belongs to the most beautiful woman in England? Beh. All of them look the same to me."

Cynthia melted backwards as Stasia and Dorothea arranged themselves in their most alluring poses, eyelashes fluttering and lips plump and pouting.

"Which of you left this slipper behind at last night's ball?" demanded the king.

Cynthia shook her head frantically. She would *not* marry Prince Azzurro.

"Me," Stasia and Dorothea replied in tandem.

"Sketch this moment," the king ordered a portrait artist, who began drawing as quickly as he could. "I wish it to appear in tomorrow's newspaper. The rest of you—as you were instructed."

Three royal footmen rushed forward. Two knelt on the freshly swept stone floor to provide their broad shoulders for each of the sisters to grab for balance, whilst the third attempted to fit the slipper to their feet.

Neither could make the shoe fit.

"It belongs to Cynthia," Princess Ammalia said softly.

Cynthia's jaw dropped at the unexpected betrayal. She sent the princess a hurt look and took another protective step backwards.

The king pointed at the crystal slipper.

“Put it on,” he commanded imperiously.

Before Cynthia could do so, Lady Tremaine clapped her hands and hissed, “Morningstar! *Now!*”

With a *rawr*, the devil-cat sprang out from the shadows, arcing upwards to land paws-first on either side of the poor footman’s cravat.

The slipper tumbled from the footman’s flailing hands. Crystals scattered on the hard stone floor. Morningstar scooped up the ruined slipper in his jaws and leapt out through the closest window, leaving nothing but glittering debris behind.

Stasia and Dorothea exchanged smug expressions of satisfaction. For once in her life, Cynthia was in full agreement. Their petty vindictiveness had saved her from a fate worse than death.

The king turned to Princess Ammalia. “You’re certain you wished to bring home the girl who belonged to that shoe?”

Lady Tremaine and her daughters blinked in confusion.

Oh no. Oh, no, no, *no!*

Cynthia stared at the littered shards in horror. It wasn’t the prince who had come to make his match, but the princess arriving to claim hers? And Morningstar had ruined Cynthia’s chance!

“It *is* me,” she blurted out. “It was my shoe. It fits me perfectly.”

“So you claim, scullion.” Lady Tremaine’s expression was triumphant. “I guess we’ll never know. And what did I just tell you?” She shooed Cynthia toward the stairs. “Off to the attic with you whilst my daughters and I discuss what is to be done about the royal wedding.”

Cynthia trudged up the steps, then broke into a run, taking them two at a time in eagerness. Up on the top floor, on the bottom shelf of her broken wardrobe, was the matching slipper.

She scooped it up, heart pounding. She cradled the crystal slipper carefully to her chest as though it were as fragile as eggshells and hurried down the stairs as fast as she dared, in the hopes that the princess and her

retinue would still be there.

Lady Tremaine was extolling her daughters' many dubious virtues to the prince. He and his father hung on rapt to every word, exchanging the occasional approving glance.

When Cynthia arrived in their midst, all eyes swung to her—and the glass slipper in her hand.

“It’s the mate,” exclaimed the king.

“My mate,” murmured Princess Ammalia.

Before Cynthia could set the shoe on the stone floor, the princess hurried forward, elbowing the footmen out of the way in order to be the one to kneel at Cynthia’s feet with the glass slipper resting in her palms.

Cynthia eased her foot inside the slipper.

It was a perfect fit.

Grinning, Cynthia reached her hands down to Ammalia’s and pulled the princess to her feet.

Lady Tremaine blanched and turned back to the prince. “But... But you said you didn’t come for *her*.”

“That is true.” The prince flashed Ammalia a crooked smile. “I don’t want anything my sister wants.”

The princess blew him a kiss.

“No need to inconvenience Ammalia,” the king agreed. “My son will take the other two.”

“*What?*” blurted Stasia and Dorothea.

“Both, Father?” said the prince with obvious interest. “Is that not too indulgent?”

“You only get one wife,” the king replied repressively. “The other will have to be your mistress.”

“B-but,” stammered Dorothea, “which of us is which?”

The king looked bored. “I don’t care. Sort it out between the two of you.”

The prince gazed at both young women like a glutton at a feast.

“Now,” Princess Ammalia whispered to Cynthia in Italian. “Hurry.”

They slipped from the house hand-in-hand, leaving the sounds of sisterly squabbling behind them.

Princess Ammalia pulled Cynthia up and into the empty carriage, then took the reins in her hands. “Where to, my love?”

Cynthia kissed her. “Is Italy nice this time of year?”

Ammalia grinned. “Why don’t we go and find out?”

“When will you be expected to retake your throne in Parmenza?”

“Never, if I don’t wish to. Our future is up to us. My only task was to see Zurri betrothed. Now that he’s settled, you and I can travel the world to our hearts’ content.”

“You *are* my heart,” Cynthia said with a smile.

Ammalia kissed the tip of her nose. “And you are mine, *tesoro*.”

With the magpies chirping behind them, the two women drove off without a backwards glance, exchanging smiles and kisses with every turn of the wheels.

And they lived happily ever after.

EPILOGUE



*O*ne year later
Florence, Italy

Cynthia clapped her hands together and addressed the crowded room in Italian.

“All right, ladies, that’s enough for today. Enjoy your evening, and I’ll see you all again first thing in the morning after breakfast.”

The rapt young women—who were not ladies, despite Cynthia respectfully addressing them in that way—rose from their delicate embroidered armchairs and smoothed their plain worn dresses as they filed out of the salon wearing matching expressions every one of them had thought lost forever:

Hope.

“You were marvelous,” Ammalia murmured, linking her arm through Cynthia’s to lead her from the spacious room through a rear exit before either one of them could be mobbed by their adoring audience.

Cynthia beamed at her in pride, humbled by the obvious impact her and Ammalia’s joint effort was making in so many lives.

As a fabulously wealthy princess, Ammalia could have chosen to live in the lap of luxury in her father’s palace for the rest of her life. Instead, she and Cynthia had come to Florence, the aristocratic heart of Italy, to start a school

for governesses.

Unlike any other such organization, theirs operated free of charge—thereby ensuring that other young women, who found themselves in dire straits like Cynthia had once lived, need not continue to suffer.

Here, there was hope. Here, there was a *future*.

The application process was based on personality and work ethic, rather than wealth or class. Any young woman with a desire for a secure position with stable wages and comfortable lodgings could apply.

Those with the aptitude to complete the year of intense training in a myriad of subjects were then placed—using Ammalia’s considerable influence—with aristocratic families all over Italy, thus ensuring the young women need never fear poverty again.

Instead, they would care for children in the best cities Italy had to offer: Florence, Rome, Milan, and many other beautiful epicenters for art, music, food, and culture.

“And how shall we enjoy *our* evening, my love?” Ammalia asked. “Two scoops of gelato in the little place you like across the *Ponte Vecchio*?”

Cynthia’s eyes twinkled. “That’ll do for a start. Perhaps we can return home for a second dessert later.”

Arm in arm, they exited the palatial structure that doubled as the school for governesses, and set out to cross the famous medieval bridge packed with tiny shops protruding over the Arno River.

They passed butchers, tanners, jewelers, cobblers, purveyors of fine hats and gloves, and more than one musician singing or playing a violin in hopes of alms from passers-by. As was their custom, Ammalia and Cynthia gave each one a coin and a smile.

Behind them, flying high above, several yards atop the bustling bridge, Cynthia’s magpies Jack and Gus trailed behind the happy couple—*mostly* behaving themselves.

When Gus swooped too close to one of the Vettori jeweler’s glass cases

of sparkling gold rings and diamond brooches, Cynthia gave the magpie a stern look before he could cause trouble. Unabashed, Gus swooped back to the sky to rejoin Jack, chirping merrily, as though to say *this* time he had been foiled, but soon the nest they were building atop the palace tower would soon glitter as bright as the jeweler's below.

Upon reaching the row of restaurants with ample outdoor seating at the other side of the bridge, the owner of the *gelateria* gave Cynthia and Ammalia a bright smile and a hearty welcome as they approached.

He scooped their favorite flavors before they reached his counter, and even provided a dish of shiny, colorful buttons to leave on the cast iron table in case one of the objects caught the fancy of Gus and Jack.

Cynthia and Ammalia made short work of their *cioccolato* and *fior di latte*, then opened up their parasols to share a stolen kiss before continuing to stroll along the beautiful river as the sun slowly set on the horizon, lighting the silhouettes of palaces and cathedrals with vivid orange and pink.

Whilst they watched the changing sky, Jack and Gus chased each other high overhead.

Cynthia tipped her head onto Ammalia's shoulder and sighed happily. "Another perfect day."

Ammalia squeezed her hand. "You are the one who makes every new day a delight."

As always, Cynthia's heart gave a little flip before beating even faster. "Shall we... save the sunset for another day?"

Ammalia's eyes glittered with mischief. "And do what, pray tell, with our long evening all alone. Have you lessons to instruct me in, headmistress?"

Cynthia grinned back. "Meet me in our bedchamber to find out."

Arm in arm, they raced back across the bridge, laughing and teasing each other as they dodged pedestrians and vendors alike in their hurry to make good on their promise.

It was a very sweet evening, indeed.



WANT MORE LGBTQ REGENCY ROMCOMS?

~

When the Duke of Southbury informs his charming French valet of his impending dismissal, handsome Vachon has only a fortnight to convince the buttoned-up duke to change his mind... and take a chance on love!

Read it now: [Undressing the Duke](#)

~

A proper Society miss recruits a very improper lady investigator in a quest for vengeance... and finds love instead!

Read it now: [The Perks of Loving a Wallflower](#)



Keep turning for more goodies!

THANK YOU



AND SNEAK PEEKS

FREE BOOKS FOR YOU

Start a new series for FREE!

THE WILD WYNCHESTERS

This fun-loving, caper-committing family of tight-knit siblings can't help but find love and adventure. Why seduce a duke the normal way, when you can accidentally kidnap one in an elaborately planned heist?

Grab the first book here:

[The Governess Gambit](#)

"Erica Ridley is a delight!"

—Julia Quinn

"Irresistible romance and a family of delightful scoundrels... I want to be a Wynchester!"

—Eloisa James



ROGUES TO RICHES

In the Rogues to Riches historical romance series, Cinderella stories aren't just for princesses...

First book FREE:

[Lord of Chance](#)



DUKES OF WAR

Roguish peers and dashing war heroes return from battle only to be thrust into the splendor and madness of Regency England.

First book FREE:

[The Viscount's Tempting Minx](#)



12 DUKES OF CHRISTMAS

Heartwarming Regency romps nestled in a picturesque snow-covered village. After all, nothing heats up a winter night quite like finding oneself in the arms of a duke!

First book FREE:

[Once Upon a Duke](#)



GOTHIC LOVE STORIES

Prefer atmospheric romance with dark heroes, strong emotion, and an edge of danger?

First book FREE:
[Too Wicked to Kiss](#)



MAGIC & MAYHEM

Want to try a trio of lighthearted, feel good romantic comedies? You'll love these fun, paranormal rom-coms!

First book FREE:
[Kissed by Magic](#)



Grab the latest edition of the free, downloadable and printable **complete book list by series** here:

<https://ridley.vip/booklist>

THE PERKS OF LOVING A WALLFLOWER

As a master of disguise, Thomasina Wynchester can be a polite young lady—or a bawdy old man. She'll do whatever it takes to solve the cases her family takes on. But when Tommy's beautiful new client turns out to be the highborn lady she's secretly smitten with, more than her mission is at stake...

Bluestocking Miss Philippa York doesn't believe in love. Her heart didn't pitter-patter when she was betrothed to a duke, nor did it break when he married someone else. All Philippa desires is to decode a centuries-old manuscript to keep a modern-day villain from claiming credit for work that wasn't his. She hates that she needs a man's help to do it—so she's delighted to discover the clever, charming baron at her side is in fact a woman. But as she and Tommy grow closer and the stakes of their discovery higher, more than just their hearts are at risk.

"Erica Ridley is a delight!"

—Julia Quinn

"Irresistible romance and a family of delightful scoundrels... I want to be a Wynchester!"

—Eloisa James



Get Yours: [The Perks of Loving a Wallflower](#)
(Keep turning for a sneak peek!)

SNEAK PEEK

THE PERKS OF LOVING A WALLFLOWER

Tommy flashed her eyebrows. “Shall we stroll about the room conspicuously?”

“I thought you’d never ask,” Philippa whispered.

She rose to her feet, the kitten nestled against her bosom, and made a big show of leading Tommy beneath this ordinary ceiling lunette, then that identical ceiling lunette.

When they reached the farthest point in the room from the chatter of the dining table, Tommy’s eyes glittered wickedly and she pitched her voice low. “Alone at last with my fair maiden. Put down the cat so that I can ravish you.”

“We’re not alone,” Philippa said, but her pulse skipped anyway. “There won’t be any ravishing.”

“Not tonight,” Tommy agreed. “Probably. Though I fear it is my sworn duty to change your mind.”

“Your sworn duty, or something you *wish* to do?”

Tommy’s grin only widened. “Ah. You have seen through me. I wish to ravish you for no other reason than the personal pleasure it would bring both of us.”

Philippa’s cheeks felt strangely flushed. “You needn’t play the rake now, when no one can hear you.”

“You can hear me,” Tommy said softly.

It was an act. Of course it was an act. But Philippa was reminded of that moment last night in the garden. There had been no music. Just moonlight, and the sound of the wind in the leaves. Tommy had touched Philippa’s hip, just as she had when they were waltzing, and for one dizzy moment Philippa had almost thought...

She cleared her throat. “You’re incorrigible.”

“I’ve been accused of worse,” Tommy replied, and tucked her hands behind her back.

Was it ridiculous to wish that Tommy had not hidden her hands away? That she might touch Philippa again, on the same sensitive spot on her side, just to see whether it would feel like last night all over again, or whether the magic had been a passing fancy?

“I found a letter in my manuscript,” Philippa blurted out. Books were a much safer topic.

Tommy gave her all of her attention at once. Or rather, Tommy had already been giving Philippa her full attention, but it sharpened somehow. As though Tommy were a wolf who had just caught the scent of her prey.

“Tell me,” she commanded.

Philippa explained her discovery in as condensed a manner as she could manage. How the letter had been hidden, that it had been written by one of the *real* artists of the illuminated manuscript, how all the other copies of the manuscript had been bought up.

“I made a copy of the letter.” Philippa turned her back toward the table and pulled the kitten from her chest in order to retrieve a folded square of foolscap.

Tommy’s eyes tracked every movement as Philippa’s fingers slid beneath her bodice.

“I’m not an artist like Marjorie.” Philippa pulled out the copy. “I’m afraid it’s just the text in my ordinary handwriting, with none of the flourishes.”

“It’s perfect.” Tommy reached for the folded square and tucked it inside her coat next to her heart. “Graham shall investigate those names at once. Expect an odious amount of detail in an impressively short period of time.”

“What if there’s no information to find?” Philippa asked. “Whoever they are, Agnes and Katherine need justice, too. Those poor...women...”

Tommy’s hand was rising toward Philippa’s bodice. Slowly. Affording Philippa time to knock her hand aside or back away. Which she was definitely going to do. Any moment now. Probably.

Before Philippa could make her decision, Tommy’s hand passed Philippa’s bosom and stopped at her shoulder, where Tommy lifted an errant kitten hair and tossed it aside.

Of course. Of course it was that.

Why would it be anything else? What was Philippa thinking? Was she *not* thinking? All she ever did was think. Why did her best skill fail her so utterly whenever it came to Tommy?

And...what was wrong with Philippa’s breathing? Was her bosom heaving? *Was this a heaving bosom?* Even her heart was behaving erratically. What was happening?

Tommy arched a brow as if she sensed Philippa’s turmoil and found it amusing. The heavy-lidded expression was similar to the night before, but somehow even more rakish. The slight quirk of Tommy’s lips distracted her in a way she had never been distracted before. She should stop staring at Tommy’s mouth at once.

Why couldn’t she stop staring at Tommy’s mouth?

It felt like Tommy was closer than before. Even closer than they had been in the garden, which was ridiculous because she had been *touching* Philippa in the garden, and here they were standing a foot apart. That was why she’d had all the time in the world to notice Tommy’s hand rising toward her bosom.

Shoulder. Tommy had plucked cat hair from Philippa’s *shoulder*.

There was nothing less sensual than that.

And yet it had felt as though the light touch were a mere precursor, a hint of something bigger, better. An appetizer before the main course.

Mayhap that was why Philippa was still staring at Tommy's parted lips. Even though the moment had stretched on far beyond what was acceptable or explainable.

She wanted Tommy to do it again; to touch her hip, to pluck cat hair from her bosom. She wanted to know if this electricity crackling between them was all in Philippa's head, or if it was as real as a lightning storm, filling the night with white-hot bursts of power and danger.

Tommy's fingers moved. On the side hidden from Mother's guests.

The slender hand was coming not toward her bodice, or even her side, but just enough forward for Tommy to brush her fingertips up the back of Philippa's hand, from her knuckles to her wrist.

She felt the caress all the way to her toes. In places that weren't even her toes. Every inch of her body seemed alive to the possibility of Tommy's touch...and her cold dead heart gave its first unmistakable flutter. Several flutters. Possible apoplexy.

"Philippa!" Mother called.

"Coming," Philippa replied breathlessly.

She did not move. If Tommy had touched her like this last night in the garden, Philippa might have thought she meant to kiss her.

And if that charged moment had felt anything like this one...

Philippa would have wanted it to happen.



Grab Yours:

[The Perks of Loving a Wallflower](#)

THANK YOU FOR READING

Love talking books with fellow readers?

Grab the latest edition of the free, downloadable and printable **complete book list by series** here:

<https://ridley.vip/booklist>

Join the ***Historical Romance Book Club*** for prizes, books, and live chats with your favorite romance authors:

[Facebook.com/groups/HistRomBookClub](https://www.facebook.com/groups/HistRomBookClub)

Check out the **Patreon** for bonus content, sneak peeks, advance review copies and more:

[Patreon.com/EricaRidleyFans](https://www.patreon.com/EricaRidleyFans)

And don't miss the **official website**:

[EricaRidley.com/books](https://www.ericaridley.com/books)



Don't forget your free book!

Sign up at <https://ridley.vip> for members-only exclusives, including advance notice of pre-orders, as well as contests, giveaways, freebies, and 99¢ deals!



Want to be the first to know about discounts & flash sales?

Follow me on [Bookbub](#).



Boxed Set Collections:

[12 Dukes of Christmas \(Books 1-4\)](#)
[12 Dukes of Christmas \(Books 5-8\)](#)
[12 Dukes of Christmas \(Books 9-12\)](#)
[Rogues to Riches \(Books 1-3\)](#)
[Rogues to Riches \(Books 4-6\)](#)
[Dukes of War \(Books 1-4\)](#)
[Dukes of War \(Books 5-7\)](#)
[Gothic Love Stories \(Books 1-4\)](#)
[Magic & Mayhem \(Books 1-3\)](#)



In order, the *12 Dukes of Christmas*:

[Once Upon a Duke](#)
[Kiss of a Duke](#)
[Wish Upon a Duke](#)
[Never Say Duke](#)
[Dukes, Actually](#)

The Duke's Bride
The Duke's Embrace
The Duke's Desire
Dawn With a Duke
One Night With a Duke
Ten Days With a Duke
Forever Your Duke
Making Merry



The *Wild Wynchesters* series:

The Governess Gambit (FREE!)
The Duke Heist
The Perks of Loving a Wallflower
Nobody's Princess
My Rogue to Ruin



The *Heist Club* series:

The Rake Mistake
The Modiste Mishap



In order, the *Rogues to Riches* books are:

Lord of Chance
Lord of Pleasure
Lord of Night

Lord of Temptation
Lord of Secrets
Lord of Vice
Lord of the Masquerade



In order, the *Dukes of War* books are:

The Viscount's Tempting Minx
The Earl's Defiant Wallflower
The Captain's Bluestocking Mistress
The Major's Faux Fiancée
The Brigadier's Runaway Bride
The Pirate's Tempting Stowaway
The Duke's Accidental Wife
A Match, Unmasked
All I Want



In order, the *Gothic Love Stories* are:

Too Wicked to Kiss
Too Sinful to Deny
Too Tempting to Resist
Too Wanton to Wed
Too Brazen to Bite



In order, the *Regency Fairy Tale* books are:

Bianca & the Huntsman
Her Princess at Midnight



In order, the *Magic & Mayhem* books are:

Kissed by Magic
Must Love Magic
Smitten by Magic



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Erica Ridley is a *New York Times* and *USA Today* best-selling author of witty, feel-good historical romance novels, including *THE DUKE HEIST*, featuring the Wild Wynchesters. Why seduce a duke the normal way, when you can accidentally kidnap one in an elaborately planned heist?

In the *12 Dukes of Christmas* series, enjoy witty, heartwarming Regency romps nestled in a picturesque snow-covered village. After all, nothing heats up a winter night quite like finding oneself in the arms of a duke!

Two popular series, the *Dukes of War* and *Rogues to Riches*, feature roguish peers and dashing war heroes who find love amongst the splendor and madness of Regency England.

When not reading or writing romances, Erica can be found eating couscous in Morocco, zip-lining through rainforests in Central America, or getting hopelessly lost in the middle of Budapest.



Let's be friends! Find Erica on:

www.EricaRidley.com

