

Leann Belle



Stalking  
*Cinderella*

# Stalking *Cinderella*

**Vicious Wonders Book Three**

**By Leann Belle**

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First Printing, 2023



Book Design and Cover Art by Leann Belle

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# Content Warnings

*While there are many moments of fun and spice in this story, this is a DARK work of fiction. Proceed with caution if you're not comfortable with the following concepts:*

Content warnings include (**May include spoilers**):  
Dubious Consent, Exhibitionism, Voyeurism, Stalking,  
Inappropriate Dildos, Gore, Violence, Murder of minor  
characters, Blood Play, Fear and Humiliation used in sexual  
context







# Chapter 1



*Age Fourteen*

“I think its wing is broken. Please help me, Roro.”

Elly, my eleven-year-old stepsister, managed to plead through her bawling. She grabbed my hand and dragged me over to the shadows of the oak trees that surrounded the cemetery, where a standoffish black bird was holding its hurt wing limply by its side.

I sighed before taking off my coat and dropping to a crouch. I dug out the baggie of crackers from my pocket, and I crushed them up to dump on the ground in front of me. The bird hesitated at first, but it wasn't long before it was pecking crumbs at my feet.

Elly lit up, and her tears ceased. *God, she's so simple.* Her innocence would be cute if it wasn't such a detriment. We were at her father's funeral for chrissakes, and yet all she

could think about was the well-being of an injured crow. It was like she hadn't even processed that her whole family was dead now, and she was going to be at my mother's mercy for the next decade at best.

But Elly wasn't one to ever think about herself. Her dad had been a total pushover, and while I never got to meet her mom before she passed, I'd heard enough to know that an excess of compassion and a deficit of self-preservation is what got her killed in the first place. Those defects obviously rubbed off on Elly, and now it felt like *my* burden to toughen her up.

At least my dad passed his strength and independence on to me before he died. Elly was fucked.

The crow pecked the crumbs hungrily, while I very carefully readied my jacket. It was still eating when I pounced, sweeping it into my coat in a single lunge. I held it firmly, and much to my relief, it didn't fight me. No, it held unexpectedly still as I examined the injury. Drops of red glistened on its silken black wings, right at the base of its feathers. If it had been attacked by a dog, it made its escape swiftly enough to prevent any major damage. I was confident it would heal so long as the wound didn't get infected.

The crow continued to be unusually patient as I motioned to Elly. “Do you know where my mom keeps the first aid kit? Can you get me that and some water?”

She nodded before flitting off to the car to retrieve it. She made it half way there before she stopped to kick off the little black heels Mom had made her wear for the funeral, then she ran as hard as she could in her little black socks.

While I waited for her to return, I dropped my gaze back to the bird in my arms. It was almost like this was a routine for the crow with how unbothered it was. When I used to help Dad with the chickens at our farm, they were never this patient.

It blinked up at me with beady black eyes, and I pursed my lips. I wasn't trying to be a hero today, but Elly's tears always messed with my head. It was so dumb. But *someone* had to look out for her now, so I guess that was going to be me. I shared silent exasperation with my feathered companion, before Elly returned with the kit.

She dropped down next to me and dumped the contents into the grass. I immediately got to work, holding the crow with one hand, and mixing some iodine with water in the cap of a water bottle. Dad had always taught me to dilute the

solution before applying it to a bird's wing, and I was thankful for those experiences that made me helpful and capable now. Elly grew up so rich and comfy, she wouldn't know the first thing about dirty work.

I dribbled the solution on the wound, and the crow started to squirm in my coat cocoon. I tightened my hold so I could retrieve some gauze. The crow settled down eventually, letting me finish bandaging it up. I figured I was in the clear as I attempted to set it back down in the grass, only for the damned thing to abruptly begin to thrash. A sharp beak and talons flailed at me, scratching three lines across my forearm, deeply enough to draw blood. I winced as it launched away, taking to the sky as if it had never been injured at all.

I exhaled, covered my wound with my palm, then looked at Elly. "It's fine now." I said. "Now let's get back to the funeral."

"But now *you're* hurt." She said with a frown. Elly dropped to a squat and started gathering up iodine and bandages to help patch me up. The smile on my lips was involuntary as she dipped a cotton ball in some antiseptic, ready to sterilize and dress my wound. *So damn innocent.*

But when she grabbed hold of my wrist and lifted away my hand to apply her medicine, the scratches were... gone.

“I guess it didn’t get me as badly as it looked.” I reassured her. Strange. I thought for sure the bird had broken skin, but as there were no traces of blood, even on my palm, I could only assume we were both mistaken.

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re both okay.” She beamed. “Thank you, Roro. You’re the best brother ever.” Elly punctuated her excitement by throwing herself at me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders and squeezing me into a hug.

*STEPbrother.* I thought in my head. I hated when she used that title like we were actually blood related. It was wrong and gross to even imagine. If she was my actual sister, that would change everything for me.

I was about to correct her, but I was interrupted by the shrill, angry shout of my mother.

“What are you doing over here?” She screeched as she approached. “Elise! Get off my son, you wretched child.” Mom was seething as she grabbed Elly by the collar of her little black dress and yanked her backwards. I opened my mouth to protest, when she began shouting again, drowning

out any words I might offer. “The love of my life is dead, and you’re over here giggling like the ungrateful brat you’ve always been.”

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry.” Elly started to cry in the way she always did when she was scared. My gut twisted at the sound, but when my mom started screaming, all my instincts told me not to move. I knew better. The last time someone stood up to her, well... We were at a funeral for a reason. I mean, this was the *second* funeral I’d attended for “*a reason*.”

“Cry, cry, cry.” Mother mocked. “Such a baby. Things are going to change now that my Dean isn’t here to coddle and spoil you rotten anymore.” She tipped her chin towards me with a scowl. “Rowan, get in the car right this instant. We’re leaving.”

“Y-yes mother.” I managed, before I started gathering up the first aid kit. When mother noticed the spent iodine and the open water bottle, that only made her angrier.

“Wasteful girl.” She snapped before she dragged Elly off to the car. I finished gathering the kit, and I returned to the vehicle. I sat up front with Mom while Elly used both hands to cover her mouth to muffle her continued sniffles, lest she get disciplined for her tears next.

She was smart, but she was much too weak.

I'd fix her.

## Chapter 2



### *Ten Years Later*

I kept a hand over my mouth while Carter pumped himself inside me. He liked me quiet during the act. Well, most of the time really. It made me an outlet for peace and calm instead of a source of chaos, he'd told me, and I could appreciate that.

Though if I was being honest, I hardly needed the barrier. As much as I loved him, sex with Carter was more akin to having someone use your hand to masturbate than it was sensational explosions. I barely even felt him inside of me, and the little feeling that there was never hit the right spot. Only one person had ever played my body to the point of shameful overstimulation, and I hated him for it, so this was totally fine. I would rather be a receptacle who made this man



happy and enjoy his unchallenging affection afterwards, than be a simpering mess for an animal.

So I never complained. If I started making demands, I would find myself alone again. Men never seemed to stay interested in me for very long, yet Carter had somehow stuck around for nearly a year now. I was lucky to have him.

I reminded myself of my good fortune repeatedly as he grunted his release into the condom. He climbed off me to go to the bathroom and clean up, while I rolled over in his bed and waited patiently for him to come back.

“Your vagina is the stairway to heaven, Elise.” He called over in a delighted hum as he turned off the sink.

I stared at my reflection in his full-length wall mirror and smiled to myself. *I'm special to him.* I'd never been special to anyone before. Not since my parents died, at least. Maybe one day he would ask me to marry him, then he'd sweep me away from that awful house, and I'd never have to see my step family again. Not Lydia and not Rowan. What a life that would be.

“Do you want to get lunch again tomorrow?” I asked as I willed myself out of bed to start gathering my clothing. I smoothed my hair with a quick finger combing before retying

it in a loose ponytail. I looked presentable enough. No one would know I'd just been rolling around with one of the village bakers. I'd gotten much better at hiding my personal life lately. My dear stepbrother taught me to manage that much. I still remembered how awful it had been when I came home from my school dance without my virginity, and I didn't think I could withstand that kind of torture a second time.

“Let's get lunch every day.” Carter said as he came up behind me to flutter a kiss on my shoulder. He hugged me from behind and squeezed my breasts playfully. “You have the best pussy I've ever played in.” He whispered, and I melted. Was this what it felt like to be wanted by someone? No orgasm could be more fulfilling than that kind of tenderness.

Though he'd never said the actual words, this was just one of the million reasons I knew Carter loved me, and it made me feel so full. It didn't matter that our relationship wasn't out in the open. It was obvious that we were on a path to something serious just by those little assurances.

“I can't wait to see you again.” I turned my head enough to get a quick peck on the lips. “Maybe even at the Royal Masquerade this weekend?” I said with a flicker of

hope. I hadn't had a date to a dance since high school, and a dance where I could sneak in anonymously would be perfect.

Carter only half smiled back. "I'm a bit busy that night, so I might be late, but I think I can make that work." He squeezed my shoulders affectionately. "Why don't we both show up separately and see if we can find each other?"

Every inch of my soul lifted at the suggestion. "Sounds romantic." I tapped a kiss on his lips one last time, then we said our goodbyes, and I skittered off to get the groceries home. Fortunately, Carter was always quick to finish, so I never risked drawing suspicion for being out too long. It was one of the many reasons our relationship worked.

I entered the house quietly, which was easy having oiled all the hinges myself, and I removed my shoes at the door to assure a silent step. No one should have been home just yet. Lydia was out, and Rowan was at work, yet I never felt comfortable enough to walk casually through my own father's house anymore. I was little more than a maid these days, and it took only the slightest falter to set off my stepmother's rage.

I walked to the kitchen to put away the milk and eggs and fresh vegetables. I exhaled, relaxing into the solitude, and

I turned to the fridge.

No sooner had I tugged open the door did a hand grab me by the back of my neck and yank me backwards. Before I could react, I was bent over the kitchen island with my cheek pressed into the cold tile.

“The grocery store is a five minute walk, and shopping takes, what? Fifteen minutes? So why is it, Elly, that you’ve been gone for over an hour?” Rowan twisted my right arm until it bordered on dislocation. He didn’t ease off until I yelped. I knew the routine. He was rough until I made some kind of sound to tell him it was too much. The fact that I trusted him to back off his abuse to an “acceptable amount” was probably one of the most fucked up parts about our relationship.

“I stopped for lunch.” I attempted, hoping he’d believe me. *Why is he home so early? How did he even know how long I was out?*

“Really?” He released my arm, but I knew better than to move. I remained still as he reached down to the hem of my knee length skirt and started dragging the material upward, digging in his fingers all the while. Rowan was strong, with lean and well-built muscles, and his grip was punishing. He’d

come a long way from the sweet, green-eyed, golden brown haired boy I used to so affectionately call Roro. Now he was a monster with a sharp smile. “What did you have?”

*A test.* I knew that question was a test. But I hadn't thought it through well enough to avoid failing. “There's a new crepe place in town,” that was true. I'd never been, but it was true, “and I wanted to check it out.”

His fingers reached the top of my thigh, still pulling my skirt with them. I prayed in my head that my stepmother wouldn't come in and see this. She often got home from her work outs at this hour, and nothing put me on the receiving end of her anger like being anywhere near her perfect asshole of a son.

“Crepes? Is that right?” He lingered, pressing his palm into my ass, but not lifting my skirt over it.

“Yes.” I nodded, rubbing my cheek on that hard surface, hoping desperately that he might believe me.

“Hmmm,” his hum sounded defused of its anger, while he resumed his ascent. He hitched up my skirt all the way, and tossed the material up to my waist, exposing my underwear. “That's interesting, Elly.” I swallowed as he cupped each of my butt cheeks in his hands. He idly traced the edge of my

lace trimmed undergarments with his thumbs. “What did you order?”

An innocuous question that felt much less innocent as those thumbs snuck beneath the edge of the material. He kneaded me up and down, entirely too close to where a stepbrother shouldn't be. “Um—”

“Wait, don't tell me. Let me guess.” Rowan's grip moved downward, His thumbs now rested at my entrance, and my legs were shaking at the threat of it. He teased the tip of his right thumb inside of me, and I swallowed hard. “The chef offered to fill you up with his own special recipe.” He pressed in the other thumb, and my lip quivered. I kept my eyes on the entrance to the kitchen and strained my ears, hoping I'd hear the front door open before it was too late. Rowan removed himself from me, then he massaged my rear as he moved his grip up to my exposed lower back. With a suddenness that made me jump, he yanked my panties downward and let them drop to my ankles.

“N-no. It wasn't like that.” I closed my eyes tight, not wanting to see what was happening anymore. My pulse was pounding in my ears, and as if my body was spiting my good sense, I was borderline dripping down my naked thighs.

“Then what *was* it like, Elly?” He said my name with a severity that made me shiver, then he got on his knees behind me until I could feel his hot breath against my pussy. “Because I can smell him on you.” He pressed his lips to mine, and he opened me with his tongue, slipping in and out, then making a languid stroke on my inner walls. “And I can taste him on you.” He growled into me.

Rowan positioned a finger between my legs and started rubbing my clit with one hand, while he squeezed roughly on my thigh with the other, bracing himself as he fucked me with his tongue with excruciating thoroughness. I cursed the involuntary moans that he was working out of me. With Carter, sex was so easy. It didn't hurt, it didn't feel good, it didn't make me wet or messy or undone, and it didn't make my heart feel like it was going to explode in my chest. It was a docile, easy chore. But with Rowan, I couldn't breathe, and my whole body was shaking and burning and tingling in anticipation, and I couldn't describe the spell he surged through me. It couldn't be normal to feel so helpless every time someone touched you.

I hated the way he was the only one who was able to make my body respond this way. It was wrong because it felt

like heaven when I knew he was dragging me to hell.

Rowan kept playing me, kept rubbing me, kept licking and sucking and tasting me, until I was crying out and shaking with a white hot flash of otherworldly power. A heat and a release that exploded in my core, until he was licking up the mess that was getting smeared on my thighs and the kitchen island.

“I swear!” I cried out as he started taking me higher, before I’d even recovered from the first jolt.

“How many times do I have to tell you, El?” He ran a wet tongue up my center, then he rose to his feet. “If you don’t want to be treated like a fucking animal, stop rolling in shit with them.”

He kicked my feet apart, and I covered my mouth in preparation for what I knew was coming next. Rowan knocked over the grocery bag beside me, and he looked at the options. He lifted the cucumber first. He examined it. He set it down. Next he grabbed a carrot that was long, skinny, and pointed. I shook my head, mouth still covered, and tears welling in my eyes. He tossed it aside. My relief didn’t last, however, as he next picked up an ear of corn. He turned it over in his hand a few times, then he started to peel away the husk. My eyes



widened as he revealed the thick cob, bright, yellow, and full. He took excruciating care as he assured every last thread of husk was removed, even rinsing the vegetable in the island's sink beside us. *So thoughtful*, I scoffed internally.

“Your mom is going to be home soon,” I begged.

“I suppose she is. Just imagine what she'll think when she sees what you've been doing with her corn. Food you bought with her money no less.” Rowan's chuckle was low and cruel. He positioned the cob at my entrance and started to nudge in the tip. “You're so tight. The crepe chef must not have been very big.” I refused to respond. It may not have been the safest option for myself, but it was the only way to protect any man I'd ever been seeing. Admitting to Rowan that I had, in fact, been with someone else would only get Carter run out of town, and then I'd be alone again.

Rowan withdrew then nudged the corn in a little deeper, testing and stretching me with his usual evil patience. “But you'll open right up for me, won't you Elly? Look at how your body responds to the slightest touch.” His tone was harsh as he continued to sink in one row of kernels at a time. “I can't believe what a fucking slut you are.” He sank the cob in three quarters of its length, then he drew it out and pushed it back in.

I gasped on each thrust, and I clawed at the island's smooth surface, begging for a distraction, as he started fucking me with my own groceries. Those thick ridges paired with his annoyingly skillful hand forced a humiliating moan through my vocal chords. The kind of sound that shook its way through every pleasure center in my body before it made it through my throat.

The sound of the door unlocking caught in my ear, and panic set through me. My body clenched down on the offending cob, and Rowan only chuckled in response. He withdrew and re-entered me with excruciating slowness, threatening to draw this out as long as possible. But we didn't have that kind of time. If she caught us, she'd be far more punishing than Rowan could ever be.

"Are you scared, Elly?" He whispered. "But you come so easily when you know someone might see you, don't you." A statement, not a question. Rowan knew my body too well for me to argue, so instead I had to appeal to his reason.

"Please." I pleaded in one last desperate bid for release. The door slid smoothly on its hinges, and her tennis shoes tapped on the polished tile. Still he stayed inside me, forcing sweet agony through my core. "Please, Rowan."

“Please what?” He must have heard her, too, but he didn’t seem to care that he was playing with fire right now. “You have to speak up, Elly.” He drew out the corn cob, one ridge at a time, and I was ashamed to know my body was drenching it.

“Please don’t let her see me like this, big brother.”

Rowan stopped abruptly as I hit the trigger words that I knew would get under his skin. If a bully gave out safe words, those were his. He stood there, still, as if in suspended motion, while my soaked and filled pussy was visible for anyone who dared walk through that doorway. My pulse pounded in my ears as the sound of Lydia’s shoes neared with increasing volume. We had *seconds*.

He jerked the cob from me suddenly, and by the devil, the motion alone sent me crashing over the edge for the third time since he’d cornered me in the kitchen. My eyes were watering, and I could barely support myself on my legs anymore, even with the island there to hold me up.

I was still quivering through the aftershocks of an orgasm as Rowan flung my skirt back down over my bare bottom, then he yanked me upright by my hair, and he held my back against his rock hard chest. He balled his fist in my locks

and jerked my head to the side so he could whisper in my ear. “I’m not your fucking brother. Don’t *ever* forget that.” His words were a death threat. He stepped on the panties pooled at my ankles, and just as I had so many times before, I obliged him by stepping out of them. He slid them away under his shoe, then gathered them up and shoved them into his pocket, fractions of a second before my stepmother entered the room.

I turned away quickly, hoping mother dearest wouldn’t notice the heat in my face, while Rowan casually examined the corn covered in my own come.

Lydia’s gaze fell on me then jumped to her son. “What’s going on here?” She snapped with an accusing tone that just begged for an excuse to punish me again.

“R-Rowan was just—”

“Elise had just come up with a new recipe for corn, and she wanted me to try it.” Rowan cut me off. He pressed the corn to his lips and bit into the kernels. The juices burst between his teeth. He took entirely too long to savor that bite before he lifted the cob like he was raising a glass of wine for a toast. “Fantastic, Elise.” He stepped in close again, then handed me the vegetable he’d just used on me like a dildo.

“Although I think it’s missing something, but I can’t quite place it. Why don’t you try it and see what you think?”

“I-I shouldn’t.”

“I insist.” He lifted my hand for me, and he pressed the slickened corn against my mouth. I looked up into those cruel green eyes that had me trapped, frozen, and on fire all at once. I narrowed my gaze, but he didn’t back off so much as an inch. “Go on. Taste it. You need to know your own flavor, Elly.”

Every single inch of my body was on fire at the implication in his tone, while my stomach turned in mortification as I opened my mouth and bit down on the sex soaked cob. The burst of sweet kernels mixed with the musky flavor of my own pussy as it coated my taste buds.

He probably thought he would break me, but the joke was on him—I was already used to my own natural flavor. He’d made me lick it off of things enough times by now, after all.

Lydia nodded in acceptance, before she grabbed a bottle of water from the counter and left us alone again.

When his mother was out of ear shot, he fell right back into being my unashamed tormenter. He loosed his grip on my

hand, and I let it drop to my side.

“If you ever come home smelling like sex again, I’ll do far worse than making you lick your own come off some corn.”

Tears of anger and humiliation formed in the corner of my eyes and threatened to spill over. “You can’t control me.” I snarled at him. “One day, I’m going to find someone who loves me, and he’s going to whisk me away from here, and you’ll never see me again.”

Rowan cocked his head back. He looked down at me from atop his snide, cocky smile. “I look forward to it. I can’t wait to see the hope leave your eyes as I gut him right in front of you.”

I gasped, and I sneered, and I shot away from him, throwing the cob in the garbage in the process. I refused to be in the same room as my stepbrother for even a moment more.

Rowan hadn’t always been like this. He used to be my hero. But something warped in him after my father died, and now I did my best to avoid him. I could only hope that Carter might finally be the one to save me from this godforsaken house—a prison that my dad had built and his mother had stolen. I would do anything to be free of this place.

## Chapter 3



The knife performed six full rotations in the air before the hilt landed back in my waiting palm. With a quick flick of my wrist, the blade landed cleanly in the rotating wooden wheel, just a hair's breadth away from the traitor's ear. His pathetic quivering was so pronounced, he still managed to cut himself on the blade that I'd positioned so carefully so as not to graze him. Typical.

"You'll have to tell me, Marco," I flung another blade to the other side of his head, "at what point you determined," another just one inch higher on each side, close enough to trim his garish bowl cut, "that our country would be better off without my father?" I pursed my lips before casually landing six more blades, one at a time, in a line that climbed between his sprawled out legs and up towards his groin.

Unsatisfied, I turned to Mason who watched from the adjacent wall. My bodyguard, confidante, and most trusted friend stood with his arms crossed and disinterest in his face. He said nothing as I drew an outline around the king's assassin.

“Can you spin it a bit faster for me, Buttercup?” I smirked at my constant companion. Mason shook his head at the nickname. He'd earned it when he'd stabbed a man in a pie suit who tried to assassinate me at the Lazuli Kingdom Faire. It suited him because it didn't suit him at all.

He huffed a sigh, then approached my torture wheel to give it another hard spin. Marco, who was gagged and bound and spread eagle on the wall, pleaded through muffled whining and pathetic, glazed over eyes. While my father was no big loss to anyone, obviously I couldn't just let his murderer walk free and still be taken seriously as the soon-to-be-crowned king. Putting a hook through father's brain did me a favor, and putting a knife through Marco's would be my thank you and congratulations. That was the only way it could go. To think that even after his death I would still be preserving appearances for the kingdom. *You got your wish, father dearest. You can enjoy the last word.*



I tossed the next knife in my hand and shifted on my feet. “Which body part should I sever first?” I nodded towards Mason.

He looked at the captive, then back to me. “Left ring finger,” he said definitively.

*Mmmm, a challenge.* I was always happy to impress my hired muscle with a good show of precision. “Left ring finger it is.”

My blade hurtled forward with a rapid spin, only to land perfectly on Marco’s left ring finger. The digit severed cleanly and was flung to the ground by the force of his still spinning mount. Blood splattered around the spinning wheel, painting a lovely circle of pain with its momentum. Buttercup stomped the appendage under the heel of his armored boot with a crunch and a squish.

“Next?” I smiled sweetly to the melody of pathetic, muffled sobs.

A delightfully cruel glint sparkled in my bodyguard’s enchanting green eyes. “How about his cock.”

Marco’s whole expression shifted to one of pure and invigorating panic.

“You *would* pick the smallest target on the board.” I chuckled, while my guard jerked the wheel to increase the velocity, whipping that blood around to paint a perfect target for me. “But I just cannot seem to say no to you. I’ll start with the testicles.”

The last sound the traitor made before he blacked out from the pain was something akin to a gurgle and a muffled scream. I let Buttercup finish the job by slitting his throat. Once my captives stopped sobbing, it wasn’t much fun anymore.

Upon Marco’s disposal, I waved for my bodyguard to join me for dinner. All of this torture had me in the mood for something salty.

We sat at a fully set table that was so much more empty without father or his usual entourage of personal guards. Clearly they’d done fuck-all to keep him safe, so I’d not wasted any time firing the lot of them. Or was it catching the lot of them *on fire? I can never keep track.*

I made my plate, while Mason indulged in a dinner roll. My most trusted and direct subordinate was the only person who I allowed at my table.

He motioned towards me with his fork. “Well, now that *that* little chore is out of the way, shouldn’t we be preparing for the Masquerade?”

*Ah, yes. What else do you do when your father gets assassinated if not throw a party?*

It was everything in my power to not groan externally. Even with my father dead, I would never be accepted as the King of Lazuli Kingdom until I took a wife, and by tradition, the masquerade was where I was to choose the lady who would produce my heirs. It gave the women in town the belief that they had a chance to increase their social status by the luck of lottery, and the masks we’d all be wearing assured their age or physical beauty didn’t hurt their chances of being chosen. Our souls were supposed to choose our partner, not our eyes, father had told me when he’d announced the ball. Which was ironic coming from a man who treated his wife and all of his servants, cooks, and house cleaners as little more than broodmares.

But I digress.

I glanced at the calendar with disdain as I realized how close my fated night truly was. Just one rest was between myself and the first of three weekends that would ultimately

end with my engagement to some stranger. “Is it too late to cancel?”

Mason snorted. “Yes. If you cancelled an event that every woman in town has spent her entire life savings to dress and prepare for with less than twenty four hours’ notice, you’ll likely end up the first man in the Lazuli lineage to die by stiletto.”

“That’s what I have a bodyguard for, isn’t it?” I rolled my eyes in his direction.

“As much as I care about you, not even I can stand against the wrath of a thousand scorned bachelorettes.”

“I appreciate your honesty.”

“You know I’d never lie to you, Prince.” He was cheeky as always. But he was also correct as always. There was no real getting around the Masquerade, but considering even I would be masked for the duration of the event, assuring no one knowingly attempted to seduce me, so our attraction would be built on “vibes” or whatever the fuck, I could easily lie to the Counsel and say I’d failed to find a queen this year, and rule happily single from then on.

It wasn't that women didn't interest me, but the idea of someone throwing themselves into my bed to win my money made my stomach churn, and I had little interest in that sort of superficial relationship.

A perfect body was a boring asset, and I needed far more than that to swear my life to someone. Yet it was impossible to get to know someone's mind and soul over the span of a single dance, and I resented whoever started this tradition.

"Will you be bringing a date, Mason?" I asked him in an effort to get out of my own head about the whole thing.

"Me?" Mason blinked rapidly. "I'll have my hands full protecting you. I hardly have time to watch after a date."

"I suppose so." I pursed my lips. "But if you weren't so obsessed with me, would you be?"

He snorted and shook his head. "There's a woman I'm in love with, but I couldn't ask her if I wanted to."

"Oh?" I did love *other* people's star crossed drama, however. It was nice not to be the center of misery for once. "I've never heard you mention her. Do tell."

“She’s no one terribly interesting. Just a simple woman from town.” He shrugged it off.

“Will she be attending the Masquerade?” I propped up my chin by my elbow.

“I hope not.” He frowned, but I smirked.

“I hope *so*. If she’s got *you* in knots, then I must meet her.”

Mason took a bite of his meat and chewed slowly. His brow was furrowed, and his eyes were on the far wall, as if actively avoiding mine. Perhaps I’d struck a nerve. Once he’d swallowed, he at last addressed me directly again. “Fine.” He said as he outreached his hand. “If she does choose to come, I might be willing to let you have your chance with her. May the best man win?” He said with a grin.

I gripped his palm with mine before giving it a hard shake. “I usually do.”

## Chapter 4



A heavy mist blanketed the graveyard, making it difficult to read the names on the tombstones. Though I knew the path to my mother's resting place by heart. My father remained in an urn in Lydia's room, but my mother was outside in this field, free of those confines. When I arrived at the small plaque recessed into the grass, I crouched down and spread my bouquet of daisies across it. It had always been her favorite flower, and I wanted to believe her spirit still shone with that bright, loving smile whenever I refreshed the bouquet.

"The Prince is holding a masquerade tonight, Mom." I whispered to her grave. "I know how much you loved to dance. You would have had such fun. They say the Prince is looking for a bride, but I'm finally with someone who makes me happy, so I don't care about any of that."

The thought warmed my soul. I couldn't wait to get to the ball and try to find him. It would be such fun to see if our souls naturally sought out and recognized each other. I knew Carter didn't have much interest in things like this, so the fact that he'd been willing to go at all told me he was really ready to commit to us on a more official level. He'd always shied away from the exclusivity, official boyfriend/girlfriend talk, and I couldn't blame him considering even I felt a need to keep our relationship a secret. But after tonight, I was certain we'd move to a new level.

Mom would be so thrilled for me. Maybe she'd find him a bit boring and bland, but so long as I was happy, I was certain she'd be too.

"Eleven years." I stroked my fingers through the short green grass. "I've officially lived more years without you than I did with you. Are you still watching over me up there?" Melancholy tinged every word. The fact that the Masquerade fell on the anniversary of her death was a touch complicated for me, I'd admit. I felt guilty that I'd be celebrating and enjoying myself tonight instead of grieving.

On the anniversary of my father's passing, I may have been able to cast off responsibility more easily, but he was the



one who brought Lydia into my life. He entrusted his entire estate to her, putting my own right to the inheritance on a strict condition, and he ignored the way she treated me the whole time he'd been alive. Perhaps I'd simply never forgiven him for it.

As I crouched over Mother's plaque, lost in thought, a large black crow came soaring down from the trees. I met its small black eyes as it walked towards me. It was completely unafraid of my much larger size and simply watched me, cautiously studying my movements, until it was but inches from my face. The last time I was so close to a wild bird was also in this graveyard, and I couldn't help but think maybe it recognized me. How sweet it would be if this was the offspring of the crow Rowan had helped way back then. I smiled softly at the dark creature.

Then it snatched a daisy right off my mother's grave.

"Hey!" I hollered as it beat its wings in my face and took off in the other direction. "Give that back!"

I chased the bird back to its tree, where the large crow placed the flower in its nest. The whole conglomeration had been made of various roses and daffodils and carnations, now to be graced by my mother's lone daisy. I stared at the

beautiful nest and ceased my chase. There were no chicks in it, but there could be some day. And even if this bird never built a family, I liked that it had used so many flowers to create its home. If only we could all build a place so lovely to rest in.

I smiled at the crow and gave it a nod. “My mom would be proud to be part of something so beautiful.” I said. I returned to her grave to retrieve a second daisy, then I held it up for the crow to gather. It fluttered down and plucked the flower directly from my hand. Its sharp claw grazed my finger, and I jerked back. I examined the shallow cut that had just barely drawn blood, then shook my head.

“I forgive you.” I grinned at my pretty black companion, while the crow displayed mother’s daisy prominently in its nest. Maybe that crow held her spirit, I thought. I hoped it might.

On the walk home, the party preparations were in full swing. The fog had melted off for the day, and the entire town was alight as streamers were hung and brightly colored paper decorations were adorning every shop front and light pole. Some of the men and women were already dressed in their party clothes, with their identities hidden by simple eye masks.

Others were still rushing about to find accessories for their garish gowns and tuxedos.

My stepmother was likely among them, always looking to buy more and more and more, even when she had perfectly adequate gowns at home. Rowan, I was certain, would be at the ball too. Though I didn't think he had a girlfriend of any sort. I would feel bad for any woman who was committed to a man who fucked his stepsister with random vegetables.

I sighed and continued home. It didn't matter that it was the anniversary of my mother's death. Mourning never absolved me of my chores.

I spent the rest of the afternoon polishing the floor and dusting shelves, thankful for a peaceful and empty house. Rowan had been working longer hours lately when he wasn't sneaking up behind me in the kitchen, and my stepmother had been shopping obsessively. Presumably, she was one of many women hoping to win the Prince's favor. She had little chance at her age, considering bearing children was one of the many things expected of a royal wife, but I wasn't going to tell her that. I valued my peace and safety too much to say a thing.

As afternoon gave way to night, Lydia came to my room to demand I help her change. She had a gorgeous ball

gown of the deepest sapphire and the most luxurious silk that flared out like a bell. I brushed out her hair, and I shaped the perfect up-do. She looked elegant and sophisticated. Maybe the prince *would* pick her. My father had, after all. She was a beautiful woman despite her black, rancid heart.

“It’s missing something.” Lydia professed as she checked herself out in the floor length mirror. I frowned. She was already adorned from head to toe with expensive gemstones and intricate lace. “Something borrowed, perhaps?”

I stared at her dumbfounded. *Borrowed from... who? It’s not like I had anything of value. Certainly not to her standards.* I was still a small child the last time my father was alive, and just about anything and everything he ever gave me was sized as such. Hell, she’d already taken most of it even so. “I could ask Lady Hargreaves next door if she might have a hair clip you could wear?” I attempted.

“No, just go to my drawer. Top left.” She motioned with a wave of her hand.

I pursed my lips, but still I listened. There were about forty different drawers on her vanity, with everything from make up to jewelry to hairbands and accessories. The top left drawer was locked, but she had the key resting right atop it.

Why she was making such a show of this played to her usual flair for the overdramatic.

I unlocked the drawer and opened it slowly. There, staring me in the face, was a massive ruby gemstone centered in a diamond studded heart on a thick necklace of sparkling platinum roses. A necklace I hadn't seen since it was around my mother's neck in her open casket.

My eyes were wide and my lip was trembling. "Where did you get this?" I spoke absently, unable to either regulate or process my thoughts.

"Your father gave it to me. He liked to pretend the heart was his own, locked in gems. A bit gaudy, but men seem to adore it. I'd like to wear it to the ball tonight." Her tone was so blasé it was offensive. "I haven't touched the thing since he gave it to me, but this seems like a particularly special occasion."

I continued to stare. I was paralyzed. I had no words. Did... did my dad really give this to her? The necklace that he'd given my mother for their first anniversary became a cherished gift of love to... Lydia?

The tears started spilling from my eyes without my consent, but there was nothing in this world I could have done

to stop them.

Lydia scoffed. “I don’t have all night. Bring me the necklace now, dear.”

How long had she had this? And how long had she waited to rub it in my face. I spiraled in my head, so stunned and numb at the now tainted object that my mother had once cherished. On the anniversary of her death, to shove in my face the object she loved most.

Too cruel. Even for my stepmother, that was too far.

“Elise.” Her sharp tone snapped me sober. Then she spoke very, very slowly. “Bring me the necklace, Elise.”

My whole body was shaking as I reached into the drawer. I lifted the necklace, and felt the weight of the thing in my hands. It was heavy and imposing and hateful in its beauty. Did she know this was my mother’s? She must have. Dad must have told her. My blurred vision lifted to the urn placed on the shelf in her room. A simple ceramic jar, painted by the most prestigious potter in Lazuli. My father was in that urn, while my stepmother was using my mother’s favorite necklace to try and win a new husband.

“I’m waiting.” She snapped again. Then she lifted the tendrils of hair by her neck so I could place it on her.

I dropped to my knees and started to sob uncontrollably. The necklace dropped to the crimson rug, and I covered my eyes as I emptied my tears into my palms.

“Still such a cry baby.” Lydia scoffed. “What’s wrong, Elise?” She asked as if she had any possible confusion. She knelt down to where I was a pathetic mess on the floor, and she scooped up the necklace. “Wishing your father had loved you enough to give you this little trinket?” Though my vision was blurred, her wicked smile was clear as day. “Or were you just wondering what it would feel like if someone beat you to death with it? Wouldn’t that be a lovely gift to your mother for her anniversary? Let her know you grew up to be just like her in so many ways.”

Ice shook through my veins at that subtle confession. The implication that Lydia was the one who killed my mother had always been in the back of my mind, but I’d thought I was simply paranoid, insane, desperate, sad, mourning, and trying to villainize her based on my own grief.

“Enough of this,” she shifted to a sweet and perked tone, “I have a prince waiting for me. I expect you’ll have the

house cleaned and the garden weeded by the time I get back.”

She left me there alone, and I stayed on my knees as I felt the last threads of my sanity starting to snap.



## Chapter 5



I yanked the last weed from the strawberries before I collapsed onto the garden bench under the feint moonlight.

I stared down at my dusty leggings and my stained and fraying t-shirt. Another outfit ruined after a long day of cleaning the house. I still had time to make the Masquerade, but the more I thought about it, the more it sunk in that I didn't even have nice clothing to wear. My makeup was ruined, my hair was a mess—Would Carter even want to dance with me if he saw me with little more than a washed face in a simple sundress amongst a ballroom of breathtaking princesses?

I'd hardly had time or money to shop for something better, and despite my subtle suggestions, Carter hadn't offered to take me out shopping either. He probably assumed I already had plenty of dresses. That was a perfectly logical assumption. All of the other girls in the kingdom did. Nothing I could be mad about.

My unjust sniffing was muffled by the fireworks bursting in the night sky. I looked up towards the half moon, where a rain of blue and purple and white explosives sparkled over the black backdrop, illuminating the pointed rooftops of the Lazuli castle spires. The fortress was perched high on the hill that overlooked the town, and it was easily visible from the garden of our manor. I probably stared at it much too often, day dreaming of what it must feel like to live in such an extravagant place.

I should be there, but how would I even pull it off? I hadn't thought any of this through when I'd imagined how much fun I could have. If I stole one of Lydia's gowns, my step family might recognize me, and they'd never let me stay, and I didn't need either of them learning of my relationship either. I was foolish to think someone like myself could go at all. I shouldn't have even asked. Even though my invite was as valid as anyone else's, it was at best a technicality. The royal family wanted worthwhile women, not dirty, fallen angels like me.

All I could hope was that Carter was having a good time and could tell me all about it in the morning.

I shook my head as I tried to convince myself that I hadn't wanted to go at all. All the pitfalls I would have been walking right into. I would have been putting myself in a dangerous position of temptation, surrounded by exciting possibilities, when I was perfectly happy with my safe and normal relationship. The last thing I needed was to risk getting picked by someone like the prince and being forced to marry him based on old values and traditions.

But maybe... maybe somewhere in my heart, I just wanted to be a part of something so extravagant and exciting and bright and colorful. I wanted to dance in a crowded room of beautiful people, feel like I was one of them. Someone worthy. I didn't want to feel like the burden who everyone was ashamed of. More than anything, that was what I really wanted.

I twirled in my own arms in the middle of the garden, rustling the nearby leaves on our tomato plant. My t-shirt caught in the wind, and I pretended, for only a moment, that it was a beautiful gown. I closed my eyes, and I took another musical step, imagining what it might feel like to be a princess at a masquerade. To dance with a stranger, who has no idea

that I'm me, and instead sees someone who's special, intriguing, and beautiful—what a fantasy.

Tears dripped down my cheeks without my permission. I spun faster to throw them off, but my sorrow clung fiercely to my skin.

But still I kept twirling, my arms tightening around my chest in a hug that wanted so badly to squeeze my pieces back together. I spun and I spun, brushing against the leaves and the flowers and the ferns. I danced alone until the sobs took my breath away. I choked on my own sadness, then I at last took a seat on the bench to try and pull myself together.

It was just one night. *Just one night.* I'd endure. If I was lucky, maybe the prince *would* pick Lydia as his bride. He'd move her into the castle, and I'd never have to see my awful stepmother again. I didn't care if that would just be one more instance of her winning where she didn't deserve it, so long as it meant I was free of her oppression.

I could only dream of the day I'd be rid of her for good. It would come eventually. One day, my boyfriend would become my fiancé, and my fiancé would become my husband, and I'd have my revenge.

It sounded so good in my head, but no matter how much of a pep talk I gave myself, my vision remained blurred and burning, while my overflowing eyes rained down into our little koi pond in the center of the garden. The flowers and the water lilies that made this little pool so beautiful usually helped sooth me when I was down, but today I couldn't even bring them into focus. I interlaced my fingers in front of me, and I pressed my forehead against my knuckles.

“If there's a god up there watching over me, please.” I sniffled. “Please just help me find a way out of this place.”

I waited for several moments, as if a miraculous beam of light might suddenly shoot down from the sky and spirit me away, but the silence was deafening. I unlaced my fingers and shifted my palms to my face, where I cried freely into my hands. Of course the gods wouldn't help me. Why would I ever deserve such a kindness? I was no one and nothing.

I drew in another sharp, hot, pained breath, and I sobbed harder. “If there's a devil who would take my soul, then come and have it. I don't want it anymore.”

A warm breeze brushed against my cheek, while I hugged myself around the waist. I rocked on my heels, just

trying to calm myself down. *Breathe in. Breathe out.* I squeezed my eyes shut, and I bit into my quivering lip.

“A man who would make a woman cry isn’t worthy of her tears, Belladonna.” A deep and seductive voice floated through the air behind me. I jumped in my skin, and I shot straight upright.

“Wh-who’s there?” I glanced frantically around the garden, but even with the gentle light of the half moon, I couldn’t see anyone.

“The only person who cares enough to be here for you at a time like this.” The words stung in their truth yet were comforting in their kindness. But still, the voice was unfamiliar. It wasn’t Carter, and I had no family who would stand by me. So... who?

“And who is that?” I asked, through pathetic and shaky defeat. The fact that I hadn’t a single person who I could imagine in that role almost made me want to cry even more. I wiped the tears from my cheeks with the back of my hand, then I stood to better survey the area.

That was when a man appeared from the shadows, walking with steady and catlike steps. He brushed a wide palm leaf with his broad shoulder as he approached me. He was tall

and strong, clad in a fine white suit adorned with gold accents that sparkled under the night's pale light. His slicked back hair was jet black, almost to the point of being blue, and his face was hidden behind a simple mask, half black and half white, half smiling and half frowning. Only the equally dark voids of his eyes were visible, but that was all such a striking man needed to hold me there. Even behind the mask, I could tell he was handsome. He walked with a gait that felt sophisticated, strong, and maybe a touch self-important.

“My name is Nero.” He said while offering me a black gloved hand. Those galaxy-like eyes flickered red.

I hesitated to take that hand. “How did you get into our garden? There are gates.”

He chuckled. “Gates.” He repeated the word like it was a cute joke. I couldn't say I understood where he was finding humor in it. “That's hardly the most pressing issue at hand, wouldn't you say?” With a shake of his head, he swept a hand toward the fireworks that were bursting in a spectacular finale. “The Masquerade has begun, and yet you're here at home. Are you not obligated to attend?”

I opened my mouth only to close it again, then I pulled my lower lip between my teeth instead of protesting. “I'm just

a servant.” I said, the words tasting bitter on my own tongue. That wasn’t true. I wasn’t a servant at all. I was simply treated like one.

“Correct me if I’m wrong, but the Masquerade calls for all of the citizens of Lazuli to attend, no?” The way he said such a thing almost felt as though he’d made that rule himself. All I could think was that he was someone who worked for the Lazuli family, and he’d been tasked with bringing in any stragglers “Even *servants* aren’t excluded from the guest list.”

“You’re not wrong.” I dropped my chin to my chest. “But I have nothing to wear and no way to get there.” I wasn’t going to throw my family under the bus for this stranger—especially not if he was possibly a powerful one—but I wondered sometimes why I still felt such a need to cover for their evil. “I’m sure I’m not missed.”

Nero cocked his head back, and he looked down his nose at me through narrowed eyes. “Nonsense.” He scoffed. “You’re the most important guest of all, Belladonna.”

Every time he repeated that pet name, my heart skipped a beat. The belladonna was a poisonous flower. There was nothing good about it. So... Why did I like that so much?



Maybe I just liked the rare implication that I was strong.

No, I shouldn't let myself get swept away so easily. Not by some unknown intruder who broke into our home. "Even a pretty lie is still a lie. No one will even notice I'm not there."

Nero looked genuinely offended in the way his brows lifted. It was difficult to read his expressions with the mask on his face, but his eyes were incredibly expressive, and I couldn't help staying locked into their beauty.

"The only pretty lie here is that pout on your lips." Nero approached me swiftly and suddenly. This strange man swept me into his arms, eliciting a sharp gasp, and he stared so deeply into me, I thought he might be penetrating my very soul. I could see the flecks of amber in that dark gaze of his. Red and orange, swirling in the lost galaxies of his irises. "Do you want to go to the Ball, Elise?" He said my name with a sultry hiss. I knew I hadn't given it to him yet, but I was letting him sweep me along without a second thought. There was something in his gaze that was nearly spellbinding.

Which was likely why "I do" was all I said in response.

His wide palm pressed into my back, pulling me tightly against his chest. Still, I was too mesmerized by that look to squirm. “What would you give to be there?”

“I don’t have anything to offer.” The words hurt to say aloud, but they were true.

“You have your soul, don’t you?” He whispered back with a sly edge.

“You can have it.” I responded immediately. It’s not like it was worth much to anyone as it stood. The way he spoke, this man could only be the devil himself, but what did I care? My soul wasn’t even worth something to *me*. At least if I sold it, I might finally have something to live for. “So please.”

He nodded in response. “Then let me give you everything you deserve.”

“Yes.” The word left my lips with a heavily released breath.

Nero lifted his mask, revealing the handsome face of defined cheek bones, of a sharp nose, and full lips framed by short and well-manicured black facial hair. Without another word, his lips pressed to mine with excruciating gentleness. He

opened my mouth with a soft flick of his tongue, and I was quick to give in to his enchanting rhythm.

*I should be fighting him. I should push him away.* My mind was shouting at me, but my body didn't care. *I have a boyfriend.* I reasoned next, but the protest wasn't but a whisper amidst the explosions of that simple kiss.

My eyes fluttered shut, enhancing the sensation of his soft and warm mouth. The way he moved his lips, pushed and devoured me, claimed and consumed me—it was carnal, passionate, and exciting. All feelings I'd sworn off when I'd chosen someone safe and steady. I didn't want to feel this way. I wanted to be content with bland and unsatisfying. But my body seemed to crave that desire like a drug. That temperature spread downward through me in a wave that swelled but never broke. A gentle heat undulated softly to my core.

His hand cupped my ass, and a tingle reverberated through me. I was shaking on unsteady legs, and he supported me in a powerful grip. He inched that hold up to my waist, and I kept my lips on his when it rounded my side and moved up to my breast. He covered me with his palm, and he pressed into my nipple with his thumb. I jerked, but he caught me immediately with his other hand, cutting off my retreat.

His hand spread warmth and electricity through my chest. My legs tensed as the feeling crawled downward. I buckled as pleasure started to build and settle where it shouldn't be while in a mysterious intruder's hands.

“A beautiful princess deserves a beautiful dress.” He whispered into my mouth as he increased pressure in his squeeze. He took my lips again, distracting me with his tongue, while a feeling of lightness tingled everywhere he touched. For a moment, I felt that I might be naked in his arms. Rough fingers pressed into my sensitive skin, with no obvious barrier of clothing between us, and I practically squeaked into his mouth at the suddenness and roughness of the contact. He only chuckled in response, while he raked those fingers over every exposed inch.

Yet still I wasn't fighting him. Instead, all I managed to do was part my lips enough to take him in deeper, and relax enough to lose myself. “A dress that can win over a handsome prince,” he added as he slid his fingertips down the front of my body. I was more certain than ever that I was bare when he circled my naval and danced soft touches far lower than I should let him go. His touch was light in that sensitive space

as he inched down my center. My lip quivered into his kiss, and he responded by biting down hard.

My yelp tasted of my own blood. My eyes shot open, and he vanished before me, leaving me standing in the garden, alone, confused, and fighting to keep my balance. I looked around frantically for where he had disappeared to, but there was no trace of anyone having been there at all.

Had I imagined the whole thing? Was he just an illusion? A manifestation of my desperation?

I returned my gaze to the pond, where the half-moon reflected in its perfectly still pool. And there, staring back at me, was an image beyond my imagination. A woman dressed in a gown of crystals, with flecks of silver and the brightest diamonds shimmering under the stars. A mask of equal decoration adorned her face, encasing red lipstick that was perfectly applied, and long dark eyelashes that popped behind the shimmering head piece. Her hair was clean and nicely styled in big, luscious curls, cascading down to her shoulders like a waterfall of golden ringlets, and on her feet were two stilettos that were so flawless in their clear, crystalline design that they could have been made of glass. To top it all off, a

silver necklace rested between her cleavage with a small stone of the deepest and darkest blue.

I touched my face in disbelief, and that reflection followed suit. I could feel my own fingers on my own cheek, and the lightly swaying crystals that dangled from my mask brushed the backs of manicured and painted nails. That woman in the pond... she... she was *me*.

If Nero had slipped some kind of drug between my lips just now, I wanted to ride its high forever.

“Hurry now, Belladonna. For just one night, this will all be yours.” The words echoed directly in my mind. “At midnight, the magic will fade, but that will be all the time you need. Go take what you truly deserve.”

Magic? Was this a spell? That couldn't be. Magic didn't exist. Yet... there was no other way to explain this sudden transformation other than being a vivid and lucid fever dream.

If that's what it was, I couldn't waste any more time. Midnight was but four hours away, and I knew I might never have a chance to feel so beautiful and special again. I needed to savor it while it lasted.

I hiked up my skirt, and I ran from the garden. The castle was far, but I could hike it. I would get there before this magic ran out if I started now.

I calculated the timing and distance in my mind as I ran to the front door and tugged open the heavy wood. There, on the other side, was a driver waiting in a sparkling white carriage, just waiting to pick me up. I blinked several times to assure what I was seeing was real, then I decided if it *was* all a dream, I'd be happy to play along and see where my imagination might take me. I climbed into the back seat, and settled into that soft cushion as though it was made for me. The driver started toward the castle.

*I'm really going to the Ball.* I was shaking with excitement. My stepmother would be so jealous of this dress, and Rowan would be livid if he saw me flaunting so much of myself. But tonight, I had nothing to worry about. They wouldn't recognize me. They couldn't. Because no one would ever think that this stunning angel could ever be Elise Cenere.

I was shaking in my seat. I couldn't wait to arrive.



The castle was even larger and more intimidating than I imagined. In all my years, I'd never been allowed to come so close to this place, and it was mesmerizing in its splendor. The spires shot so high into the sky, I thought they might touch the stars.

I dismounted from my carriage, and I was immediately greeted by a doorman. He didn't ask for my invitation. One look at me, and he knew I was meant to be there. He took my hand, with my pretty painted white nails and all, and he escorted me into the ball room.

If the outer walls of the castle were magnificent, the ball room itself was heaven on earth. Beautiful women in elaborately colored dresses of silk and gold and jewels twirled across the floor, while men dressed in finely tailored suits lead the dances. Short of the surrounding guards watching over the party, everyone was partnered up. If Rowan was there, I couldn't find him. Carter was surely in there somewhere by now, but the masks paired with movements so fluid and fast made it difficult to get a read on anyone.

It didn't matter who was who though. I was here to have fun. I just needed to figure out how to become a part of



this symphony of bodies.

I took one hesitant step forward, and that was when I  
saw him.



## Chapter 6



“This is every bit as insufferable as I imagined.” I professed to Mason with a scoff, while I stayed secure and out of sight in the guard’s quarters behind a thick blue curtain. I’d stepped out onto the dance floor just enough to pretend I’d made an effort, but this back room, away from all the hustle and bustle and bodies, suited me just fine.

All I had to do was tolerate this for three weekends in a row, and then I could move on with my coronation, officially taking over the Lazuli Throne. Rules were rules, after all. By custom, I was to invite every soul in town, then I was to make my rounds through the dance floor, trading partners with every couple among them until I found a woman I fancied.

I’d know right away, I’d always been told. Easy to say when coming from a man like my father who never met a set of tits he didn’t like. The devil himself would laugh at me if I

ever tried to explain the nuances of love before marriage to the ogre of a king who created me. Not metaphorically either. That man was obnoxious and easily amused.

But thus was this ritual, built on cruel flaunting of power and status, where at times a husband found himself helpless as the acting prince chose his wife to be the new queen. But it wasn't love that drove the crown. It was a strange sense of fate. The kind of startling attraction that you feel at first touch when you meet the person who is supposed to be yours. Whether it was magic or intuition, I'd yet to experience it myself, so I couldn't yet say.

Still, I didn't think I had such a person. Mason was the closest I'd ever been to liking another human being. At most I'd mustered the motivation to dabble in a few one night stands to appear "normal" and "well adjusted," but even then it felt mechanical and trite. Sex was more an obligation and a chore than anything. Something I did just to say I'd done it.

But I found nothing thrilling about an orgasm void of all connection. It was simply a passing feeling on the road to hollowness.

My only respite was that, perchance, by the end of the final Masquerade, when I still had yet to feel connection to

another soul on the dance floor, the Counsel might leave me alone about finding a queen for a while. It would be a relief to no longer have to play along with the song and dance, even if it was only for a brief period before they hatched a new plan to mate their ruler.

“It’s your duty, Zakari.” Mason’s scolding was more mocking than harsh.

“I know it’s my duty, but that doesn’t change my disdain for it.” I peeked out between the curtains at the pretty dolls spinning with their well-dressed men.

“It’ll be over faster if you stop delaying your appearance.” As always, he was right. And as always, that didn’t make me any happier. “You know the Counsel will never let you secede if you don’t at least play along with the game. If you’re so set on remaining alone, I suggest you go through the steps and get it over with just to prove you’re unmatched. They’ll have no choice but to crown you on the night of the full moon, and then you can change the rules.”

“Fine.” I groaned begrudgingly, knowing that too was a logical, fair, and correct assessment. I stood from my plush cobalt armchair, and I peeked through the curtain again.

“Your mask, my lord.” Mason reminded me sharply. I sighed, then I accepted the deep black eye mask adorned with small blue gemstones. I fastened it snugly around my eyes, and ran a hand through my shaggy black hair to cover the band.

“Wish me luck, Buttercup.” I smirked at him one last time before I nudged open the curtain.

“For both our sakes.” He rolled his eyes at me sarcastically.

I stepped into the ballroom from my position atop the steps, and I looked down at the subjects of Lazuli Kingdom. I scanned the patterns of spinning and dipping, trying to determine where it might be best to cut in. I wanted to enter the dance subtly. Letting everyone know I was the crown prince right off the bat often tempered their behavior in a most insufferable way. I appreciated the anonymity of the masquerade to avoid such theatrics.

I adjusted the sapphire tie in my otherwise all black suit, and I took my first move towards the ballroom floor. I made it but a handful of steps when my eyes fell upon a singular woman, standing at the door, looking so very confused.

She stood clad in a crystalline silver, from her head to her toe, with a dress that shimmered like it was made of glass, and a mask that covered all but her pretty, pouty red lips. Her stance held the caution of an ice queen trapped in the middle of a volcano. A woman who needed a savior.

Her eyes met mine for only the briefest of moments, and the whole world fell silent. All I could hear was the tapping of her transparent heels against the marble dance floor. She walked with a fragile confidence. Not one that came from trained excellence and poise, but one of timid uncertainty, of fear, and of discomfort. Her grace spoke of one who was noble born, and her hesitance spoke of someone who'd lost it all. It was vulnerable, innocent, corruptible.

If it was truly possible for one's heart to skip a beat, she had mine skipping entire stanzas.

I'd been fighting this event tooth and nail, yet here I was, utterly smitten at first glance. It would be impossible to put into the words the magnetism I felt from this delicate creature, but it would be equally impossible to pull away from it. Why would I want to?

Her uncertain eyes looked from one masked face to the next, as though she was searching for someone specific. I took

that as my invitation to show her that the person she was looking for was *me*.

I pushed through the dancers to close the distance between us. I had no need to try on any other partners. I'd waste no time on the ritual when I'd already found my lady.

I stepped nimbly through the crowd until I was securely in her gravity, then the moment she turned to face me, I swept her into my arms, I secured her body against mine, confirming exactly how perfectly it fit there, and laced my fingers in hers, poising our position for a sweeping waltz.

"I'll have this dance." I whispered against her bright red lips. A command, not a question. I wasn't going to ask her to be my partner. She *was* my partner. I could feel it every time I looked into that confused and broken gaze of hers. Those shattered blue eyes that held me in chains, whether she understood it or not.

Bewildered. She tensed in my arms and she attempted to pull back the slightest bit. "I'm sorry, sir, but I have a boy —."

"And now you have a man." I interrupted her absurd protests immediately. I placed my wide palm on the back of



her head and pressed her face into my shoulder. “Let me demonstrate the difference for you.”

“W-well...” She stammered, but she didn’t struggle or push back any longer. I began to step in time with the dance floor, and she struggled to match my movements. Not a trained dancer, but that didn’t matter. I was more than happy to lead her. Watching her body give into my whims was immediately satisfying. “I can stay for just one dance, I suppose.” She said through wavering resolve.

If she needed convincing, I was happy to oblige. One dance was all it would take. “Your loyalty is admirable,” *and would soon be only for me*, “but this is a masquerade. The fun is to dance with a stranger, isn’t it?” I assured her with a smile that had her smiling back.

*A good, gentle soul. Mmmm, my favorite kind.*

Maybe I needed that kind of good in my life. Mason certainly didn’t provide anything of the sort, and ruling a kingdom was all about balance, after all.

The tension in her shoulders eased, and she at last let me sweep her away. “I guess you’re right.” She said. Even her voice was perfection. Perhaps my words were getting through to her, or perhaps she could simply feel our connection as

vividly as I could, but the moment those words left her lips, she gave herself completely to my lead, and she allowed me to waltz her through the sea of bodies without any further wayward glances.

I spun her away from me, then I spun her back in close, ending with a dip that had her holding onto me for safety. Oh the safety I could give her. Security this alleged boyfriend didn't seem to be offering.

Back on her feet, she started to move more fluidly and comfortably. She was a quick study, her steps shifting from unsure to sultry, while her body language grew in speed and confidence. *Clever, adept, enchanting.*

“Where did you learn to move like this?” I whispered against her lips as we swayed, letting her fantasize about what that warmth might feel like if it were closer.

“From you. Right now. You didn't give me much choice in the matter.” She laughed. A light and lovely sound. “Do you always take without asking?” Her words had bite, but her tone was soft. She never faltered in her step now. I was impressed by her athleticism. She wasn't a waif of a woman. She had the build of someone who had to work terribly hard, with muscles defined by functional exercise. She was thick

and perfect, and I found myself appreciating every extra inch that gave me to touch.

“Are you sure you want me to answer that?” I let my hand on her back drift downward until I was cupping her ass through the sharp glass of her dress. I squeezed tightly, until the little gems cut into my palm. Dangerous yet soft was my favorite combination. “I like to call it ambition. If I see something I want, I’ll do whatever it takes to acquire it. Be that a kingdom, or an ice queen at a masquerade.”

I expected a yelp as my squeeze tightened, but instead, I got a soft pink blush behind the swaying gemstones on her mask. “Why would you want me? Of all the women on this dance floor, I’m probably the least special.”

What an odd statement. “Special?” I shook my head, then I led her to the edge of the dance floor. I gave her another twist, then I secured her against me, assuring her back was against my chest when she returned. I squeezed her body between my arms, trapping her in my embrace, and I directed her attention to the dancers at the ball. “Tell me, Love, who among these women is more special than you?”

“All of them.” She said with a half-hearted smile.

“Correct. And utterly wrong.” I squeezed her more tightly. “Look at those two there. What do you see?” I directed her attention to a man in a forest green suit, and a woman in a sparkling gold gown. Even with his mask covering so much of his face, it was impossible to miss the light in his eyes and the real, honest joy on his lips.

“A beautiful woman with her loving date?” Her voice was filled with the kind of sorrowful envy that tugged at my own distant empathy.

“And there?” Another couple, both in all black, swayed to a melody all their own, far removed from the rhythm of the actual music. It was a dance of lovers who’d held each other a thousand times, and all they wanted was to hold each other ten thousand more.

“True love.” She spoke idly, in awe of that sparkle between them.

“Do you think that the woman in black is more special than the woman in gold?” I nuzzled her curls that smelled of blueberry and coconut. More of my favorite things. This couldn’t all be coincidence. Her warmth and her shape and her natural frequency recharged my soul on contact alone.

“Of course not.” She shook her head without so much as thinking on it. Then she stopped herself, when she realized she’d walked right into my point.

“So why would you believe they’re more special than you?”

“W-well—”

I squeezed her again. “Every man here believes that his lady is the most special woman in the room, and every man here is correct.” I felt the jolt as her breathing hitched on those words. I released her to run my fingers through her bouncy and luscious hair. “So for me, my lady, you are the one who outshines them all, whether you believe it or not.”

The gloss of a tear caught on the gemstone dangling from her eye mask. If I was capable of looking at anything but her lovely face, I might not have even noticed it. How long has this perfect dove been grounded with broken wings?

“Th-thank you. That’s really sweet to say.” Her voice broke under those words, and my heart cracked with it. The fact that her boyfriend could be somewhere in this cluster of bodies, dancing with someone else, made me want to execute him as the nightly entertainment, just to punish him for having

ever made her feel less than. If he didn't cherish her, then I would gladly exercise my rights to a woman of my choosing.

No, that wouldn't be satisfying. I had to prove to her I was worthy of her, too.

## Chapter 7



This man was a charmer, truly. Though it wasn't the first time I've been told pretty lies that meant nothing. I wanted to believe him, but he was but a stranger, and I was... me. Perhaps a majority of the women here were special to their partners, but there were possibly just as many who were little more than a soon to be one-night-stand who would be discarded without hesitation.

My eyes searched the crowd for Lydia. The idea that even *she* was more special than I was leant credibility to my dance partner's theory. It wasn't hard to spot her in her blue dress. She'd picked the color to match the Lazuli name, and she stood out from the other ladies with the sheer volume of her skirt. Her partner was tall and blond, and the way he moved and swayed made her look like a darling princess in the arms of a lover. Something about his body language almost

felt familiar, but... there were thousands of tall blond men in Lazuli, and I immediately dismissed the thought.

All I could think was I wanted to find *my* tall blond baker in this confusing mix of bodies. But then, even he had never held me like that. Never looked at me like this random man was gazing at fucking *Lydia*.

That wasn't fair. I couldn't expect him to. She had class and wealth. I had dirty knees and thrifted clothes.

"Some of us are born diamonds, and some of us are simply worthless shards of glass." I muttered, pulling away from the man. I took a step towards the crowd, and he caught my wrist.

"A diamond's worth is assigned, not intrinsic." He shook his head. "That glass is worth everything to a man with a broken window during a storm. Let me show you how much your shine is worth to me."

"Okay." I said. Though not without that guilt panging through my heart again. Was I allowed to spend more time with this silken tongue stranger, or was he going to turn into a mistake I didn't want to make? I couldn't risk ending up alone again for a simple predator looking for disposable prey tonight.



I was reading too much into it. This was only a dance, and all I wanted to do was feel a touch of that magic that everyone else was enjoying. That was it. After this, I would go back to my usual comfortable, unchallenging relationship, and I would settle for easy. Boredom would be a welcome change.

After all, every time I caught my own reflection in the surrounding mirrors, I was reminded that by the Devil's own spell, I wasn't Elise Cenere anyway. I was a princess that even this handsome stranger saw value in. I only had this magical façade for a few more hours. It might be the only time I'd ever get to feel this pretty, and maybe I should take advantage of it just this once.

This sparkling dark knight led me from the ballroom. I followed him up the stairs of the foyer, and he waved me through a stained glass door that opened into a beautiful balcony. An unusual number of stars were visible, despite the half moon, and I found myself completely enchanted by the twisting galaxies that glowed through the night.

The door shut behind me, and a peace filled me now that we were alone in still quiet.

“Are you sure it's okay to be here? I imagine the royal family doesn't like it when guests wander about the castle

uninvited.” I couldn’t take my eyes off this man whose mask of black and blue sparkled under the starlight with every shift in his step.

“The guards would have surely stopped us if it wasn’t.” He waved a hand dismissively. I smiled at that. I felt so naughty being here. Not just out on the balcony, where no one had authorized us to go, but at this party, where I was standing in plain sight, and no one knew who I was. “Now come. I want to show you something.” This dark man leaned against the railing of the balcony, and he motioned with his hand for me to follow. I neared cautiously, with no clue what a dark stranger like him might have in store for me.

I couldn’t be too trusting, but oh how I wanted to be. I took three unsteady steps forward, leaving ten between us.

“Closer.” He said with a tilt of his chin and an inviting smile that crossed his thin lips. I took three more steps, then stopped hesitantly. “Closer.” He repeated. Three more. He extended his hand. “Closer.” A chuckle punctuated his words. “Are you afraid of me, Love?”

“Should I be?” I didn’t close that last short gap.

“Absolutely you should.” The grin turned wicked as he stepped forward and grabbed me by the waist. Before I could

protest, he lifted me like I weighed nothing, and he sat me on the rail where he held me firmly. I gripped the edge like it was my only lifeline, while my body stiffened at the realization of how high up we were and how narrow the metal seat that supported me truly was. It would take nothing to push me off and send me to my doom, and only the strong hands of a stranger would decide that fate. If Rowan was behind me right now, he would probably give me a push.

“Relax, I’ve got you.” The man whispered directly into my ear, while his warmth embraced me like a fireplace and a mug of cocoa on a cold winter night. “You can trust me.”

*Trust? What a pretty, naïve, and useless word.*

His scalding breaths slowly moved down from my ear to my neck to my shoulder, feathering that warmth down, while never truly touching me with those lips. I swallowed down the horrible, unfaithful thoughts that wished he would close that gap. “How do I know I can trust you?” I asked through the butterflies building in my chest.

“I don’t have to explain that to you.” He kept one hand braced on my waist, while the other drifted up my stomach. He danced his fingertips between my breasts, then placed an open

palm on the bare skin directly over my heart. A heart that was beating steady and quick. “You already know you can in here.”

I swallowed. That skin to skin contact was like magic, and it filled me with something I couldn't admit was there. Something I'd never felt before with another person.

“Now look.” He whispered against my shoulder blades, his lips brushing the strap of my dress. He could so easily remove it if he wanted to. It was only that thin line of faith that told me he wouldn't.

I forced my attention to the sprawling city beneath us, pitch black in this night where the entire populace was gathered in the massive castle. A rare silence. “Tell me, Love, what do you feel when you see such darkness where there's usually so much light?”

*A philosophical question? Anything to get my mind off of his closeness.* “What light?” I practically scoffed at the word. “This is the true face of the city. Black and empty and cruel.”

“Interesting observation.” Those words were whispered on my neck, while his hand pressed more firmly into my chest, holding me tighter against him. He held that pressure for several counts, as if measuring my heart rate as I

said it. “You live in that town, do you not? So there’s ordinarily at least one light there.”

I laughed at that. “No. I’m the darkest part of all.”

“And that’s how I know you’re special.” He lifted his hand from my heart, then placed it on my shoulder. “I would say the same about myself.” He absently nudged his finger under the strap of my dress.

*Pull it down*, the thought flashed through my mind like a betrayal to my moral compass. The image of my breasts exposed to the night flashed through my mental slide show, and a heat settled low in my core at the mere suggestion of it. I leaned back into the security of the dark man, unexplainably comfortable in his grasp. My skirt inched up only slightly under my movements, and that treacherous imagination of mine couldn’t help but think about what it might feel like if he touched me right now. If he lifted my skirt higher, and slipped his fingers between my legs. If he nudged aside my panties, and entered me with his fingers, while the night watched me unravel.

How fast would I come for him? How filthy would he think me? Would this confused yet charming stranger still hold

me as a beacon of light if he knew what thoughts he'd forced to the surface of my mind?

I was so fucked up. This was Rowan's fault. I couldn't get off without knowing I was doing something wrong, and I cursed every bone in my body that let my heart crave such lust and deviance. I was supposed to be a good girl. Not some whore who valued my pleasure before my faithfulness and obligations to my boyfriend. I wasn't that kind of girl. I didn't need nice dates, special invites, intimate dances, or foreplay. I didn't need orgasms or excitement. I had stability with a humble, normal man who was good enough.

I crossed my legs and clenched, trying to stave off the friction and exposure this dark stranger had me craving, then I glanced up at the moon that had drifted much too high in the sky. Was it nearly midnight already?

I leveraged him for balance to climb off the rail and back onto stable ground. "I have to go." My protest was barely more than a whisper, both in volume and in my heart.

My host frowned. "Have I done something to offend you?"

I shook my head. "I wish you had." I said through a half-hearted chuckle. "It's not you. It's me."

“Because you have a boyfriend.”

I nodded. “Yes. But thank you for the dance and the beautiful view. It was everything I needed tonight.” I took a step away from him, thankful for the distance that pulled me so slightly out of his spell.

“Can I at least get your name before you leave me?”

I opened my mouth, then I closed it and shook my head. “I’m sorry.”

He smiled, and he laughed. “Never apologize for being true and honest, Love. Not enough people know how to be either one.” I let him hold me in his violet gaze for just a moment longer. “If I can’t have your name, can I at least know your face?”

I shook my head again, harder this time. “If you knew who I was, you wouldn’t want me.” I retreated until I was against the door. I wasn’t ready to give up this little fantasy, and that would be all it might take to ruin it. “I’m sure the next time we cross paths, should I ever be so lucky, you won’t even recognize me.”

The man drew in a slow breath and huffed it out through his nose. “My soul has already written yours into my

memory. I'll know it's you even if you were to cloak yourself in a veil." He shifted his weight on his feet then ran a hand through his hair. "But I'll respect your wishes. I hope you'll give me another chance to win your favor next week."

I smiled through the regrets already filling me, then I turned on my heel and returned to the ballroom. The clock that was painted amidst the elegant murals on the ceiling noted eleven fifty, and I knew I needed to get moving. I didn't know what exactly would happen at midnight, but if whatever spell Nero had cast upon me was powerful enough to attract such a charming stranger, I couldn't risk the fallout of my lies being revealed.

Even if I was so bold, I still had to make sure I beat Lydia and Rowan home, or I might never get the chance to leave home again.

With haste, I made my way down the stairs and pushed myself through the crowd of dancers who were still spinning and spinning and spinning. On the other side, I glanced back as I walked towards the exit. My eyes locked on Lydia and her partner, still swaying to the music, their bodies now so close together they were almost one. The man leaned in and kissed her, and something about the intimacy of it felt off. Again the



intrusive thought that that was Carter flashed through me.

Projection. My own guilt. That was why.

It wasn't him. *It wasn't.*

My knees buckled, and I tripped over my own two feet.

I fell to the ground, and no one so much as glanced my way.

No one but a singular guard by the door.

“Are you alright, my lady?” He said through his armored helm as he offered me a hand. One of my shoes had bounced several feet away, but I didn't have time to retrieve it. I took his offer to get to my feet, removed my other shoe, handed it to him, then bolted from the ballroom. I had two minutes to midnight, and I couldn't waste any more time. I made my way down the steps with frantic, panicked haste. There was no sign of the carriage that had brought me there, but I could run. I'd spent plenty of years running barefoot on rough cobblestone, and tonight would be no different.

As I ran as fast as my legs would take, my crystal dress began to transform. Long, beautiful lines of diamond grew dull, and clean, shining fabric reverted to the old, drab, dirty leggings and frayed shirt I'd worn in the garden. In a matter of moments, I was back to being my ordinary self, and I was glad

I'd escaped in time. At least this way, I hadn't ruined the night for everyone else.

I continued running until I was alone in my room in an empty house, and I was breathing heavy but sound.

Knowing I was finally safe, a little thrill rushed through me, and I smiled to myself. Even if I couldn't keep the dress, and I hadn't found the man I was looking for, I'd still gone to the masquerade, and no one would ever be the wiser.



## Chapter 8



*Run, run, run, Belladonna, all the way home to your beloved executioners.* Perched atop the castle spire, I yawned as the little dove flitted out of sight. I could have helped her home with a new carriage, but I wanted to see how dedicated she was first. Though she offered me her soul, I still had standards. I didn't accept just anyone, and she'd been surrounded by guardian angels for so long, I didn't have any read on her spirit just yet. It would take much more observation to understand how, exactly, she'd been marked by an archangel. Or more significantly, why it had been so easy to poach her. The last time I chased down a light fae's mark, that bubbly ball of joy had been so insufferable, I banished her back to the mortal realm.

But this one? This one felt right.

Too right.

Which was also why she interested me beyond a simple grudge against the Light Fae. Whoever her mother had been before she died, her soul had protected Elise from me for over a decade, and I might have never gotten this chance to peer into it if my sweet Belladonna hadn't chosen me over her mother's spirit today.

I flapped my black wings, lifting my delicate body from the spire. The cool night air felt lovely as it flowed through my feathers. What a delightful game this would be.

I steered my flight path toward the castle balcony, and I perched on the railing where the crown prince was slouched down on a bench, looking rather aggravated and distraught. Not quite the reaction I'd expected when I'd given him such a pretty package, but the Prince was often a confusing mess of a man. With a quick flutter, I was on the seat beside him. He lifted his gaze as I shifted back into a humanoid form.

"Are you crying?" I asked blandly with a raise of my eyebrows. "Big, scary Zakari Lazuli, sobbing like a boy. How tragic."

"What do you want, Nero?" The prince barked his greeting. *Rude.*

“What do *I* want?” I scoffed at the question. “You know I’m only here to provide for *you*. Have I ever been anything but your loyal servant, my prince?”

“Is it still called loyalty if you’re only doing it to get the eternal souls of my entire lineage?” He was so needlessly disagreeable. I barely even wanted his soul with how rough it was. He could go spend eternity in limbo with that attitude.

“The means justify the ends, in this case.” I waved away his pessimism. “But I have to say, you’re much more alone and wearing much more clothing than I anticipated on the night of the Masquerade. Were none of the women to your liking? What about the men? At the low, low cost of just thirty years of your life, I could easily grant an incubation chamber to your groom of choice. The birthing process may be a bit different, but the results would be the same.” I tapped a finger to my chin. “Perhaps your cute little bodyguard would be game. What was his name again—”

Zakari interrupted me by choking on his own saliva. One of many curious defects built into humans. To choke on the same fluids your own mouth produces. Wild design flaws abound.

“No, I’m good on that.” He rubbed his neck, despite the soft redness in his cheeks. “I met her tonight. The girl of my dreams. I don’t know much about her, but I could feel the way our souls were meant to lock together instantly.”

*Oh? A soul connection? Perhaps there’s more to my Belladonna than meets the eye.*

“And yet here you are, keeping your dick warm in your pants instead of her pussy. That’s a strange way to show overwhelming need.” I shrugged and sat back in my seat.

“She’s got a boyfriend, apparently.” He rolled his eyes, and I did too. The ironic chuckles that followed from both of us were perfectly in sync.

“What an extreme and impossible obstacle.” I snorted. “If only, if ONLY, there was some way to make a boyfriend disappear in a series of plastic bags.”

Zakari’s laugh was jovial and hearty. “You really are the devil.”

“I’ve literally never professed to be anyone else.” I placed an arm around his shoulder and gave him a squeeze. “But as such, you know I can’t physically murder anyone, so that’s on you. I *can* provide the bags though.”

“I think I can afford some bags.” Zakari’s frown was completely gone. He always lit up when we talked about killing people. It was delightful. I quite liked that about him. “But no, I think I want to win this one the right way. If she legitimately loves this boyfriend of hers, and if he treats her right, then I want to be better than him. I want her to choose me, not be afraid of me. I’m looking for a queen, not a slave.”

“Hmmm, well that *is* a predicament. What is it that you humans normally do to court women? Send flowers? Chocolate? Sex toys?” I tapped my finger to my lips. “If the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, then the way to a lady’s heart must be through her orgasms, no?”

“The link between the heart and orgasms goes both ways.” The prince shook a hand through his black hair. “But I’ll certainly put it on the list of tactics.”

I drew in a breath, then grinned at my stalwart companion. “Well, if you get frustrated and need a little assistance, you know how to call me.”

Zakari smirked. “What was your number again? Just pick up the phone and sacrifice a goat?”

“Hey now.” I scoffed. “You know full well I would never condone any harm to animals. But you’re fair game.”



Some of your blood on a pentagram with a bagel will suffice.”

“Cream cheese or butter?”

“Not even hell is cruel enough to make a man choose between the two, Zakari.” With a shake of my head, I shifted back into my crow form and fluttered away. As much as I enjoyed the prince’s company, I had other souls to bargain with tonight.

## Chapter 9



*What the hell was she doing there? And where did she get that dress?*

I threw my helmet onto the bed, and I paced in my room. Her glass stiletto, sitting beside my discarded armor and uniform, looked expensive and delicate. And of all the people she could have ended up dancing with, it was the fucking prince? Maybe that was the man I'd smelled on her the other day. Perhaps he'd invited her directly. Only someone with royal wealth could have afforded a dress made of goddamn diamonds. Was this whole event a damn farce?

I gripped my head as if it would stop it from splitting apart, and I slumped down on this too soft bed. The only reason I ever returned to this goddamn house was because of her, but clearly I'd given her too much freedom, and now she

was off fucking royals. The prince wouldn't even be able to make her come.

My blood boiled in my veins, just thinking about the very real likelihood that I'd be losing her. No matter how many times I punished her, it was like she never fucking learned.

I drew my hands down my face in aggravation. *Calm down, Rowan. You like the Prince, and he's been great to work for.*

I stood again, I paced some more, then I stormed from my room and approached her bedroom door. I knocked four times with a hard closed fist. A signal she knew. "Elly." I said shortly. "Open the door."

It was all of a single minute before she was obliging me without argument, opening up while still in her barely-there pajamas. *That's a good girl.*

"What is it, Rowan?" She said, scrunching her nose. She leaned against her doorframe and crossed her arms over her chest to cover nipples that were poking through the thin gown. The smooth, see-through fabric followed the contours of her muscles, while doing nothing to hide the silhouette of delicate and lacey panties underneath. Underwear that I knew

she hadn't owned before tonight, just like those damn shoes.

"It's two in the morning. Are you drunk or something?"

"I was wondering what you did tonight while everyone was at the masquerade."

"Why does it matter? You want to hear how sad and pathetic and lonely my night was?" She rolled her eyes. Always trying to be defiant. Always trying to taunt and seduce me. "If that's all you wanted, I'm going back to bed. We can talk about this later." She started to close her door, and I slammed an open palm into it.

"Elly, sorry." I attempted, more gently now. She stepped back from the doorway, and I took that as an invitation. "There was an incident at the ball, so I wanted to make sure you were safe. That's all." A lie, but not entirely. Her being at the Masquerade when she should have been home was an incident all itself. Her attracting the attention of Zakari Lazuli was a goddamn travesty that certainly wouldn't lend to her safety.

Though in his defense, how could I expect him to resist her? If I had been allowed to dance tonight, I'd have stepped in before he could.

“There was?” She asked with obvious concern. Probably worried about the well-being of whatever cock bought her that dress. “What kind of incident?”

“Someone snuck into the party who wasn’t supposed to be there.” I took another step into her room, and she took one back.

“Were they dangerous? Did they hurt someone?” She kept her eyes on me, just as I’d trained her to do if she didn’t want to get punished. I couldn’t help the way my lips upticked.

“Not yet.” *But I promise, Elly, someone is certainly going to get hurt for this.* “But they’re about to.”

“W-what do you mean?” The backs of her knees hit the bed, and she fell onto the mattress. Immediately she clenched her legs together, while her body tensed in anticipation.

I placed my index finger beneath her chin and delicately lifted her head so her gaze remained in line with mine. “Let’s try this one more time. Where were you tonight, Elly?”

“I-I was...” She was trembling, yet she stopped backing away. And when I removed my finger from her chin,

she maintained the same position I'd put her in, always obeying with no resistance.

“Where?” I nudged the straps from her nightgown down her shoulders, and the loose material dropped down to her wrists, pooling the dress at her waist. Her breathing sped up, obvious as I watched the rise and fall of her exposed breasts, so full and pink in front of me. “Were you off getting fucked by some peasant again?” I brushed the back of my knuckles over each of her nipples, watching as they perked under the ridges of my rough hands.

“No...” She remained still, her eyes staying on me as I placed my knee by her hip. The mattress dipped under my weight as I sank into it, and her body fell so slightly towards me.

“Keep talking.” I continued running my knuckles up her chest, until I was brushing the delicate center of her neck. I opened my palm and placed it softly around her windpipe. “Did you finish on his dick?”

“Rowan.” Her voice was a pleading whisper, yet when I indicated for her to lay down by pressing the lightest pressure on her neck, she obliged, slow and controlled. Her breasts flattened on her chest beneath me, and she placed her arms

neatly beside her head, positioned to be pinned in place as soon as I so desired to trap her. My little doll, always so compliant for me.

I shook my head, while a smirk stretched across my lips. “How silly of me.” I clenched down on her neck. “You’ve never been able to finish on anyone else’s dick, now have you, Elly?”

She shook her head. Her eyes started to water as she returned those pretty blue irises to me. I couldn’t tell if those words horrified her or finally helped get through her fucking head that she was mine. I’d settle for both.

“So then.” I slid my strangling hand up her neck, forcing her head back as I angled myself on top of her. “Here’s what’s going to happen.” I nudged her thighs apart, hiking up her nightgown until those expensive panties were exposed. “You’re going to tell me who bought you that shiny little dress you were wearing at the masquerade tonight,” I used my free hand to push that very wet material to the side, then I sunk in my index finger until I hit the knuckle. I hooked my finger along the front of her inner walls, and I dragged the tip over that spot that I knew made her shiver. “And I’m going to fuck

you until your pussy forgets every fucking cock you ever let trespass in what's mine.”

I withdrew my finger from her and slipped it between my lips. I let her watch as I licked her flavor off my skin.

“Okay, okay, okay, wait.” She broke immediately as always. “I have a boyfriend. I went to see him.” She kept eye contact the whole time, knowing I'd see right through anything else. “It was him. I was trying to find him there, but never did. I don't know who I was dancing with but it was my boyfriend who gave me the dress.”

“Name?”

“J-James.” She choked out, and I tightened and released my hold on her neck as a quiet threat. “James Smith. From the Crepe Shop. You were right.” She whimpered.

I loved and hated that sound. I loved listening to those weak little cries, but I hated the pitch of her lying to me. James Smith didn't run the Crepe Shop. I already paid that little eatery a visit. So was she covering for her relationship with the prince, or was there some other man she'd been looking for?

No matter. That told me everything I needed to know. Whoever it was, not only did she, in fact, find a boyfriend, but



she thought he was someone worth protecting.

“I see,” I said, low and measured.

“I told you what you asked. Now let me go.”

And to that, I fucking laughed. “You did. That was step one.” With a hard jerk, I tore those delicate little panties off of her. The lace was thin and weak, as if it had been made to be forcefully removed. “But fucking you was an *and* not an *or*, Elly”

Her eyes widened with that delightful terror she always showed only to me. “Y-you can’t. I... I don’t want your mom to hear.”

“I’m pretty sure mother is off screaming someone else’s name. The blond she was dancing with didn’t look like he’d be letting her go anywhere with her clothes on.” I rolled my eyes at the abhorrent reminder, as she’d stumbled off with the first foolish man who she’d attached herself to. Mother was never shy about her promiscuity or her partners, and I’d already been thoroughly traumatized by her bragging. “Don’t worry. Tonight you can be as loud as you want.”

Her eyes widened at that remark, but not with the usual fear or surprise. It was something else, and I was completely

taken aback by the vulnerability of it. That look swimming in the tears in her eyes wasn't disgust or anger. It was... heartbreak?

*No.*

*No fucking way.*

She spread her legs near imperceptibly. A defeated gesture. One that said she didn't care if I tore through her now. Because she was hurt and broken. Because she *did* find her boyfriend at the ball, and that boyfriend wasn't Prince Zakari. He was the man shoving his tongue down her stepmother's throat.

*I'll kill him. I will fucking rip his balls off, throw them in a blender, and serve him his nonexistent manhood in a goddamn smoothie.*

My once painfully hard cock was now flaccid at the thought that some piece of shit, who couldn't even satisfy her, had enough of a hold on her emotions to make her submit to me out of sadness instead of resentment and fear. I didn't want that kind of pity. I fucked her because she was a lioness, not a needy kitten.

I shoved off of her, leaving her with a wet but unsatisfied mess on her blanket, then with nothing but irritation and anger, I reached over to her night stand, yanked open the drawer, and pulled out the vibrator I'd gotten for her after her last school dance, the first time I had to teach her how a man was *supposed* to make her feel during sex. She was still lying there, legs spread for me and lips parted with surprise, when I dropped the fuck toy on her stomach.

“Forget it.” I snapped, having lost all interest in tormenting her now. “You can fuck yourself tonight.”

“Rowan—” I slammed the door before she could say anything further. If she hated me as much as she claimed to, then I wasn't going to continue doing the work of keeping her fucked and satiated so her garbage boyfriend could enjoy her like she was a selfless sex doll without any needs of her own. She never put her desires first in relationships because why would she need to? She could come home to me and get the endorphins her body craved, then go out to him to get the emotional manipulation and false compliments that she thought would magically boost her self-esteem.

She thought she knew what punishment was. She was about to learn she didn't know shit.

## Chapter 10



I laid in my bed, staring at the ceiling, with a mix of confusion, disappointment, sexual frustration, and utter heartbreak swirling in my gut. In some fucked up way, I was now more upset that Rowan left me high and dry than I was over the way he'd cornered me in the first place. The fact that I wanted him to make me feel so good that I might forget how horrible I felt inside was testament to how broken I really was. However much I hated him, I would be lying if I said he didn't know how to play my body like an expert pianist.

And now, instead of screaming my stepbrother's name in agony, I was left to picture my *stepmother* riding Carter, which was so, so much worse.

This was all assumption anyway. For all I knew, Lydia had started dancing with someone else after I left. Or the guy

she was dancing with had never been him in the first place.

That had to be the case. It had to be.

I rolled over on my bed, letting that vibrator fall to the comforter, and I scrunched into fetal position. It was a lie. Rowan was always trying to hurt me. He must have figured out I'd been dating Carter and made that up to destroy any semblance of happiness I might have found. That seemed in character for him, anyway. He destroyed all of my relationships, as if he got some sick satisfaction from assuring my body was ruined for anyone but him.

I wasn't going to fall for it. My own eyes had surely deceived me. Where Rowan was cruel, vicious, and hateful, Carter was good and kind and loving. I knew he was. I kept repeating those words as if I might start to believe them that way.

“Why are you crying, Belladonna? This was your night. You got everything you dreamed of, no?” My bed dipped under the weight of the masked intruder so suddenly, I found myself scrambling to cover my still very exposed body. I yanked my gown down and closed my legs, knowing the thin, see-through material would hide nothing on its own, and I covered my breasts with my arm, considering it would take

far too long to try and thread my arms back through the spaghetti straps of my nighty.

“How did you get in here?” I squeaked through a quiver, while backing up towards my headboard.

“I was able to magically manifest a dress and a carriage for you, and yet you’re flabbergasted that I can enter a room with an open window?” He raised his brow behind his mask, and I might have felt rather silly if I didn’t feel so exposed. “Enough of this sobbing. It’s my job to assure you get all you desire in this life time, so please explain what went wrong.”

“Nothing went wrong.” I inched back enough to get a hold of my covers and pull them over me. “The Masquerade was fun. The dress was incredible. I even danced with a lovely man. I laughed and felt alive for the first time in ages.”

“And?” Nero waved a hand, as if to usher me more directly towards the point.

“And it meant nothing, because it was with the wrong person. My boyfriend was there somewhere, and I wanted so badly to see him, but he was already dancing with someone else.” I was rambling, but that was at least better that

uncontrolled sobbing. “I danced with a stranger, while my boyfriend might be fucking my stepmother.”

Nero started choking on nothing, while the galaxies of his eyes were swirling in disbelief. He blinked rapidly then shook his head. “I suppose we all have some defects.” He muttered.

Calling Carter a defect was a little harsh, but then, if he would stick his dick in Lydia, it was perhaps warranted. Though I didn’t have proof that it had happened. I was jumping to conclusions that I could verify easily tomorrow.

The masked man sighed and adjusted the half frowning and half smiling shield over his face. “I see. And how would you like to get back at him for it?”

“Chlamydia?”

Nero snorted. “I think your stepmother already has that covered. You won’t need me for that.”

I heard myself laugh, and it was an honest, easy sound that happened too rarely. “I’ll make sure he wears a condom next time I see him just in case.”

Nero looked over his shoulder. The way his eyes narrowed reflected someone serious and unamused. Even

more so as he removed the mask completely, revealing that dark, attractively trim facial hair, and the true depth of his eyes.

“Elise.” He said my name with a hiss of disappointment, and the richness of his voice made me shiver. “While we’re getting to know each other, why don’t you tell me a bit about why you would even consider having sex with this man again if he’d truly saw fit to enter your stepmother.”

“Uh, I—” I wanted to say *‘that was a joke,’* but... it wasn’t. I had every intention of trying to pretend it never happened if he still wanted me in the morning. “He’s been good to me. And he’s my chance at freedom.”

“Freedom from what?” This peculiar, magical stranger asked so many questions that nearly made me think he cared.

“From... this.” I motioned to encompass the house, the misery that lingered here, my role as a maid, and the death it constantly reminded me of.

“You have free will. You can leave this house at any time and simply never come back, can you not?” His questions were obtuse, yet probing, yet reflected the reality I pretended wasn’t there.



“My mom picked this house herself. She built the gardens and painted my room. My father paid for it. He wasn’t the best, but at least he kept us comfortable. It’s all that’s left of my parents. I’m worried if I leave, they’ll destroy every last trace of them.”

“Yet you hope to marry? Won’t you be abandoning it then?”

“I get my inheritance when I marry, including this house.” I answered with the truth I hated. The fact that I was also waiting for some portion of my father’s money was the confirmation that I was as despicable as the rest of them. “I can save this house, get my revenge, and escape their rule in the same swift motion. All I have to do is find someone who values me enough to call me their wife.” Despite the resolve in my voice, I felt pathetic as I said it.

But Nero grinned a wicked grin. Then he climbed fully onto the bed. He approached me on his hands and knees until our faces were but inches apart. “Let me help you with that, Belladonna. I owe you that much.”

My heart thumped hard in my chest as he hovered over me, with only the blanket between him and my naked body.

“How?”

“How, indeed.” He placed his hand on the blanket where my heart would be. I released the material, and he took the invitation to tug it down. He replaced a fire hot palm on my bare chest, and he kneaded my breast, creating a scorching friction on my nipple.

His lips connected softly with mine, then he took complete control over my mouth, using pressure and subtle shifts in direction to press me back into the bed. Once he had me fully beneath him, he tugged the blanket down, exposing the rest of me. Rowan had left me so wanting, I was painfully ready for this man to take his place.

Another horrible, despicable thought.

That probing palm made its way down to my naval, where he removed my nightgown with a snap of his fingers, then he rotated that hand, pressing in steady pressure, as he cupped me between my legs. He used his middle finger to glide over my clit, then he hooked it into me.

“You’re just going to let me fuck you, Elise?” He whispered fire against my lips. He laughed, shaking me underneath him. “Have a little agency, my dear.” A second digit pressed into me, and I gasped, bowing my back against the bed, decreasing the distance between our bodies. He slid

his fingers through me, slow and careful, as if looking for the exact spot that I needed most. He watched my expression for the silent affirmations of when he'd found it. "From here on out, no man will ever be able to enter you unless you truly want him to." He breathed those words, dancing pure heat on my neck, then he withdrew his fingers and smeared my fluids up to my naval. A phantom light encompassed my pelvis, drawing what looked like a chastity belt before it vanished. "Only a man who values you will be able to unlock this cage. If he doesn't truly love and desire you, then you'll be safe from his crimes."

His hand returned to my breast. He reconnected our lips, and that warmth spread through me, just as it had in the garden. I let him rake his tongue over mine, and when he bit into my lip to draw blood, I nipped back to stop him from leaving so soon. I could feel his lips pull into a smile against me, but when I gave in to his touch, that was when he disappeared.

Once again I was alone.

And once again, I was terribly, terribly frustrated.

"Only a man who values me, huh?" I said the absurd words aloud, then shook my head.

With a sigh, I located that vibrator and thanked the stars—or I thanked the devil I sold my soul to, rather—that it still had some charge left. This stupid, embarrassing toy that Rowan bought just to torture me was now some fucked up lifeline on a night like this. After the stranger, the devil, and my stepbrother all teetered me over the edge, I was ready for some relief.

*“What’s wrong, Elly?”*

The memory flashed through my mind the moment the toy came to life, and I tried to push it out. But the night he gave this to me started to play through my head with the vivid clarity of watching it on a screen.

*“You’re bleeding. No, it isn’t always supposed to be painful. You shouldn’t waste your time with any man who hurts you.”*

Why was I thinking about that right now?

*“You should know what an orgasm feels like. If he can’t make you feel at least as good as you make him feel, what good is he?”*

My heart was pounding from the recollection, while my mind had already turned on the vibrator.

*“Here, just lay down. I’ll show you how to use it.”*

It was wild how much I used to trust my stepbrother.  
Wild and so fucking wrong.

*“Do you like that, Elly?”*

My cheeks were on fire, I was a pool between my legs again, and I needed to ease the tension.

*“You sound so pretty when you cry out like that. You know you’re beautiful, don’t you? You deserve the world, Elly.”*

The pulse of the vibrator rubbed me just right, and the pressure was perfection. It was far nicer than the lies and manipulation that Rowan otherwise shoved in my face.

Maybe I should have asked Nero to stay. To use some of that magic to ease the desire these men all built between my legs.

Ridiculous. Perhaps this was simply a symptom of my slipping sanity. That was the only explanation as to why I was imagining my stepbrother pinning me down while I fucked myself with his gift, that I was imagining the handsome stranger’s hands and the heat of his breath on my neck, and

that I was vividly recalling the feel of Nero's fingers inside me as each pulse took me closer to ecstasy.

But there was only one man I wanted, and yet I couldn't seem to conjure his face while my body was buzzing on this feeling. It was pathetic and disgusting that I found myself fantasizing about three totally unreasonable monsters tonight. I should be in Carter's bed instead.

## Chapter 11



The morning following the first night of the ball, Mason examined the glass stiletto that my future wife had left behind. He twirled the beautiful footwear with a curiosity. “Did you see her go? She left in such a hurry, I was wondering if she’d been possessed by a ghost.” He asked with nonchalance and disinterest.

“More like a guilty conscience.” I scoffed. “Did she say anything when she left? Did you get a look at her face, by chance?”

Mason paused for several moments before he shrugged unsatisfactorily. “No sir. I only saw her very briefly before she passed through the door.”

“She left only one shoe inside the ballroom though. You didn’t find the other.”

“No, just the one.” He confirmed.

“That’s not much to go on.” I paced back and forth in the war room. “What if I sent guards to ransack every home in Lazuli until they found the shoe’s mated pair, and thus found *my* mated pair.”

“That assumes she didn’t discard it somewhere on the way. I can’t imagine running away with the urgency she exhibited with a single stiletto on her heel. It would be rather awkward to move that way.” He kicked up his feet but didn’t offer anything helpful. “Who knows if she gave it away or threw it into a bush to be found by a passerby. If you searched and found the shoe, you could still end up with the wrong person.”

“Okay, that’s fair.” I harrumphed. Not that I would ever confuse her for anyone else, mask or not, but I had very little to go on other than a visceral connection, and that she was as blonde and average in height as half the kingdom. “Well... I could go door to door and force every woman in every house to try on this shoe until we found the one who best fit it. Maybe throw a festival, and call it a contest of sorts. That would surely eliminate any room for error.”



Mason raised a brow. “Yes, because of the thousands of women in Lazuli, I’m sure only one very specific woman wears an approximate size seven-and-a-half.”

My expression flattened. “Well what would you propose then? How am I going to find her if she left me with no name, no address, not even a view of her face? I have nothing to go on but the fact that she admitted to living in town.”

“Maybe you *shouldn't* try to find her.” So casually he suggested giving up on the most important mission I’d ever committed to. “You said a thousand times you didn’t want a relationship. Leave her be. You claimed she was already hung up on someone. You can’t force her to pick you.”

“Convince. Not force.” I snapped. “Her boyfriend was somewhere on that dance floor, and he never so much as sought her out. I will *not* lose this woman to a man-child who would put her second. If she gave me one full day to show her what life could be like with me, she’d choose me in an instant.”

Mason frowned. “If she wasn’t convinced after you swept her off her feet, you might be underestimating her desire to lie with lesser men. Some women have a type you know.

You showed up with a yacht, and she bailed for a sinking garbage barge.”

So dramatic. “Or it means that she’s not drawn to wealth or superficial things. Because she’s amazing and brilliant and you wouldn’t understand.”

“Yes. I don’t understand how you’ve become so smitten after five minutes of brief conversation and light twirling. How wild and ignorant of me.”

“You almost sound bitter, Buttercup.” I stopped pacing to stare down my confidante. Usually I found his cynicism charming, but today I was a changed man. “Did you spot the girl you wanted with another man last night or something?”

He laughed, nervous and awkward and very telling. “It’s difficult to explain, my lord. But I’ll simply say it wasn’t an amazing night for me either.”

Now *I* was frowning. I sat down in a chair across from Mason and slumped down on the blue velvet. “So we both have no luck in love. Do you think they would still give me the crown if we murdered the men who dared dance with our women? A royal wedding is a royal wedding, right?”

“I’m certain the Counsel wouldn’t *love* that idea.” He sighed, and I sighed. “All you can do is hope she shows up again this weekend and next weekend, so you can ‘convince’ her, I suppose.”

“You’re no help at all.” I stood from the table. “I need more than an hour or two of a masked dance to show her everything my heart can offer. I can’t let her spend a whole week in his arms and his—” I choked on the word, refusing to vocalize the idea that she was in some asshole’s bed. “I can’t let her get further indoctrinated into the manipulative lies of someone unworthy. I need to find her and plant the seeds of affection in between each dance.”

“What a plan. So you’re going to magically figure out who she is and do what exactly? Show up at her doorstep and beg? Very manly and impressive of you, Zak.” Mason snorted, and I wondered why we were friends. Perhaps I’d given my bodyguard entirely too much comfort in our relationship.

I reached across the table and ruffled his golden hair. “Oh my dear, sweet Buttercup. You know I’m far more convincing than that.”



A leisurely ride through town had been subtle enough, though there were few people out and about the morning after such a large party. I stopped by a few homes that seemed quaint and appealing and fitted to the aesthetic of my darling dance partner, but there was no trace of her in any of them. I even stopped into a show at the theatre, in case those thick thighs were from a life as an acrobat, but while there were many strong and beautiful women, none of them were her.

It was with frustration that I returned to the castle to stew in my failure. I sent Mason home for the day, not wanting his constant presence at the moment, and I slammed the door on my room, keeping out the rest of my guards for the afternoon. I had to find her. To wait and hope for this little dove to land in my castle again, on nothing but a passing wish, was not acceptable. I was a man of action, not a man of letting destiny run its course. That's what it meant to be a king.

I paced in front of my bed with aggravation, then I stormed over to my armoire where that lone shoe rested. Glaring, elegant, beautiful, and one of a kind. It was my

queen, embodied in an accessory. I grabbed the art piece of glass and crystal, and I examined it as if it might hold some kind of clue. Like a map to her home might appear if I stared at it long enough.

I danced my fingertips around the rim. The one she'd slipped through to wear this lovely piece. The same rigid glass that held the shoes to her perfect feet. I admired the smooth, crystalline surface, feeling along its side with my thumb until I reached the pointed toe. This high heel was a window. Where her mask hid everything about her, her glass stilettos offered an unfettered view to her path and intention. It was the one thing open and free about her, while the rest of her had been closed off and chained.

I wouldn't stand for it. My love shouldn't have to lock away her identity, hiding behind a costume, while her heart's imprisoned by another man. My queen was a tragedy, and she deserved a happy ending.

Light touch of my thumb traced the sloping sole up to the base of the stiletto. A bold and dangerous design that offered no support, yet required complete commitment. For a woman to dance in such a thing—moreover a narrow stilt made of glass that could break on the first misstep—she was

bold, daring, and balanced. Powerful qualities she didn't understand she had.

I closed my eyes and bit my lip, recalling those insecure steps that slowly gained in confidence the longer she let me lead. I could be her guide, her teacher, and her protector. She'd trusted me to lead her across the dance floor without knowing a single step of the waltz. She'd immediately adapted, surfing along our matched wavelengths, both as my marionette and my puppet master. With this boyfriend, she was uneasy and saw no worth in herself. With me, she was powerful and strong.

I leaned my forehead against the armoire for support, while my idle hand undid my belt. I stroked that smooth, glass surface with my left thumb and forefinger, enjoying that unblemished texture, while my right thumb rubbed a circle around the head of my equally smooth cock. I was already painfully erect just thinking about her, and I sunk into the fantasy, as if I could channel some vague part of her by holding her shoe. I wrapped my fist fully around my length, spreading pre-cum along it as my only lubricant. I wouldn't spoil that sweet satisfaction of dipping into her pussy for the

first time with unnatural slickness. Without her, I deserved it a little rough, a little harsh, painful, and dry.

I danced that smooth glass along my cock, feeling the way the surface caught and tugged at my sensitive skin as I rubbed it up and down. All I could picture was her standing over me, stilettos on her feet, and teasing me. A dominatrix in white. She'd be in her dress, but she wouldn't be wearing panties, offering me a view of heaven that was so far, far away. That she wouldn't give me until I'd earned it.

I gasped aloud as I started pumping my cock more forcefully. The tight squeeze around me would be her perfect little cunt, wet and warm and clenching under orgasm. She'd be riding my cock, and she'd pick her favorite spot inside herself to grind over my head. Over and over, that pretty voice would break into sharp gasps and heady moans. She'd writhe on me, then I'd grab her, flip her beneath me, and pound into her until the pleasure hit her so hard she cried.

The image in my head had me releasing into the glass shoe in my hand, and I had to support myself against the armoire to stop myself from falling to my knees.

When I caught my breath, I stared down at the clear slipper with semen dripping down its smooth outer edge.

This was a problem. I needed to find her immediately.



## Chapter 12



Like nothing had ever happened, I was up brighter and earlier than my tired mind, heart, and body wanted to be, and I got straight into dusting and sweeping. It was somewhere around seven when Lydia's keys jangled in the front door.

"Welcome home." I said to a tone of fake niceties. Mechanically, I rushed to her side to retrieve the large gown she was carrying. She wore a man's button up that she'd cinched at the waist with a belt in order to make it look more like a dress. There was no such thing as a walk of shame for my stepmother. Every man was a conquest. It was an arrogant overconfidence that I'd admit I envied.

I carried away the cumbersome princess gown, trying not to look any more closely at her outfit in the process.

*Was that one of Carter's shirts?* I didn't want to think about it. There was no reason to assume a generic light blue

dress shirt was undoubtedly my boyfriend's. I'd let paranoia and insecurity get in my head, and I needed to stop doing that.

Once everything was tidy, I changed out of my work clothes and into a sundress for my trip to the store. Rowan was at work, Lydia was recovering from a hang over, and I had a boyfriend to confront. So I took a quick shower, did up my hair, and patted on some light makeup. Lydia preferred I look presentable whenever I went out, since my existence, however shameful, still reflected on her, so she didn't complain that I at least allowed myself to appear clean and happy in public.

I grabbed the usual groceries, opting out of serving corn with tonight's dinner, then I stopped into the bakery beside the crepe shop. Though I couldn't help but notice it said "John Seville's crepes" beneath the sign. *Fuck. I wasn't even close. Hopefully, Rowan never checks that.*

On the other side of the counter, Carter had just finished closing up shop for lunch hour, before he switched to their afternoon menu.

"Elise! I was hoping to see you today." He beamed.

*See, he loves me. Stop self-sabotaging.* I thought as I plastered a smile on my face.

He continued, “I’m so sorry I missed you at the Masquerade last night. I had so much to do, I just couldn’t get away.”

“I can only imagine.” Relief washed over me. So he wasn’t even there. Carter hadn’t done anything wrong. I was so stupid to have even thought him capable of such a thing.

“Did you make it out? I hope you weren’t too lonely without me there.”

“I did.” I admitted. “I danced with some strangers, but it never felt right. I kept hoping I’d find you.”

“I’m so sorry. I’ll make it up to you, I promise.” *There it is.* Carter was such a romantic. My heart melted right back into goo, and I resented every anxious thought that had ever pegged him as less than faithful. How could I be so crazy? “It was cruel of me not to tell you I wouldn’t be making it. This weekend, I’ll clear my calendar and pick you up directly for the second day of the Masquerade.”

“I would love that.” My smile filled my eyes. I was so worried for nothing, while I was the one who had betrayed him more than he’d ever betrayed me. I danced with someone else, and I fantasized about multiple someone elses. Carter was innocent and I was the problem.

Of course he was. How could I ever think for even a second that he would sleep with my stepmother? Insane. If he had such taste, he'd never have picked me in the first place. I took a deep breath, happy to hear all that stuff had been a figment of my imagination. There were tons of tall blond men in Lazuli Kingdom. Her chlamydia never got anywhere near the scones.

“But while you're here, Elise,” He leaned over the counter and grinned suggestively, “maybe you can help me with some of the frustrations I built up last night while the whole town enjoyed themselves without me.”

“Oh I...” *wasn't really in the mood.* I'd had enough ups and downs the last few days, and while sex with Carter wasn't a terribly daunting or time-consuming commitment, another unsatisfying dick wasn't really on my to-do list this morning. “I can't today.” I said with a smile. “Rain check?”

“You might change your mind if you see what I have for you in the back.” He kept pushing, and I hoped that wasn't supposed to be some cute metaphor for his penis.

“I really can't stay. I have ice cream in my bag.” I said, hoping he wouldn't hold it against me as long as I turned him down easy. It wasn't a lie anyway. Lydia would kill me if her

ice cream melted, and not even Carter was worth that kind of risk.

“Even for this?” He reached into his pocket, and he revealed a small box. My mouth dropped open. “Our one year anniversary is coming up, so I was thinking that it was about time.”

Speechless. I was speechless.

He opened the box, and a simple ring rested in the center. “Will you marry me, Elise Cenere?”

“Yes!” I was near sobbing as he placed that ring on my finger. “Carter, yes.” Completely beside myself, I stared at that simple ring, and I couldn’t begin to process everything this meant.

Carter loved me, he wanted to marry me, I would get my inheritance, and I would be saved from this terrible life I led. This was a reward I didn’t deserve and I would savor till the end of time. I was so happy. So ridiculously happy. Everything I ever wanted was in my hands right now. If this was part of Nero’s spell, I’d sell my soul a thousand more times.

I kissed him long and hard, and it was with great pain that I bid him farewell. But it didn't matter. I'd be seeing him again soon. Then I'd see him every day, as we pledged the rest of our lives to each other.

I stashed the ring in my wallet so no one would see, then I skipped home, bursting with joy from every seam.

## Chapter 13



Two days passed with no luck at all in finding the ice queen, and I was tearing my hair out. She didn't work at the bakery, the theatre, nor the grocers. She wasn't the farmer's daughter nor the farmer's wife. If she was in the official registry, her photo hadn't been updated since she was a child. She was everyone and no one, and I had been so entranced by her soul that I couldn't pick her blue eyes from a thousand others.

And Mason was worthless. He was likely still licking his wounds over whatever forlorn situation he'd gotten himself into, which I have ALL THE SYMPATHY IN THE WORLD FOR, OF COURSE. But priorities, goddamnit.

I huffed, feeling rather like a spoiled child, which only annoyed me more, then I stood from my bed chamber and stalked to the balcony. Night had already fallen, ticking off

another day on my soon expiring time clock. Every night, the moon inched closer to fullness. Once the entirety of the white sphere was visible in the sky, I would be expected to make my choice, and I couldn't dare risk her not being there on the final night of the Masquerade.

I paced and I paced, when a black bird landed on my railing once more.

“I thought you'd never show up, Nero.” I cocked back my chin, as that was the only possible way to look down on him. He flapped his black wings three times, then he shifted, fully, into his human form. He leaned against the rail with his arms crossed over a white three piece suit, while he wore his usual mask of both comedy and tragedy over his otherwise handsome face.

“Did you miss me?” He cocked his head slightly to the side. It might have looked cute if he wasn't the lord of Hell himself.

“Always.” I approached him, keeping posture so my inch of height on him nearly seemed significant. “I was just thinking—what would you say to a little bargain.”

Nero squinted with a side-eye of measured study.  
“Your father already sold the entirety of the Lazuli line to me,



ironically in exchange for saving your life, so I'm not sure you have anything you can offer me, Prince."

"Yes, so I'm the only one in my family *not* within your grasp, and I will soon be crowned king. If you look at it like that, I have *everything* to offer."

That seemed to catch his interest. "Go on."

"Now, correct me if I'm wrong on any of the details of your deal with the former king."

"I plan to."

I ignored his snide tone and continued, "But when he promised you the entire Lazuli line, I was excluded, was I not?"

"Yes."

"But any of my father's illegitimate bastards belong to you."

"Yes."

"And any future children that may come from me would also have reservations straight to hell."

Nero yawned, while he twirled a hand to ask I speed up. He was always trying to rush the buildup of every story.

For a man who was immortal, he was terribly impatient.

“And?” He nudged with irritation.

“Well, in order for you to cash in on that deal, I have to actually produce heirs, correct?”

“Obviously.” He groaned. “The sheer pleasure you get from hearing yourself talk will serve you well as King, Zakari. Now what is it that you’re getting at?”

“I want my queen, and I would sell my soul to you right now for her identity.”

“My, you *are* desperate.” Nero pushed off the railing and paced closer to me. He had a catlike walk, despite spending most of his time in the shape of a crow, and the mask that always hid his face made him impossible to read. “What if I told you I already know who she is?”

I swallowed as he stepped in close. He radiated suffocating heat, though the sweat on my brow had little to do with his temperature. “Then this deal should be effortless for you. I can see no way that you could lose.”

Nero removed his mask, and those black and orange flecked eyes drilled into me with force. “Have you ever

considered that I don't want your filthy, depraved soul?" He chuckled, but those eyes kept me frozen in place.

"No." I spoke because he allowed me to.

Nero slipped a finger beneath my tie, and he pulled it loose. He unthreaded the material from my collar, then he stretched it in front of me. "Your arrogance is adorable." He rethreaded the tie through his own collar, then he tied it in a perfect full Windsor. "But your soul really is worthless to me, Zakari. I do like this tie though."

"There's not an angel in this dimension who would take a vicious man like you. I already own your afterlife." Nero unbuttoned my collar then started making his way down my shirt. He continued until he exposed the skin that formed a barrier between his open palm and my heart. "But...I'll give her to you, only because I quite like you." He said, while that fire penetrated my chest. "And you will accept her, whatever she wishes, even if that means she never wants you in return."

"I'm not worried."

"Heh." He shook his head. "You should be." With that, his human-like hand turned into a lion's claw, and he penetrated my chest until I was bleeding on those sharp black nails. I felt the squeeze of magic on my heart, before he jerked

back his hand, and licked my blood clean from himself. He savored every drop, then touched those coated lips to mine.

It was a soft and barely there kiss, tasting of my metallic essence. The kind of bloody promise that sealed our bargain. “She already has a man who’s competing for her heart, and it’s not who you might think.”

“What?” He silenced me by deepening the press of his lips and spearing me with his tongue. I never denied the devil—not the one in my soul or the one in my mouth.

“Good luck, Prince.” Then he vanished, and I was alone again.

A shiver climbed down my spine, while the name Elise Cenere formed in my mind. A beautiful name for a beautiful girl, yet one I didn’t recall from the registry. How had such a perfect woman slipped through the cracks of my own kingdom’s records?

No matter. She wouldn’t be elusive for long.

## Chapter 14



When I got home from guard duty in the castle, I went straight to the den, where mother was reading a book. Elise was likely out in the garden, and I didn't want to see her just yet. I'd already decided I was going to fight any desire I had to get her off until she was begging me to. I'd made it far too easy on her the last few years.

"Mother, how did you enjoy the first night of the Masquerade?" I asked nonchalantly, while I removed my helmet and placed it over the fireplace.

"I didn't get a chance to dance with the prince, but I truly had a wonderful time." She said before placing her book face down on her lap. "Did you get a chance to dance with anyone, Rowan? I saw some girls in some very nice, very expensive dresses you should consider waltzing with this weekend."

I internally scoffed while maintaining a pleasant outer expression. None of those women were anywhere near as beautiful as Elly, so what would be the point?

“Guard duty rarely gives me time to socialize.” I shook my head, hoping to dismiss that line of questioning as quickly as possible. I had very specific motivation for this conversation, and I didn’t need to waste time explaining why I didn’t want to dance with some random noblewoman who wasn’t my stepsister. “But I hope you found a good partner. I hate seeing you alone.” The role of concerned son was one I knew how to play well. It was my fall back whenever she irritated me.

“Perhaps.” She hummed with a smile. “I’ll just say that bakers give wonderful massages.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” I said dismissively, before I bid her goodnight. I headed to my room to ponder on this new bit of information.

The baker? Is that the man Elly had been allowing inside of her? Under masks, she could have mistaken my mother’s partner and her boyfriend. But then, when I caught a glimpse of her eyes that night, even with her face painted and dressed like a goddess, it took me less than a fraction of a

second to recognize her. I'd never mistake someone I cared about.

Though, that wasn't beyond the realm of possibility. The bakery was right next to the Crepe Shop, so it would check out that she'd latch onto that for a last minute lie. The baker is blond, and that was exactly the description that triggered her last night. But for her reaction to have been so strong, how long had they been seeing each other? How long had I missed the signs that she was off picking terrible men again?

Protecting her was more of a full time job than protecting the prince.

Aggravated, I returned to my room to sort out a plan. I'd have to get away from work long enough to verify this data was accurate before I could act on it. But once I confirmed his role, he'd be sorry he ever dared play with my stepsister's heart.





## Chapter 15



Nero never lied to me, and while I knew that fact well, the moment I first stepped into the empty home of Elise Cenere, I nearly found myself second guessing the entire basis of my trust in the devil. She lived in a mansion, so she wasn't from a humble beginning. I'd deduced as much by the subtle training to her movements. I might have pegged her for a fallen noble who lost her fortune but still clung to the remnants of a refined life.

This mansion was far from a lost fortune though. On the contrary, such a family should have been well on my radar if they were still thriving. Who did business here? Who purchased this manor in the first place? It must have been a fortune acquired during my father's time, otherwise I would know the surname, surely. So was this all that was left of their family legacy? A dwindling resource.

Though that wasn't why I doubted my demonic advisor. It was more about the aesthetic of it all. Neither the décor nor the flourishes implied my princess lived here. It was drab. Bland. Not the home of a woman who dressed in crystal and enchanted a Lazuli prince. It all just felt so sterile and ordinary. The place was clean—flawlessly so, beyond what my own team could accomplish if I was being frank—but it lacked personality and light.

And at the moment, it also lacked in people. Neither the woman of my dreams nor any of her servants or family were around. Surely she didn't live here alone. She did say she had a boyfriend, though.

Such a juvenile title. I'd be disappointed if they lived together.

I shook my head to dismiss any such nonsense, then I got to work on surveying the premises. I needed to learn as much about her as I could as quickly as possible if I hoped to impress her, but first it was imperative I figure out what made her tick. I knew little more than her name and the shape of her body, and that wouldn't do at all.

I started with the kitchen, digging through cabinets and the refrigerator. No signs of a favorite food or snack unless it

was something like bread or yogurt. I refused to believe my queen could be so boring. Perhaps she was simply excessively disciplined and didn't allow herself treats.

There were bookshelves aplenty, largely full of fiction. Fantasy, Romance, anything that could sweep a person away into a happily ever after kind of world. *Cute*. I noted "*consider a bouquet of books*" in my mental database. Mason liked to read too, I believed. I often caught him with his boots up and face in a book when attempts on my life were particularly slow. I'd ask him for recommendations later.

The garden was lovely and perfectly maintained. Both food and flowers adorned the soil. The edible plants led me to believe she was frugal and practical, while the decorative ones told me she was still willing to sacrifice room in her life for enchantment and beauty. A garden said a lot about a person, in my opinion.

My garden, for example, was full of poisonous herbs, thorned flowers, and the kind of thick ivy that invited spiders. Though I couldn't take credit for the last one. That was Nero's idea. He often ate them when he was masquerading as a crow. Such a weird fucking bird devil thing.

Back in the house, I set my sights on picking out Elise's room. There were a number of guest rooms, but only three different bedrooms were set up in a way that implied they were used on any regular basis.

*Three.*

So who else lived here? The castle records didn't give nearly enough information about my citizens. I would have to change that. Perhaps send out some guards to do a census.

*Right. Adding that to the mental notes as well.*

I poked into the first room, which was dark and stifling. Heavy red comforter, gaudy curtains and décor. Definitely not Elise's room. A lord or lady's space, but not *my* lady's.

The next room was more minimalist. Simple bland colors, no nonsense or decoration. Zero personality of any kind. It barely looked lived in. It reminded me of Mason in its painful lack of artistry or style.

A man's room. Perhaps my love *did* live with this boyfriend. Though the idea that they stayed in separate rooms was odd. Possibly telling. Either she didn't much care for his continued presence despite their shared home, or the room

actually belonged to a brother or a butler or a servant or some such. That would make more sense than making a commitment to some mediocre commoner.

I skimmed the décor for any trace to this man's identity, when I couldn't help but notice the glint of glass on the dresser. My eyes widened.

Her glass stiletto. I walked absentmindedly into the space, and I lifted the specimen to eye level. Had she come home to this boyfriend and left behind her shoe in a night of passion?

I nearly squeezed the delicate footwear to the point of cracking, then I forced myself to calm. I replaced the slipper on the mantle, exactly as I'd found it. I wouldn't give this boyfriend any warnings of my intrusion. He'd meet me soon enough, and it would be on my terms.

The last room was rather small but it had a warmth to it. It was simple, with soft blues and small touches of decoration, comprised mostly of flowers or birds or lace. A room for a lovely, pure, sweet woman who could sweep any suitor off his feet with her smile. No doubt that this was her space. I didn't even need to ponder on it. I could feel her natural energy bouncing off the walls.

I opened her drawers and her closet to get a feel for her general style. All of her clothing was practical and plain. Simple sundresses, leggings, and dusty looking t-shirts. Most of her outfits almost resembled the help more than they resembled a lady of the house.

... I paused on that thought for several moments, then I stepped in rotation to survey the room once more. Small double bed, not big enough to stretch or for a night of naked gymnastics. No jewelry, art, or mementos on display...

Was my queen the *help*?

Admirable that she was employed and working hard, but that absolutely would not do. Once we married, she'd never dirty herself with household chores again. I couldn't promise she wouldn't spend time on her knees anymore, but it would be much more enjoyable than whatever she was polishing down there now.

*Ahem.*

I'd have Mason stake out the house to figure out the lesser known variables here, but at the very least, I felt confident in my current deductions.

Now that I knew her home, it was time to figure out her routine and ever so subtly insert myself into it.

Also to decorate this awful place. This woman deserved some goddamn flowers.

## Chapter 16



On a beautiful Tuesday morning, I finished refreshing the bouquet at my mother's grave before heading back towards home. Though as I moved idly through town, once again starting to bustle with activity for the weekend, I couldn't help but wonder what the second masquerade might have in store for me. Would Nero create another dress for me? If he did, would that stranger recognize me again?

I admonished my thoughts for focusing on all of the wrong things. Carter had just proposed for god's sake, and he said he'd take me with him this weekend. He'd probably pick my dress for me, and I'd be meeting up with him directly, so there was no reason to be wary of not finding him. There would be no pretending to be someone else this time, and that was okay. I wanted to go with Carter. Not some enchanting playboy.



I stopped into the market to pick up the day's dinner, shopping hastily to make up for the time I'd spent at my Mom's grave. I wouldn't have time to see Carter as a result, but I had a whole life to look forward to with him. Today, I needed to be quick and get home before anyone started asking questions. Rowan was unpredictable, and Lydia was always a nightmare.

I paid for the groceries, then I rushed from the store, moving quickly down the cobblestone path to home. In my hurry, I caught my shoe on one of the stones completely wrong, and I stumbled as a result. I did my best to keep a hold of my bag, but the weight of it quickly got away from me, and my footing was lost to the uneven ground. Bracing myself for impact, I closed my eyes and held my breath. But instead of hitting hard stone, my shoulder landed on hard muscle.

I blinked the world back into view, only to find myself face to face with a dark haired man with impenetrable sunglasses and a handsome, perfectly symmetrical face.

“Are you alright, my lady?” He asked with a voice of silk. He lifted me to my feet, then crouched to gather my lost vegetables. He repacked my bag, then returned it to my arms. I

stared at him, dumbstruck. He was dressed impeccably, and his posture spoke to someone important.

“Yes, thank you.” I responded nervously. I returned a smile and a slight bow before I flitted off again, not offering any additional opportunity to engage me. I didn’t have time to chat or make friends, nor did I need to be wasting time with any other men who weren’t my fiancé now that I was engaged.

The shortcut through the woods made it easy to make up time, and I was running to make sure I beat Lydia home. I was grateful when I arrived to see her car still gone, knowing I’d succeeded.

Before I entered the house, I stopped by the mailbox to gather up the day’s mail. I carried in a handful of letters into the kitchen, then sorted through each one carefully. Lydia was very specific about having her bills, personal letters, and spam mail separated, lest she ever had to waste time looking at it.

Four letters for her, one for Rowan, and one for... me?

I stared at the little blue envelope that had the name Elise Cenere written in golden inked calligraphy. There was no sender listed. No address. Just my name.

I flipped it over and shook the letter, listening in case there was something inside. It must have been left here by the sender themselves rather than the postal carrier. But who would have sent it?

I tore open the envelope and unfolded the small piece of paper inside.

*“Beautiful Elise, I can’t wait to have your eternity.”* was all it said. This had to be from Carter. A sweet nothing, expressing as much excitement for our engagement as I had. I smiled quietly to myself. My heart warmed knowing he was thinking of me even when I was busy.

With an extra spring in my step, I walked to my room to stash away the letter. The moment I bounded through the door, a gorgeous, massive bouquet of blue roses, accented with white sparkles of baby’s-breath, filled my vision. The sheer quantity of flowers fanned out from the sturdy vase like a peacock’s tail, and it brought a brightness and life to my entire room.

Now my heart was overflowing. No one had ever bought me flowers before, and I barely knew how to process this. These must have cost a fortune, and Carter thought I was

worth such an expenditure. I was grinning like a fool as I reread that letter again.

I buried my face in the buds and took in the soft and inviting smell of fresh dyed roses. I didn't know when he'd had time to do this, but any doubts or confusion I'd recently had fully and completely vanished. Tomorrow's errands couldn't come fast enough. I was so excited to see him again.

I was still aglow as I made dinner that night. I served Lydia at the dining table, then I ate my own meal in my room. Rowan typically didn't make it home until late, so I stored a portion for him in the fridge. He'd oddly insisted that I not make him meals since he was always working, but I had extra, so I set some aside out of habit. Why I did nice things for him, I couldn't say, but I supposed it was simply too deeply ingrained in me to never throw away food.

With the last of my daily chores done, once everyone had turned in for the night, I decided to give Carter a little surprise of my own. My pretty panties from the ball had been ruined, so I opted not to wear anything under my little sheer nightgown. I placed his engagement ring on my finger, and I dug out a large winter coat to cover myself. Once I assured all

the lights in the mansion were off and the coast was clear, I very, very quietly snuck out of the house.

I felt so naughty when the cold, outside air teased at my bare nethers. Though the streets were empty at this late hour, I hugged the coat around my body tightly to stay fully covered. The slightest gust of wind would be all it would take to expose me, and just the thought of it made my heart race.

The bakery wasn't far, and I knew every short cut. I cut through the woods, saving half a mile from my route, and I exited onto the cobblestone of Main Street. The lights of the bakery were all off when I arrived, including the lights of his second story home, but I was still hopeful he might be awake when I tapped the door and waited for him to answer.

I waited three minutes with no sign of stirring before I knocked again, much harder and louder this time. A small gust swept by, and I hugged the coat more tightly around myself. My clit throbbed and excitement pulsed through me at that near miss. I couldn't wait to see him.

He was my fiancé after all. I couldn't even imagine how fulfilling it would be to be touched by a man poised to be my future husband. Whatever I'd felt with him before, tonight would be different.

Another knock and still nothing.

I frowned. This was silly. He owned the bakery, so he likely had to be up early to catch the morning rush. I couldn't expect him to just wake up in the middle of the night because I was excited and horny.

My shoulders slumped, and I gave the door one last knock, loud enough that the neighbors likely heard it. With still no response, I sighed and turned to head home. This was stupid anyway. Running around in public, borderline naked, just to have late night sex with my fiancé was a ridiculous fantasy. Dumb and dangerous. Lazuli Kingdom was largely a safe place, but I shouldn't be out so late in such a vulnerable position.

My soul froze in my body when I heard the sound of footsteps in the distance. I scanned the area, but the sound wasn't coming from inside the bakery. No one was visible. "Carter?" I asked cautiously. Maybe he'd gone for a late night walk.

No answer, but the sound continued.

My heart picked up pace, and I stepped away from Carter's door. I took a few steps back, then listened again. The

footsteps ceased. Maybe I was just imagining things. My predicament must have had my mind playing tricks on me.

I took one more step back, then I heard a single light tap follow. Another beget another. Either my quiet steps were echoing through the alley, or someone was watching me and matching my movements intentionally.

*Fuck.*

*Stay calm. Don't be paranoid.*

I turned slowly on my heel and started back down the hill to the house, keeping my ears perked and straining. Still every step was matched by someone else's, at a pace and tempo that was just far enough off mine to erase any hope of it being a benign ricochet of sound.

Knowing I was completely naked under this thin barrier didn't seem so thrilling anymore. My pulse pounded as I rounded a bend. It was a dark walk if I took my short cut, but it wasn't much brighter if I took the main road. And no matter what, I would have to go through the woods.

I reached the crossroads where I had to choose between a short cut and the main road, and I paused. The footsteps continued for a few extra seconds before they stopped, too. I

whipped around quickly, hoping to catch sight of whoever was following me. My coat flung open from the momentum, and I scrambled to get it closed again. The last thing I'd wanted to do was flash some late night passerby.

“W-who’s there?” I called out, hoping I might alert someone by making some noise. “Why are you following me?” I took another uneasy step back, and I clenched my legs together, embarrassed by the way being followed by a stranger had my body as turned on as it was sweating with terror.

No answer. Of course not. The steps resumed. They got louder, but I couldn't figure out where they were coming from.

“I don't have any money. I don't have anything of value at all.” I tried next, while my knees buckled under the fear. I tripped over my own feet, stumbled on my nerves, and I hit the cobblestone, ass first. My whole coat sprang open, but I couldn't register it as important. I whimpered as those footsteps neared, and the tall shadow of a man fell over me.

Paralyzed. I was too terrified to cover myself, and my heart rate was bordering on explosion. I scrambled backwards, knowing he was getting a full view of every inch of me through my thin nightgown, and being too focused on survival to care.



“Please. Please don’t hurt me.” I begged the shadow, who chuckled low and deep in response.

The man was wearing some sort of mask covering his face, but in the heavy darkness, I couldn’t make out a single feature beyond the fact that he was tall and strong. He could break me in half if he wanted. He could kidnap me in an instant.

It wasn’t too late to escape. I knew this route better than anyone. I just had to distract him, and I’m sure I could lose him.

Without warning, I yanked off my coat, threw it in the shadow’s face, then I shot to my feet and started sprinting towards my short cut. It was a full three seconds before those footsteps started following again, though at a rate far faster than before. Cold air whipped against my skin, while heat burned through my muscles. If there was one single positive to my life as a housemaid it was that the unending physical labor had made me strong, the threat of punishment had made me fast, and I wasn’t going to be caught and murdered tonight because of it.

Into the woods, my shoes squished into the soft, wet earth. One of my flats stuck in the mud, so I yanked my foot

from its hold, then I wrestled the shoe from my other foot, so it wouldn't be a hindrance. I threw the small leather flat at my attacker, using any ammo I could get a hold of.

His footsteps stumbled, while mine stayed true. Being barefoot was no trouble for me. Lydia hadn't let me wear shoes for four years after my father died, claiming they were too expensive and I didn't appreciate them, so I'd become well adapted to the naked earth.

I leveraged gravity on the downhill sprint towards home to get every extra inch I could on him, but it was clear that he was gaining on me. My speed might have saved me in a hundred yard sprint, but this full mile run wasn't working in my favor.

I could hear his breathing as I neared my first crossroads. I chose the right path towards home, and jumped over the fallen log that I'd not had time to clear yet. My pursuer stumbled, and I gained more ground again.

A flicker of confidence sparked through me, but his laugh that followed snuffed it right back out. I swallowed then kept running. I was half way to home. So close. So, so close.

I ignored the burning in my lungs and the pain in my straining muscles as I hurtled forward with reckless abandon.

When he neared again, I shot into the bushes, lengthening my route, but throwing him off enough to increase my distance.

Twigs and branches scraped against my bare skin and caught and tore my mesh gown. Every snag slowed me down, while I could hear the same branches breaking and snapping under his charge. I was almost there. I just needed a little more.

I pumped harder, when a hard yanking force braced against my entire body. My nightgown took me down, as he caught and fisted it in his palm and threw me backwards. The material tore seconds too late to free myself, and before I could react, I was on my back and he was on top of me.

The shadow's face was hidden, but now that he was so close, I could see the fine details of the swirls of gold on the skull mask set in a hood of black. He was heavy and firm with muscle, while the thickness of the hard cock in his pants was pressing against my stomach. My breathing was rapid with panic, terror, unwanted arousal, and the stress of pursuit, and I couldn't begin to find equilibrium.

The man examined me beneath him, then he gripped the straps of my gown and finished tearing the material from my body. My breasts heaved through every desperate,

hyperventilating inhale and exhale, and I could feel the way he was watching the show. Everything about his movements was distinctly predatory.

I swung at him, and he caught my wrists without even looking, effortlessly restraining me with my arms above my head.

“Let me go! Let me go, let me go, let me go.” I was sobbing in hysterics, “I don’t want to die. Please don’t kill me.” It was a wonder I formed any words at all. I’d had too miserable of a life already to deserve to die like this.

“I’m not going to kill you, Elise Cenere.” He finally spoke, though his voice was indiscernible behind the muffling of his face mask. “Though I have every intention of showing you heaven.” He repositioned on top of me, consequently grinding the rough texture of his pants against my clit in the process, and by the devil did that sensation send a full body shiver through me. I resented how turned on I was as he released my hands and positioned my spread thighs over his. After such a rough chase, he now treated me with a damn near tender gentleness. It was disarming.

He pushed off his haunches onto his hands and knees, where he now hovered over me with an arm on either side of

my head. I couldn't see his eyes through his mask, but he could see mine, and he seemed to be drinking in my distress like a fine wine.

I tensed as he lifted only the bottom half of the cloth skull mask, and my eyes shot wide as he pressed his lips softly against mine.



## Chapter 17



By the devil, she was as delicious as she was beautiful. Her lips tasted of honey and sex, while the soft moonlight highlighted every dip and contour of her body. Those countless cuts and bruises from our little game of tag only added to this unique and beautiful painting that was Elise. Nero had absolutely not lied to me.

If I showed her my face, would she recognize me? If I fucked her, would she feel the same connection I did? I couldn't do that, could I?

It was with superhuman discipline that I pulled my mouth from hers and replaced my veil. While she was trembling under my dark shadow, she wasn't making any attempt to fight me. She knew she was overpowered, and the short breaths and flushed cheeks led me to believe she might even like it.

I supported myself on my right hand while I lifted the left to delicately draw a line down her arm with the backs of my fingernails. I brushed the engagement ring on her finger, not wanting to acknowledge what it might mean, then I danced over her palm and traced the delicate veins of her wrist, visible through her pale skin. I followed the soft line of her bicep, then fluttered a light caress over her shoulder. Her eyes followed my touch, as though they were the only muscles in her body that she could move.

“Were you trying to entice me with this little stunt?” I followed the line of her shoulder to her collar bone, and drummed soft taps down the length of it until I reached the base of her neck.

“N-no.” She stumbled over her words, but the way she hesitated felt like she’d had to think about that answer.

I dug four fingers into her skin, then drew harsh lines down to her breast. I hovered there, staying just millimeters from actually touching her where I wasn’t invited, only to have her inhale and hold a full breath, assuring her nipple met my palm. She kept it there for a second, then she slowly exhaled to create space between us again.

*A game of teasing? Oh how I'd love to play.*



“What about that stunt?” I smirked beneath my mask, before I closed the gap and squeezed her roughly. Her legs reflexively clenched around my waist, and she subtly brushed her clit against the front of my pants. “And that one.” I drew massaging circles down the side of her body, then I gripped her ass roughly and I lifted her hips until she was fully pressed against me.

Her whimper was as precious as it was maddening. I was supposed to be treating this woman like a princess, and instead, every little cry begged for something much more rough and carnal.

I traced a line down her outer thigh, then I let her ass drop back into the leaves, nudged her legs apart, and shifted pressure down her inner thigh.

I settled my palm at the apex, and I drew soft strokes with my fingertips everywhere but her most sensitive areas. Her spread legs did little to hide her own arousal from my exploration.

“And this one.” With that, I plunged a finger briefly inside her, then dragged a line of wetness up her center, rolling her clit before I climbed that touch back up her body. “Who are you performing for now?” I made it up to her neck, her

chin, then dipped that same finger between her lips. She sucked without me even asking, and her legs trembled each time I shifted my position enough to give her new friction. “I have no intention of killing you, but tell me, Elise, are you wishing I might fuck you?”

I withdrew my finger from her lips slowly. She waited until I'd fully vacated before she bit into her quivering lip. Those glazed over eyes looked more desperate than scared. *Don't look at me like that, Love, or I'll have to actually do it.*

If I speared her on my cock right now, I had no doubt she'd forget whatever man she was wasting her life with. But I couldn't have her thinking me a monster before we'd even established a safe word. Once she was mine, however...

I was getting ahead of myself. Having found her so quickly, it was hard to contain myself. I'd watched her whole routine for the day, I now knew her errands, her duties, and even the names of her lost loved ones. But what I didn't know was what kinds of fantasies this woman needed fulfilled, and how I could sincerely please her. Did she prefer to be fucked by a monster or a mouse?

I'd imagined entirely too many possibilities in the brief span of time between that thought and the flutter of black

wings landing on a tree branch overhead. I didn't lift my gaze from hers. I knew who had paid us a visit.

< *"You finally have her naked beneath you, yet you look so conflicted, my prince."* > The voice of Nero penetrated my psyche. < *"Do you need some instruction?"* >

< *"I can't just fuck her in the weeds without even introducing myself first. I'm a hunter, not a barbarian."* >

< *"Is that your only hang up?"* > Nero's tone was a laugh, so tongue in cheek.

I tilted my head as I considered that question. < *"There are others, but that's the main one."* >

My devilish friend snorted. < *"I wonder if you even could."* >

< *"Is that a challenge?"* > I looked at the woman who appeared both enchanted and open to my touch. Her fear and adrenaline seemed to be subsiding.

< *"Simply a question, Zakari."* > The sound of flapping wings was disguised in the rustling of the wind. < *"The Belladonna is a beautiful flower, but you must never forget it's laced with poison."* >

I couldn't help smiling at that. < *"I've spent a lifetime building my natural immunity to poisons."* >

< *"Mmmmm, yes indeed you have."* > Nero said with a hum. < *"Well, I can't wait to see if this one can kill you."* >

I leaned in close, and I lifted my mask just over my nose, letting her feel exactly how close my breath was. I touched the tip of my tongue to her skin, allowing myself but one more taste, then I whispered directly into her ear, "What I wouldn't do to take you right now." She tensed, and I could feel the heat radiating from her flushed skin. Then with impossible willpower, I pulled back, leaving her panting, on edge, and so clearly wanting. "But not tonight. Though you look like you wouldn't mind if I did."

She drew her lower lip into her mouth, then bore into me with those priceless sapphires she called eyes. "Why?" She asked, and the hint of disappointment wasn't lost on me. This woman's needs were so far from getting met, even this situation had her open and willing, and I felt more justified than ever in my pursuit.

"Because tonight, I only wanted you to make the right decision. And that decision wasn't him."

Her eyes widened. "You mean—"

I cut her off by dipping my hand down between her legs, and sinking into the hot, soaked pussy one last time, just to enjoy the implication of it all. “You know who I mean.” She bowed her back just slightly, sinking herself onto me more completely. I pushed back to meet her effort. The tug of war was subtle but obvious. “Carter, right?”

Her eyes widened, and her lips parted in fear and surprise. I couldn't fight the grin that gave me. Nor the maddening satisfaction I found when I brushed the rough skin of my thumb over her center, and a full body shudder shook through her. The worry was so quickly replaced with desire. I rubbed her clit with careful, testing strokes, before I ran that rough hand back up her bare body. When I reached her face, I cupped her cheek gently before brushing disheveled hair from her forehead.

Like the gentleman I was, I punctuated it all with a cobalt rose I'd stashed in my jacket, securing it softly behind her ear. The thorns that still adorned the stem cut shallow slits in her cheek, and the beads of her blood looked ravishing against her porcelain complexion.

I fluttered one last kiss over the bloom of red, then I pushed off of her.

As I stood over my precious love, the darkness of my shadow blocked out every ounce of light that once reached her.

“You truly are beautiful beyond compare, Elise.” I whispered before I dropped my coat over her. She sat up and hugged the material against her chest, never removing that alluring eye contact. “You outshine every flower I could ever give you.”

I turned on my heel, ready to leave her for the night, when she called out to me. “Who are you?” Her tone was more curious than scared now.

“A man who can give you everything you deserve, if you only choose to accept it.”

## Chapter 18



A new bouquet of flowers was on my nightstand when I returned to my room that night, with another love letter among the fresh scented petals. I was now very aware that neither was from my actual boyfriend.

*“Carter, right?”*

The way he’d said it sent chills through me just recalling the tone, and a sinking feeling in my gut told me I’d made a terrible mistake. What kind of psychopath was I dealing with?

I crawled back in bed, sore and battered, and I rolled over to face my nightstand. The whole chase replayed through my mind once more.

I reached for my vibrator.

It was probably a good thing Carter hadn’t been awake. If he had, would this man have left me alone, or would he have

watched us? Would he have interfered?

Would he have Carter watch as he fucked me instead?

I swallowed hard, my fingers still drumming on that vibrator as I climbed towards heaven, and my mind chastised every fucked up synapse in my brain that put that temptation on the table. Why was this the only thing that drove my body to the brink? I wanted to be a good, normal, happy, healthy, sunshiny girl, dammit. Sweet. Normal. Safe. I wasn't some deviant. I didn't want to be chased and fucked in the woods by a hot stranger with a mask. I didn't want to be pinned to the kitchen island by my stepbrother and forced to orgasm on the vegetables, and I sure as hell didn't want to imagine the literal devil himself picking up my pieces with his skillful fingers and sharp bite. I could be happy without all of this chaos in my life. I just wanted to lay on my back in a bed and take some easy, boring, unobtrusive dick.

I tossed and turned all night, forcing myself to wake from dreams that should be nightmares, and I was grateful for the sunrise when it finally came. I was up doing chores as immediately as was possible.

When I went to my room to get dressed for my errands, I double and triple checked the locks on my window and my



door. I was at a complete loss as to who this man could be. It wasn't Rowan trying to torment me. I would have recognized the way his weight and body felt on top of me if it was. Maybe he had a friend who he'd convinced to escalate his cruel games. Maybe someone who ran into me in passing at the Ball? The stranger I danced with never got my name or my face, so he shouldn't have been able to find me, but I couldn't rule him out either. I'd just had the devil grant me a pretty dress and a magic chastity belt, after all. Would it really be so unbelievable that he might buy someone's soul in exchange for information?

I couldn't shake the unease in my step as I headed out. I wished I could stay home, but I wouldn't risk not having a good dinner for Lydia. Still, I looked over my shoulder every few steps, and I was hyper aware of every rustle of leaves or tap on the sidewalk. At noon, the town was bustling, and there was no reason to think I'd be attacked or hunted in broad daylight. I needed to calm down. Everything was going to be fine.

## Chapter 19



I sat on the bench in the town square, waiting patiently for my queen to show up for her usual groceries. This lunch hour was the only time I had available to observe her, and I treasured it in its brief window into her life. I'd still yet to catch a glimpse of her house mates, but I was sure I'd figure that out soon enough.

After all, I'd been watching her every day since I learned her name. Though she was as sweet and efficient as I imagined, I couldn't help but sneer at that ring on her finger, which she only wore while out in public, then banished when she returned home. It was a tiny ring. The gemstones were probably fakes. It was so unimpressive, it only left me even more irritated.

She'd already had the ring on that night, but the way she responded to me was hardly indicative of a happily

engaged woman. The whimpers, the heat in her cheeks, the shameful grinding, and that slick, perfect pussy...

*Right, no boners in public.* It was hard enough to avoid recognition just being the prince. I didn't need to come off as some kind of pervert. The Counsel would just *love* that kind of scandal.

“So are you officially a stalker now, Lazuli?” Nero’s voice suddenly sounded beside me, and I glanced over to see him sitting next to me on the bench. *Because I didn’t stand out enough before.* “You see, I figured when I gave you her name, you’d go to her house and introduce yourself. Not send her flowers and tear her clothes off in the woods.” He hummed along merrily as always. “I expected more romance for a girl who gets you hot and bothered enough to jack off in her shoe.”

“You saw that?” My expression flattened.

“I see everything.” He waved a hand dismissively.

*Annoying.* I sighed, then addressed my obnoxious bench mate. “As the prince, I’m not allowed to just show up at some woman’s home and try to court her during the Masquerade. It would violate every rule, and send the whole town into a tizzy. Imagine if all the women who thought they still had a chance started burning their dresses.” I spoke in

hushed tones. “Plus, half the merchants in town depend on this event to get back into the green. If I ended the event early, they’d riot. Think of the economy.”

Nero laughed. “Humans are ridiculous. I love it.” He patted me on the shoulder. He had no mask today, which helped him look vaguely normal so long as you never looked into his eyes. “So then you’re just going to send her gifts until she falls in love with you? Do you think she’s superficial enough to be impressed by that?”

And that made me grin. “No, but I think there’s much more darkness in her than this boring routine implies, and *that* I can play to.”

“Mmmmm, yes you can.” Nero practically purred the words. He leaned over and whispered into my ear ever so softly “and I think you might be right about her.”

He blew in my ear a second before he disappeared again, and I jumped from the heat of it. I rubbed my ear, soothing the uncomfortable flush that sent through me. This whole situation had me starting to question the company I keep. Nero and Buttercup were the only people in this universe who I trusted, yet they had gotten entirely too comfortable addressing the crowned prince.

No matter. Once I added Elise to the mix, the whole dynamic would change.

I relaxed back on the bench, when the first sign of my lovely queen came into view. She was holding two large bags of food—enough to feed a family of five, which I was only somewhat confident she did not have—and she started toward the bakery. Carter Greyson’s bakery, I presumed. Her sweet little mistake.

I could intercept her, but...maybe it would be better to let her have her bearings for now. The paranoid way she kept checking over her shoulder had me thinking she was terribly on edge. Sometimes it was better to observe and listen. I was curious to get to know this baker who claimed her heart anyway.

*Go on, peasant. Prove you're worthy of my queen. I suggest doing so like your life depends on it.*

## Chapter 20



Doing my best to keep my composure, I collected my groceries and stopped by the bakery as always. Partially because I wanted to see Carter to calm myself down, and partially because I wanted to make sure he was okay. He greeted me with a smile.

“You look good enough to eat, Elise.” He beamed as he saw me. His eyes never made it to my face, or he might have seen the near broken expression on my quivering lips. But I couldn’t blame him for not noticing. Men were logical and had no time for emotions, father used to tell me. While Rowan had an annoying knack for picking up on my mood, Carter exemplified the fact. Which was better, of course. My relationship worked because we never dug too deeply and could enjoy these simple moments with each other. Men who showed too much emotion were how I ended up naked in the

woods with a bedroom full of flowers, and who would want to be subjected to that kind of life?

I shook my head to banish the images of the night before. “I had kind of a rough night, to be honest.” I said shakily. “I wanted to call you, but I worried I’d wake you.”

“I’m usually up pretty late. You can always call me, and I’d be happy to stop by for a quickie.” He winked.

“Oh.” I wasn’t about to admit that I’d come knocking on his door last night, and he didn’t answer. I couldn’t find any good way to bring up what happened or the fact that I was receiving love letters from an evil shadow, just like I couldn’t find any good way to ask him why it was so dark at his house if he was up all night. His definition of late may have been closer to ten instead of midnight though. He was a baker after all.

The only reason I imagined he would be up was because I’d wrongly assumed he’d left me those flowers. Which... in hindsight, he didn’t actually know where I lived, so he couldn’t have done anything of the sort. No one knew or cared where I lived, really.

I forced a smile. “Would you like to go out for dinner?” I asked, hoping I could spend this evening with him to make

up for the last. Once I made Lydia her dinner, I was largely free for the night, and I could easily sneak away for the hour or two before Rowan got home. It would be a relief to see him outside of my lunch hour, and I'd feel safer knowing I wasn't in a home being watched by a psychopath.

“That would be great. How about I come over to your place? Finally meet your family? We're engaged now. If we're going to be official and exclusive, we should probably take the next step.” Carter beamed innocently.

*Wait, we weren't exclusive?* My eyebrow twitched, and I pretended to not hear that part. He hadn't proposed until yesterday, so I guess we weren't locked in yet, so that was totally fine. Of course. Comparing real life to fairy tales was a recipe for misery, and I couldn't expect him to forget all other women existed just because he was dating me, right? This was the best I could really hope for. I just needed him to marry me, and I'd be good. I couldn't keep overthinking this relationship.

“F-fine. Let's do that.” I lifted my bag of groceries.  
“I'll make something delicious.”

“I look forward to it.”

I walked out of the bakery with a flat expression on my face.



*Well then.* I guess I was introducing my boyfriend to fucking Lydia and Rowan. Somehow I just found something more terrifying than having a stalker chase me through the woods.

## Chapter 21



“A... family dinner?” I blinked in utter disbelief as mother called me while I was on my way back from my lunch hour.

“Yes, apparently your stepsister has tricked some buffoon in the village into being her fiancé.” Her tone was a verbal eye roll. “She said they want to make it official by meeting each other’s families.”

*Back up. “Her fiancé?” What in the actual fuck, Elly? Have I taught you nothing?*

“But that’s only half of the comedy. Her fiancé is the same man who I spent the night with during the Masquerade. He’s one of the village bakers. A man named Carter Greyson. I guess I have a knack for stealing the husbands of the Cenere women.” She laughed in that half cackle half giggle that grated on my ears.

“Carter Greyson.” I repeated every word robotically and distantly.

“Just wait—She’ll probably ask you to give her away at the wedding since her father is dead.” Mother just kept on going, and every word hit me with blunt force.

“Give her away at her wedding...”

Mother snickered as if there was humor in any of these words, but it was not fucking funny. This was not remotely what was supposed to happen. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure she doesn’t get a penny of her inheritance, no matter what it takes. Her father owes us this house and fortune. I have plenty of ways to sabotage an engagement. Your mother knows her way around a—”

“I have to get back to work.” I hung up, no longer interested in anything she had to say. I had a far more pressing matter here.

*She doesn’t even love this asshole. This is un-fucking-acceptable.*

*Calm down.* I told myself. I should be happy. This saved me having to investigate, and she was bringing my target directly to me. I’d just have to ask the prince to leave

early, and with how much he'd been keeping to himself lately, he likely wouldn't care.

“Carter the baker, huh.”

## Chapter 22



“Carter the baker.” I tossed my knife in the air, giving it a perfect spin before catching it by the sharp point. “She rejected me for Carter the baker.” My expression was flat as I twirled the knife in my hand.

“You already knew she was in a relationship. What did you expect?” Mason so annoyingly pointed out. His lack of empathy for my plight was... well, really it was exactly what I expected from Mason. I didn’t keep him around because he was a man of sugar and butterflies. Though he seemed a touch more on edge and distracted himself lately, so I suppose I could feign sympathy for his own lady problems. But that wasn’t the point. Right now, the point was Elise.

“This makes no sense. Is he rich? Hot? Does he fuck like a lion?” I threw my knife into the back of Mason’s chair, and he didn’t even flinch as it grazed his golden locks.

Of course he didn't. Because Buttercup here was boring and trusted me.

Mason raised an eyebrow. "I can't speak to the strength and precision of his dick, but from what I've learned so far, no on the other two counts. If anything, I gather she'll be the one bringing money to the marriage when they seal the deal, not the other way around. I wouldn't be surprised if he's using her."

"Do go on." *Because this Carter situation was SO interesting.* "I just love hearing about all the ways she's terrible at picking men who offer her absolutely nothing. I'm not annoyed by this at all." I waved a hand to speed up the story. "Give me something more interesting. What have you learned about *her*."

"Her father was Dean Cenere, the banker. He passed about ten years ago. Her stepmother inherited the estate on a trust, but everything will go to Elise upon her marriage. From what I deduced from the records anyway." Mason recited the whole thing like it was common knowledge.

"They write all that in the records?"

"Sure, why not." He shrugged, and I sighed.

“Do we have a good excuse to kill him?”

“Technically you can claim her at the end of the Masquerade even if he’s still alive.”

“Yes, because that’s satisfying.” I rolled my eyes.

“Literally no one wants to be a consolation prize, Mason.” I wondered sometimes if my guard had experienced affection of any kind before with how clueless he always was. “Do you know if she enjoyed the flowers? The notes?”

He waited for several moments of silence before he fished out a picture for my viewing pleasure. Every flower I’d sent her in a trash can in town. “Well, they elicited an emotional reaction of some sort.”

“I hate everything.” I dropped my forehead to the war table. “I guess I have to win her the old fashioned way.”

“You mean asking her on a date?”

“What? No.” *Seriously, Mason.* “I mean slit her fiancé’s throat and swoop in while she’s grieving.”

Mason rocked his head back and forth as if weighing the pros and cons of that proposal. “I can get behind that.”

## Chapter 23



“So how did you two meet?” I asked, fighting any irritated twitches from my expression. I hadn’t attended a family dinner since Elly’s father was still alive, and the uncomfortable chairs added a pile of shit to this cake filled with nails.

“Elise came by my bakery almost daily, and I had to finally ask her out.” The fucking tool was beaming, while Elly sat quietly and awkwardly beside him. No part of her body language implied she even liked him. “We’ve been sharing *lunches* ever since.”

Elly laughed nervously, clearly as appalled by that implication as I was. “Y-yeah, something like that.”

Mother ate quietly, but the smirk on her face was shameless. Probably because she also knew what Elly’s fiancé’s *lunches* tasted like. But if this man had the gall to



propose to her while actively banging her stepmom, and if Elly was desperate enough to say yes despite, then a little infidelity wouldn't break them up.

“Really? *Every day* you met for lunch?” My sights fell on the very flustered girl beside him. “How long have you been dating? I’m surprised I haven’t heard more about you.”

“U-um...” She fixed her gaze on her food, pushing it around with her fork, probably so she wouldn’t choke on it if I ratted her out for still bending over for me on the regular.

“Every day for an entire year now.” Carter chimed in. “Actually, Our anniversary is coming up, and I was hoping to hold the wedding on the same day. I have so much to celebrate. Your sister is wonderful.”

“She’s not my sister.” I held back the scoff. *Every fucking day for a YEAR, huh Elly?*

“What?” He looked between us in confusion.

“He’s my *step*brother.” She squeaked, continuing to share that eye contact only with her peas and carrots. “Not technically blood related.” She chewed and swallowed then she lifted her gaze to mine. If I didn’t know better, I might say

there was a flicker of rebelliousness in her clear blue eyes.

“But he’s my brother in every other sense.”

I cocked my head back slowly. I kept my expression completely neutral. I drew in a slow breath through my nose.

“Yes. We’re very close.”

Her glare was subtle with the way she also forced a sweet smile. I’m sure if I called her on it, she would pretend to be so innocent, but her flirting was obvious. The defiance. The little jabs. All the ways she knew that she could drive me up a wall. And now she’d be fucking some pathetic excuse for man in this house, knowing I was in the next room.

This was going to be lovely.

It was with painfully awkward small talk that we finished the incredible meal Elly made. She was a good cook, but it was just about never that I got to try her food fresh. I’d told her she didn’t have to cook for me, not wanting her to be the slave mother treated her as, but she insisted, so I always ate her leftovers, not wanting her work to go to waste, while apparently the baker over here had been having *my* sloppy seconds for lunch. If I hadn’t satisfied her enough, she could have told me, yet instead she chose to make a fool of me yet again.

From the first time I showed her how she deserved to be fucked, she's been taunting me. Though it had been ages since she had the audacity to bring one of these men home. If this was an attempt to make me jealous, I would be happy to show her the consequences of such a thing.

When dinner was over, Carter went to the den with mother, while I opted to help Elly clear the table and the dishes. A thank you for cooking, of course. And much to my surprise, she didn't protest.

We both gathered up plates and carried them to the sink. I waited for her to set down the last of her dishes and turn on the water before I grabbed her and shoved her against the fridge.

"You're getting pretty bold, Elly." I smirked as I caged her between my body and the door.

"I don't know what you're talking about." Ordinarily she'd be trembling, but perhaps having this alleged fiancé in the living room had her feeling safe.

"A whole damn *year*? You've been fucking him for an entire year without me knowing?"

She shrunk against the door, trying to make any distance she could between us, so I took any millimeter she gained right back.

“I’m allowed to date. I’m not a prisoner here.” Her quiet squeak of a protest implied otherwise. “Carter loves me. We’re getting married, and he’s taking me to the ball this weekend, and then we’re going to move far, far away from here.”

I could have puked at that mental image if not for the fact that I would never want to do that in front of Elly. Maybe she *should* go to the Masquerade. Let the prince claim her on his final night, and save her from a marriage to this idiot. He was a far better option, whether he used force or not. I didn’t care if *she* got the house and inheritance, but I cared about her giving some undeserving man access to them. And I cared about some undeserving man accessing *her*. “And *you* love *him*?” My eyes narrowed as I studied her expression for some semblance of a lie in it.

She turned her head to the side, trying to hide any emotion from me as she answered. “Yes. I do.”

I shook my head then grabbed her chin and directed her gaze back to me. “Can’t even look me in the eye as you

say it.” I pressed our bodies fully together, connecting every inch of her to me, and I nudged her legs apart with my knee. I let my hand slip from her chin to her neck, where I could feel that speeding heartbeat in her pulse. She subtly shifted her hips just once, grinding herself against my thigh in the process, while her breathing hitched so attractively. “Is he good to you?”

“He is.” Her voice was barely more than a whisper.

I brought my hold from her neck to the strap of her pretty little sundress. “How many times have you come for him? Does he even know what you like?”

She swallowed and remained quiet for several moments. She knew she couldn’t lie to me about this, and I’m guessing she couldn’t answer that in any way that would satisfy me. “That’s hardly something I want to talk about with my big brother, Roro.”

I laughed at that just to scare her. *No, my sweet Elly, we’re not using any fucking safe words today.* “Do you want to talk about *this* with your big brother then?” I lifted her skirt, and nudged her panties to the side, so I could easily slip a finger in. She pressed back harder into the metal door, while

she bit into her lip. “Does he get you as wet as I do, little sister?”

“R-Rowan. He’s in the living room.” She stumbled over her words, but she never said no. In our entire relationship, she hadn’t *ever* said no. The irony being that’s the only word I would have needed to hear. Yet instead, she spoke to me in breathy moans and pleased whimpers.

“Then be quiet.”

She bit harder into her trembling lip as she let me finger fuck her against the kitchen fridge. I hooked two fingers inside that hot wet center, while I rubbed languid circles around her clit, and I watched her expressions all the while. Those pleading eyes, that overwhelming emotion on her face as she neared orgasm. Fuck, she was beautiful.

“You’re going to make a mess.” Her words were hitched with panting, and her cheeks were flush as she tried once more to press back and away from me. I placed my forehead against hers, and touched our noses at the tip. There was nowhere for her to run.

“Do you want me to use my tongue? I’d be happy to lick you clean.”

She said nothing. Just bit her lip again in that silent affirmation. Elly was incapable of voicing her desires, as if she never thought she deserved to have her needs met. Like she was little more than a toy to be used and a servant to take care of others.

But that wasn't her. Elly shared more of my darkness than she did my light, no matter who she pretended to be. Was she ashamed that she didn't want those same sweet and pure and normal things that she thought she was supposed to? I'd tested her body enough times to know nothing made her heart race like knowing she might get caught.

I dropped to my knees, and I lifted her skirt. Her knees shook as I dragged her panties down to mid-thigh. We could have easily broken it up if anyone walked in while we were standing, but this was the kind of compromising position that couldn't be mistaken for anything else. I knew that was what she really needed.

I pressed my lips to hers, and I slipped my tongue between her folds, teasing her clit with the tip. She held onto the door for support as I drew intentioned shapes in her arousal.

“Drop your top, Elly.” I spoke against her to an involuntary full body shudder.

“Rowan, I can’t—”

The glare I gave her was adequately severe. “Drop the straps and push up your bra. I want to see you, and I want anyone who walks into this room to know exactly how dirty you are.”

I nipped at her skin, leaving the lightest marks while staying just outside where I knew she needed me. She glanced at the door, listened for a moment, then she did as she was told. She slid one thin support from her shoulder then the other, letting the straps of the dress fall to her elbows, and the bust fall to her waist. She hesitated for only a moment before she nudged the underwire of her bra up and over her breasts. She always made a show of how much she didn’t want to listen, while doing absolutely nothing to suggest I actually stop. Instead, she stood breathlessly against the door, her nipples hard and pointed and completely exposed, so any possible explanation was completely off the table should someone come in and see her. Sabotage that was all of her own doing.



“You’re always such a good fucking girl for me, Elly.”

I hummed into her, before I dipped my tongue back through that delicious wetness. She covered her mouth to muffle her whimpers, while her knees squeezed my ears in a desperate bid to stay upright. Her eyes were watering as I felt her starting to lose herself to me. “I could fuck you on the dining room table if that’ll make it easier for you.” I taunted. She shook her head rapidly but still spread her knees a little wider. It was obvious she liked the idea, yet she was terrified of actually doing it.

I’d save that for their wedding day.

I played in her pussy until I found her climbing back to the edge. Elly fisted my hair, while she covered her mouth. I let her teeter over the point of insanity, before I pulled back and denied her completely.

I stood and I shoved her hands back against the metal. Then I stared into her desperate eyes. “If you love him enough that you want to marry him, I certainly hope he can finish the job better than I can.” I tightened my hold on her wrists. She squeezed her legs together in a desperate bid for friction, so I used my knee to force them back apart. I held her against that refrigerator until she lost her chance at orgasm completely.

Until she was frustrated and disappointed and annoyed. She started to struggle in my grasp, but I just shook my head.

“That’s not fair.” She pouted, genuine anger in her voice.

“What’s not fair, Elly?” I pressed against her so she could feel how hard she made me. Subtle suggestion was all it took to rile her up.

“That you ruined me.” She jerked hard in her attempt to escape me and storm off, but I wasn’t done with her punishment yet.

“You think I’m going to let you walk away without telling me what you mean by that?” I couldn’t help but laugh at how upset she was. Anger that she would never admit to and would be too humiliated to explain.

“You know what I mean.” She spat, but she stopped struggling.

“I’m not a mind reader, Elly.”

Her offended laugh was as contrived as it was embarrassed and dishonest. “Let me go. We’ve been in here too long. They’re going to start getting suspicious.”

“That’s what I’m hoping.” I whispered into her ear, and I could feel the heat rush through her body. When I released her hands, she stayed still, keeping them against the metal surface without the need for force. I ran my hand over her breasts, cupping her and squeezing her before I moved my hold down the curves of her body again. I reached her ass, and I massaged pressure into the side. Her knees buckled, and her underwear dropped the rest of the way to the floor.

“Wrap your legs around my waist.” I growled into her ear, low and soft. I hoisted her up, and she listened, because she always did. She’d pretend it was out of fear, but we both knew better. I brushed my lips across her jawline, then I leveraged her weight against the hard surface so I could undo my fly. I moved my hold back to her ass to better support her. “Now tell me to stop.”

“R-Rowan, please.” She shook her head, and she was right back to begging.

“You hate me, don’t you?” I pressed in with only the tip. “You said I ruined you, Elly, so tell me to stop. Tell me he does you better. Tell me you don’t want me to fill you and fuck you until you’re blacking out on my cock.” I punctuated each

sentence and each ragged breath with another inch, until I was buried to the hilt.

“I...” She was so bad at lying, her lips couldn’t even form those words. She turned her head to the side and bit her lip.

I started to move, shoving her into the fridge with each thrust. “You can’t say it, can you?”

She clenched her thighs hard around my waist, locked her ankles behind my back, and held onto my shoulders to brace herself.

“Please” was all she said.

“Please stop? Please fuck me harder? You’re always so vague.” I loved watching her unravel, and I reveled in forcing her to admit she had real needs. I cushioned the back of her head with one hand, and I rolled her nipple between my fingers with the other. “I can’t help you if you don’t communicate.”

She dug her teeth into her lip, muffling moans and ragged breaths, refusing to answer me in words. Instead, she just gave in to the ride, letting me fuck her against that door

like she'd die if she didn't, while her future husband was in the den just two rooms away.

“I need to hear it, Elly. If you're going to fight me, fight me. If you want me to stop, tell me to stop.”

Elly ignored me, instead focusing on losing herself. Letting her grind against my shirt while I fucked her always got her there so fast. She dug her fingers into my biceps, dragging her nails against my skin hard enough to leave a mark. She was tight, hot, and drenching me. I was going to fall off the cliff right alongside her if I continued for another second.

And that was when I stopped moving. I lifted her hips until I was completely unsheathed, I spread her legs, set her back down on the floor, then I shoved my still hard and pussy-soaked cock back into my pants.

I stepped back to admire the panting mess in front of me, who was now damn near crying out of pure, perfect, excruciating frustration.

“Carter, can you give us some help in here?” I called out to the den, more than loud enough for him to hear. Elly's eyes bugged wide, then she hastily started fixing her dress and smoothing her hair.

I picked up her panties and shoved them in my pocket, claiming another pair she wouldn't be getting back. Consequences for never speaking up.

And within about two minutes of frantically getting herself in order and shutting off the overfull sink, Carter came stumbling into the room.

“How can I help, Elise?” He said with a stupid and ignorant smile.

She held my gaze in anger, and I only smirked in response. The most satisfying part of all was that her dearest boyfriend didn't even notice how out of sorts she was. He brainlessly joined her at the sink and started washing dishes with her.

She gave me one last seething look as I stepped out of the kitchen. *Good. I think I made my point.*

## Chapter 24



*I hate him, I hate him, I hate him!* I screamed internally, as I finished up the awkward house tour and dangerous small talk. As the night wrapped up, I grabbed Carter by both hands and led him to the garden—the one place where no one else ever bothered me.

“Your family is wonderful. I don’t know why you waited so long to invite me over.” Carter said with entirely too much enthusiasm, and his cluelessness annoyed even me now. Maybe Rowan had a point.

No, fuck that. Rowan never has a point, because he’s an asshole.

“Yeah, you know, can’t pick your family, and that’s what I ended up with.” Only you can pick your family apparently, because I’m not even related to these awful people. “But to be honest, I don’t really want to sleep here tonight.

Maybe I could stay over with you? I'd love a little privacy to, you know, seal the engagement." I batted my eyes flirtatiously, hoping he was at least perceptive enough to get my meaning.

Rowan wouldn't like that, but he had me all riled up now, and I was starting to feel like I had to scream if I ever wanted to get anything nice or satisfying for myself.

Aside from that, I was too afraid to sleep alone after the stalker incident, and I didn't know what kind of danger I'd just put Carter in by revealing his existence to two different obsessed monsters. It would be safer for both of us to stick together, and to do so somewhere outside this house.

I had no clue what this masked shadow was capable of, and I knew too much of what Rowan was capable of, and the whole situation was making my skin crawl. Not to mention the Lydia factor. I wasn't blind enough to not notice the subtle looks between them at dinner, and the lingering touches as we said goodbye, even if I desperately wanted to be. If we stayed here, she'd be all over him, and I wasn't entirely confident he wasn't going to be open to some creepy stepmother/daughter threesome.

Nope, nope, and holy fucking nope.



“I suppose I wouldn’t mind a little privacy with my sweet fiancée.” He swept me into his arms, holding me by the waist, then he pressed a kiss to my lips.

“We don’t have to wait until we get to your place, you know.” The thought made my heart pick up a few beats as I said it. Sex in the garden, when Rowan was home, but with someone I actually wanted? It was risky and exciting, and that actually stood a chance of doing something for me.

“Outside?” Carter all but scoffed. “What if someone were to see us?”

*Yes, that’s the point.*

“This garden is my little sanctuary. No one comes out here. We’ll be fine.” I reassured him. If anything, I specifically wanted to try this here with him just to prove to Rowan that I could get off without his stupid, sadistic games. I could overlook a lot of things, but I wanted to at least be able to believe that Carter was a better man than my stepbrother, and this was the one chance for me to feel something for someone—*anyone* else.

“Really?” He asked, nervous but maybe receptive. He looked down at my chest, and a slow smile stretched across his

face. “I don’t have a condom, but I’ve been dying for the day I get to really feel you.”

“O-oh, no condom?” Instantly I shut down, and I tried not to acknowledge the realization that the idea of having my own fiancé fuck me without a condom was more objectionable to me than my own stepbrother having free and raw use of my body.

“You don’t mind, do you?” He walked me back to the bench by the pond, and he started to nudge the straps of my dress down my shoulders. “We’re engaged now, which means I don’t have to keep wearing those silly things.” He fondled my breasts, and I tensed harder.

“I’m not ready to risk getting pregnant.” I tried to object softly, not wanting to upset him and make him change his mind, but genuinely not entirely confident he *hadn’t* gotten chlamydia from my stepmother.

“I’ll pull out. I promise.” The way he laughed at the end immediately got under my skin.

“Let’s go back to your place after all.” I shook my head. “It’s more sensible, and I know that’s important to you.”

“But now having my way with you in this garden is all I can think about.” He whined, while he inched my dress further down until it was being held up by only the width of my hips. He pressed a soft kiss on the top of my chest. “Maybe Lydia might have a condom on her we can borrow. Do you want me to go ask?” *Sweet Jesus. No.* If it was possible for a vagina to dry up and shrivel, mine just did. This scenario of fucking raw in the garden should have been thrilling, but my body wasn’t getting on board when Carter talked like that.

“Th-that’s okay.” I shook my head and sat back on the bench, resigning to just try and focus on the task at hand. “Just don’t forget to pull out.”

Carter freed himself from his pants, already completely hard and ready, and I tried not to think about the missing condom.

*He loves me,* I told myself. I leaned back and closed my eyes, while he tugged my dress down the rest of the way and discarded it in a nearby bush. Eventually I’d be expected to make children with him, so I should be excited about this. I had to someday be okay with the idea of him finishing inside me, even if the lurch of my stomach implied there was something wrong with that.

Fortunately, behind the dark veil of my eyelids, feeling the cold rush of the night embracing my naked body was enough to get my heart racing again. Not having protection was totally fine. I just wanted to get off tonight. It was worth it to risk it just this once. Definitely.

“Is this some kind of joke, Elise?” Carter scoffed with pronounced irritation. My eyes shot open with confusion, only to see a cage of leather and metal wrapping around my entire pelvis.

A... chastity belt?

*“Only a man who values you will be able to unlock this cage. If he doesn’t truly love and desire you, then you’ll be safe from his crimes.”*

Nero’s words after the first masquerade flashed through my mind near instantly upon seeing it.

“It’s uh... I thought we’d try something new. Maybe get a little kinky.” I managed through my own surprise. I hadn’t put this on at any point, and if this was a result of Nero’s spell, it shouldn’t be appearing for Carter. It was only supposed to keep out men who I didn’t want or men who didn’t value me, which has already proven worthless considering it hadn’t appeared for Rowan. It hadn’t even

appeared for the monster who chased me through the woods. This was my fiancé. The love of my life. My future husband and doting boyfriend. I loved him, and I wanted him.

My eyes widened at the realization. What if I was looking at this from the wrong angle.

What if this appeared because *he* didn't actually want *me*.

I swallowed, while Carter looked down on me with annoyance. "How am I supposed to get it off?" He picked up my discarded dress and shook it, while he rubbed his erection with an impatient scowl on his face. "I'm not into this. Where's the key, Elise?"

I opened my mouth but no words came out. He didn't value me, but Rowan and that stranger did? This was a spell from the Devil though, so how could I trust it? Nero must have been using his own biases to select more evil men, because this couldn't be right.

I watched Carter searching through my clothes with frustration for several minutes, when I finally admitted, "I don't know where the key is."

Carter glared at me with unexpected contempt, and I shrank away beneath him. And that was when an intrusive thought hit me, loud and clear. One that burned away any fog of uncertainty. The realization that I...

*I didn't want him to touch me at all.*

“Looking for this?”

Both of our gazes immediately snapped to the tall fern at our side, where the elegantly dressed and masked Nero leaned against the trunk. One hand was in his pocket, while the other was twirling a key ring around his index finger at eye level.

Carter startled and immediately began trying to dress himself again. “Who are you?”

“You’ll know soon. Actually, you’ll come to know me very, *very* well, as I escort you to your final destination.”

Nero’s tone implied a smile, and I could imagine exactly how wicked he must look under that mask right now. My heartbeat slowed to a calm, and I silently cursed the part of me that found more comfort in his presence than my own fiancé’s.

“What does that mean?” Carter demanded through a shake in his voice. “Who is this? What is he talking about,

Elise?” He rapid fired questions like it was a negotiation for his life. If Nero was truly the devil, maybe it was.

I covered my chest with my hands but stayed beneath my fiancé at a loss for words.

“But please, don’t stop on my account.” Nero chuckled and twirled his hand to urge us on. “If this is what you truly want, Belladonna, then by all means.” He ignored Carter’s inquiry and tossed the key in our direction. Carter reached overhead to catch it, but it was just out of his grasp.

I followed that small metal object as it was snatched from midair by a black glove. The strong hand closed around it, then the man it belonged to touched that key to the lips of his black skull mask.

My eyes rounded and my lower lip quivered.

My stalker examined that key before he returned his attention back to Carter. “I wonder if he’d even be able to use it? What do you think, Nero?”

“What?” I glanced from the masked man to the masked devil. Did they know each other?

“If he can, it’s not fair for you to keep it.” Nero spoke directly to the interloper. “But then, I very much wonder the

same.” No sooner had he spoke the words did he disappear, leaving little more than an echo of a laugh in his wake. And then we were alone with this dangerous, dangerous man.

The skull masked intruder approached the bench, one steady and carefully placed step at a time. Every tap of his heels on the stone path tapped another note into a most haunting death knell.

Carter was shaking when he pushed himself off of me and got to his feet. I scrambled for my discarded dress, doing my best to cover myself.

“Why are you so scared?” The man asked Carter in a deep and taunting growl. He reached out his hand, and opened his palm, presenting the key. “Go on. Unlock the cage. So long as you love her, it’ll come right off.”

Carter looked between us. The sweat on his brow and the fear thumping in his chest was palpable from feet away.

“Take it.” The masked man demanded harshly when Carter continued to hesitate. “Show me how much you value your sweet little fiancée.”

Carter’s shaky hand lifted slowly. It continued quivering as he wrapped his fingers around that key, and pure



terror reflected in the gloss in his eyes as he returned his attention to me.

“Get on top of her.” Another demand. “Place the key between her legs.” And a chilling laugh. “Prove to me that you can make her come, and maybe, just maybe, you’ll leave here alive.”

Carter and I shared a hopeless glance, then like hostages held at gunpoint, we complied. I spread my legs just enough to offer easy access, and Carter crawled back on top of me.

“I love you.” I forced the words, hoping they might be enough to dispel that magic cage.

Carter simply swallowed, but he didn’t say it back. He trembled as he placed that key in the large lock at my waist. The key entered the mechanism smoothly, then he turned it in the lock.

And nothing happened. The key disintegrated in his hand, and the chastity belt remained secure around my nethers.

“Looks like this one’s a loser.” Another voice caught in my ear, and my attention shot to the knight standing behind

my fiancé. A helm was secured firmly on his face, and I couldn't make out any defining features.

“Thanks for playing though.” Nero said as he reappeared behind me. He placed a hand at either side of my head, supporting himself on the backrest of the bench, and he stared into Carter's eyes. Three men in three masks, and I was the only one completely exposed.

“I don't understand. Who are you?” Carter's tone grew frantic. He tried to back away from me. He tried to run. He tried and he failed as the knight caught him by the back of his neck, and shoved him back on top of me. I scrunched into fetal position, trying both to cover and protect myself, while he was forced into position.

“You're just going to run away and leave your poor, beloved girlfriend in the grasp of three violent men?” The knight hissed. “What if something bad happened to her? Would you even care?”

“Please just let me go.” Carter blubbered. It wasn't lost on me that he didn't deny any part of that accusation.

“Pity.” My stalker shook his head. Then slowly, with pronounced care, he drew a blade from his belt. The metal shone under the light of a moon that was near full. “She gave

you her trust, her love, her loyalty, and her hopes and dreams, and what did you provide.” He rested the knife on Carter’s ear. The knight held him in place as the skull masked psycho started to cut a line down Carter’s jaw.

Beads of blood slid down the contours of his face, collected at his chin, and dripped down onto me. I watched, eyes wide, shaking, and unable to move.

“N-Nero, please, you have to help.” I heard myself say.

My guardian devil slipped his hands down to my shoulders. He massaged my muscles with strong hands. “I am helping you, my sweet poisoned flower.”

More blood dripped down onto my collarbone, less viscous now that it was mixed with Carter’s terrified tears. It pooled until it was thick enough to drip down my skin. It flowed down, drawing thin red lines down through my cleavage. I kept my eyes locked on my love as he stared down at me.

Carter clenched his teeth as the demonic man started a new cut along his cheek. He drew a line down to the corner of his lips, and he hovered the blade there.

“Tell her you love her.” He demanded.

“I—” He opened his mouth, and the knife nicked the corner. He pressed his lips back together and jerked his head away to avoid further pain.

I frowned inexplicably. It wasn't worth it to hurt himself over silly words, he must have determined. Why did that bother me?

The knight forced Carter's eyes back to mine, and my stalker's blade tapped back on his cheek.

“Can't even say it.” The knight scoffed. “No wonder she won't let you in. She probably knows you only proposed to her because you found out about her inheritance.” He jerked Carter backwards, pulling him off of me at last. “It takes audacity to ask a girl to marry you right after you fucked her stepmother.” This time the soldier was the one holding a blade to Carter's cheek. “Marry the stepdaughter, take all of her father's money, and then leave her, poor and discarded.”

When Carter said nothing, my eyes widened to the point of strain. “Wait, is that true?”

“Tch.” Carter squirmed in the strong hold of biceps and blades, but he didn't speak. Because... he was too afraid to argue, right? He didn't want to get hurt. Not because it was true. Not because... because he...

Nero braced his hands on my shoulders, and I was thankful for this one, single comfort.

“Nothing to say in your defense?” My stalker asked with nonchalance. “Then I guess you don’t need this anymore.” He twirled his knife in his hand, then he nodded to the castle guard. The guard responded by shoving his fingers into Carter’s cheeks and forcing open his mouth. Swiftly and with precision, my stalker shoved a blade into the opening, pierced straight through Carter’s tongue, and pinned it to the bottom of his mouth. The scream that followed was muffled and wet.

And it was brief, as another blade swiped deeply across his neck.

The guard released my fiancé, passing him off to the demon in black, who finished the job without a second thought.

Before I could so much as utter the word *‘wait!’* the flash of a blade in the moonlight appeared on the other side of Carter’s skin. And before I could scream, I watched as that head was severed from his body completely, thumping on the floor and rolling across the stones of the garden. It rolled into

the koi pond. It fell in with a splash. And the fish feasted wildly on the spreading crimson.

That knight's gloved hand caught Carter's headless body, stopping it from falling on top of me, but nothing could stop the blood as it erupted from his open neck. I was drenched in hot death in the instant before that lifeless sack was thrown into the pond to join its head.

My scream tasted of iron, and I swung at the masked figure who now stood over me. Nero released my shoulders, while my assailant caught my wrists, one at a time. He forced them back down on the backrest of the bench. He climbed on top of me, his face still hidden behind that dark mask, and he positioned himself to block out every trace of the moon's light.

"You killed him!" I screamed, though the shock was so intense, I couldn't register enough feeling to sob. "You killed my fiancé!"

I thrashed to no avail, while he calmly pinned me. It took nothing for him to overpower me again. "I killed the man who wanted to cage you in marriage to rob you of your fortune." He released my wrists to run his hands through the thick layer of blood on my neck, my shoulders, and my chest. He dragged wet handprints down my skin, stopping when his

palms cupped my breasts. Beads of liquid dripped down the soft domes as he kneaded me under his hold. “I killed the man who was sleeping with everyone in town, who you couldn’t trust to penetrate you, lest you risk a disease.”

He drew five streaks down my abdomen, digging his fingertips into my muscle as he moved his hold to my hips. Then he backed off the bench, and he knelt before me. “I freed you from an eternity of misery, where your heart would slowly die while you would never be satisfied, because you don’t think you deserve the same pleasure you give to others.” He lifted the lower half of his mask, and he touched his lips to the lock of my chastity belt.

It disappeared under his touch.

He leaned in and feathered his lips to the apex of each thigh, just to emphasize how easily he’d gained access.

Why could he dissolve the cage when Carter couldn’t? My heart raced as those kisses moved inward. I should have been fighting and screaming, yet I stilled completely when his tongue slipped inside and drew pressured lines around the shallow opening of my inner walls.

His bloodied hands painted me in red death as he pushed my shaking thighs wider and sucked roughly on my

clit. He flicked me with his tongue, then drew perfect circles before returning to taste my pussy.

I gasped, unable to process the conflicting feelings fighting in my heart and my head and every nerve between my legs. This man just murdered the man I loved, and yet the only sound I could manage was one of shameful ecstasy?

I dug my free hands into the cloth of his hood, and I felt his lips pull into a grin against me. His breaths sent electricity through my spine, while his tongue had me exploding in my core.

He shoved my knees up to my shoulders, leaving bloody handprints beneath my thighs, and he feasted on my pleasure like it was the only thing that sustained him.

<“I bet you’re wondering why he’s able to get past my spell?”> Nero’s voice filled my head, and my eyes shot open, giving me an unavoidable glimpse of the man between my legs, and the patient guard who watched us. Knowing those foreign eyes were on me only goaded me further. <“Then again, maybe you aren’t.”> His laugh reverberated through me. <“I have a feeling you already know the answer.”>

The moan that escaped my lips next was unwanted. Another laugh from the devil echoed against the confines of



my mind.

<”This is wrong. So fucking wrong.”> I shouted into the void of my thoughts, hoping he would hear me. I dug my grip in deeper as this man dragged me to the edge of my sanity, and I forced my focus on the knight watching in the background, hoping he might serve as a distraction who could pull me back into sane thought.

A phantom sensation drew circles over every sensitive and soaked pressure point in my body. <“Is it though?”> That magic rolled my nipples, then clamped down in the perfect pinch as my stalker stroked me once more. When the twinkle of power reached my neck, it wrapped around my windpipe like a snake. Nero’s magic and the killer’s tongue was an unfair combination. <“What would have been *wrong*, Belladonna, is if you married a man who couldn’t make you feel...”> another high pitch gasp escaped me when the masked assailant hit that perfect spot again. He spread me with his tongue and he was about to throw me off that cliff, kicking and screaming through the high of perfect orgasm. <“Like *this*.”>

Nero’s magic penetrated me fully, instantly finding all of the right spots that only amplified the sensation of the teeth grazing my clit. Like the devil had chosen the side of my

stalker, he pulsed power through me until I was a helpless mess, crashing into satisfaction and pleasure. I gave in, unable to resist any longer. A wicked smirk stretched across that guard's lips as I cried out. I was seeing stars, and tremors of relief dispelled the constant disappointment and discomfort I'd bore with tonight.

While my mind and body slowly came down from the confused high of sex and horror, my masked stalker climbed up my body and placed his lips directly on mine. He slipped his pussy soaked tongue into my mouth, tasting of come and blood, and he secured us with soft, swollen lips. I let him kiss me, too confused to protest, and too enticed by that delicious combined flavor to want to. His thick tongue filled me, and the power and domination of his movements had me wet and ready for more.

It was with tenderness that he laced his fingers through my hair, slicking it back with traces of my fiancé. "I'm your fiancé now." He purred into my mouth. "If you forget that again, I'll be happy to remind you."

He connected us one more time, then he let go of me long enough to free himself and connect us again. He pressed in the full thickness of his cock in one easy motion, and my

body accepted him easily. I don't know when I wrapped my arms around him, but I was holding on tight as he chased his own release inside me, while forcing me to find my own with perfect pressure and precision.

My cry was muffled as he covered my mouth again, just as I crashed into another full body high. I was panting and too sated to think straight when he at last climbed off of me. He replaced his mask over the bottom half of his face, then with a nod to his guard, he left me alone in that garden. No portion of my brain made any attempt to process any of it.

It was mechanically that I at long last sat up, though I couldn't say how long I'd laid limply against the backrest. I blinked myself into clarity, I stood, I pulled back on my dress, then I dropped to my knees and hurled the contents of my stomach into the scarlet koi pond.

## Chapter 25



Beautiful. Not even my critics could deny that the juxtaposition of death with sex was masterfully crafted. A classic composition with enduring themes.

I couldn't find any sympathy for the man, either. He wasn't worthy of our poison flower. I'd sooner have wed her myself than allowed a union with such a pathetic human being. I was happy to discard him into the depths of purgatory.

Perhaps this event would help her understand her needs better, including the fact that he wasn't meeting them. She sold her soul to me to get all of her life's wishes. She'd have to learn to trust the process.

And yet, for the remainder of the week, even up until the night of the Masquerade, she would come out to the garden for her nightly tending, and she'd stare at the koi with disgust

and horror. What a strange way to show appreciation for the prince and the protector.

On the night of the second party, I paced up behind her. My mask remained firmly affixed.

“You seem ill, Elise.” I said with the softness that she needed. I looked down over her shoulder at the reflection in the pool. I looked rather menacing with my mask, towering over her trembling body and exposed emotions. “The second Masquerade is but hours away, and here you are, barely able to stand. Can I assist you, my dear Belladonna?”

Elise made eye contact through our reflection. She couldn't see the smile that brought to my lips.

“N-Nero.” She sat back on her haunches and started rubbing the tears from her reddened eyes. I snapped my fingers to offer her an instant freshening up, removing any trace of bile from her taste buds or dehydration from her face. She started sobbing again, however, immediately rejecting the comfort I offered. “I've made a terrible mistake.”

“Which mistake was that?” I'd really need her to be more specific here. As much as I wanted to assist her, she was truly the hottest of messes.

“I was happy. I had everything I wanted and needed. And yet I was selfish and greedy and wanted so much more until I was left with nothing.” She continued to cry and I internally groaned.

“Nothing?” I asked with feigned curiosity. “It appears to me you have health, suitors who would kill for you, and freedom. What part of that counts as nothing?”

“My fiancé is dead.” She said with a pronounced bawl.

*Yes. Freedom. I already mentioned that one.* I resisted the urge to remind her out loud, giving her the benefit of the doubt that she simply misheard me.

“The same fiancé who your body rejected, no?” I tried instead with a raised eyebrow. “The same man who was using you to claim your inheritance and cheating on you with your stepmother?”

“That’s not the point.” She huffed, though her tears lessened.

“Would it help if I told you there was no debate as to where his soul ended up? I couldn’t have pawned him off on the light Fae if I tried.”

“Does that mean you can bring him back?” She sounded genuinely hopeful, and I had to keep my cringing purely internal.

“Not even I have those kind of powers.” Not actually true but, again, she wasn’t thinking clearly, and I wasn’t in the mood to coddle her. I would not be accepting any wishes on behalf of the baker. “Perhaps you’re looking at this entirely the wrong way. Your fiancé’s death means that someone cares enough for you to stick up for you to the point of risking capital punishment. That seems far more thrilling than what you were settling for.”

“Wow. When you put it that way, I’m so glad I have an unhinged psychopath stalking me to the point of murdering the only person in the world who loved me. It’s every woman’s dream come true.” She scoffed, and I thanked the mask that hid the stifled laughter from my face.

“To be fair, my spell already proved that he felt no such way for you.” I waved my hand dismissively, and that prompted her to glare up at me with irritation and hate in her eyes. “Hey now, I’m just the messenger. Save that look for the men who decided you deserved better than a playboy who

wanted to drain you dry while he harvested a garden of chlamydia.”

And that made *her* laugh. A sound of joy that she immediately caught and wrangled in with embarrassment. “This isn’t a time for jokes.”

“I might argue it isn’t a time for being amused by those jokes if he meant as much as you claim.” With that, I offered sweet Belladonna a hand, which she accepted without a second thought.

“He was the first thing I’d ever gotten that felt like he was entirely mine. I know he wasn’t actually good to me,” she finally admitted, “and I guess he was barely mine at all, but he was still more than I deserved. He accepted me for who I was, and he would have been a means to an end. Even if we divorced after and he took half of my earnings, at least I’d have gotten the estate.” *There it is.*

“You could have just wished for the estate instead of a nice dress.” I rubbed her shoulder for reassurance. “You terribly undervalued your soul to the point I feel in debt to you to pay enough for it.”

Her eyes widened, and the surprise was delightful. This woman never accepted praise, and there was an indescribable



joy in giving it to her. “Is my soul really worth more than that?” The question was both full of doubt and curiosity, as if she needed a clear explanation as to why or how I had come to such a conclusion. Her mind could never conjure such an explanation.

“Every soul is worth more than that.” *Well, maybe not the baker’s.* “What makes you think yours isn’t? Was it you, yourself? Or was it someone who has never lived in your head, giving you an appraisal based on their own insecurities and lack of self-love?”

She opened her mouth then shut it again. I knew her explanation would likely have involved this stepmother character who she still kept in her life. Maybe her father who didn’t even exist in this realm any longer. I already knew very well what her *stepbrother* thought of her, and I’d not cast blame there. I rubbed her shoulder then leaned in to whisper softly into her ear. “Stop and think for a moment. What is it that assigns worth to a person? Is it their character, and how they treat others? Is it how they deal with hardship and trauma? Is it an internal morale that drives you to push forward? Is it a skill that you have or a journey that you’ve taken? The stories you tell? A richness of experience? Tell me,

Belladonna, how do you define your worth, and what has brought you to the conclusion that you don't have any?"

Her struggle to answer said more than she would ever know. She paused for several moments before she made eye contact with me again. "No one around me values me, and there must be a reason for that."

"No one? Yet, you have a man who killed for you and another who has learned to play to every one of your kinks. And even I—" I stopped myself, and I shook my head. "Even the devil himself thinks you deserve the happiness you deny yourself. I might say you're valued to an extreme." I reminded her. I wanted her to stop seeing the tragedy in the baker's death and start seeing the wonderful implications of it.

"So my fiancé getting murdered is something I'm supposed to take pride in?" She damn near scoffed, and I couldn't help but snicker at that. "He valued me without hurting me."

"Mmmm, we both know that isn't true." I waved a hand dismissively. "He didn't value anything other than his dick" That forced another laugh from her throat, and my, was that sound satisfying. "But this dark stranger who ended his

life valued saving you from giving yourself to an empty, loveless contract.”

“Even if that’s the case, that only tells me that his death was completely my fault.” She sniffled. “How can I feel good about the idea that my fiancé is dead because he asked me to marry him? That someone got hurt because of me.”

“People get hurt all the time for a million reasons, from petty theft to justifiable revenge. Passion seems like a fair middle ground.” I attempted, though she only frowned. I thought she’d like that line, but I may have read her wrong. I started again, “you’ve let the world beat you into submission your entire life, and even fate itself now wants to stand up for you. If you don’t want more death to follow, then take control of that destiny, Belladonna.”

She blinked several times to process that. “So you mean I should bathe in the blood of my enemies or something?” She somehow said that with a straight face. I involuntarily snorted. A most unbecoming sound.

“It *did* look lovely on you.”

Elise shared with me the first honest smile since she’d watch her boyfriend end in pieces. There was that darkness I was looking for. A broken toy who was finally starting to find

the strength and uniqueness in its defects. “Help me find the identities of the men who did this, and I would be happy to do exactly that.”

My expression flattened, and I was grateful for my mask. *Your revenge is directed in entirely the wrong direction, my poison flower.* “As you wish.” I lied unapologetically. This culling of lesser men was the prince’s wish, and I wouldn’t be going against that. She still had to be manipulated a bit more if we were to get her where I needed her.

So instead, I played the role expected of me. I grabbed this lovely woman by the waist, I pulled her in close to me, abrupt and taking her off balance, and I lifted my mask. To create the illusion of sealing the contract, I took her lips. It wasn’t necessary, yet something about their pretty red hue and her puffy crying eyes made her irresistible, and I was happy to play the role. It was hard enough to simply spectate as Lazuli pushed her over the edge, and there was some part of my mind that wanted to see that expression on her face again.

Elise didn’t fight me. She was always so willing to give in no matter how rough I was. I speared her lips, and she closed her eyes to focus on the feeling, so I ran my hands down her shoulders, pulling down the straps of her sundress

along with them, so she could feel herself being undressed just seconds before I made this old thing disappear.

In an instant, she was naked in my arms, and in another, she'd be dressed in a magical gown, but first, I wanted to enjoy her. I traced the lines of her back with a firm palm until I made it to her bare ass. Exposed and naked in the garden with the cold night air dancing on her flushed, hot skin, she was digging into the kiss more desperately than ever. Those hints of deviance that she fought to keep hidden were one of the many things that drew me to her spirit.

I deepened the kiss as I rounded my hand to the nonexistent space between our bodies. She ground on the friction of my clothing until I replaced it with my fingers. I drew a line down her center, and she parted her legs just slightly. I slipped in my index finger, and she shifted her hips to drive herself onto me more completely, until she had my finger tip dancing over her favorite spot.

An eager and hungry little dove.

“I won't fuck you.” I whispered against her lips so swollen from kisses. I drew a pressured circle inside her, and she gasped into my mouth. “You shouldn't want me to either.” I kissed her again, never nipping or drawing blood, so no

contract could be signed. “But I’ll make sure you understand everything you’re worth tonight.” I grabbed her hair and pulled her head back, dominating her mouth and her body beneath me. Then it was time to let go.

I forced myself to withdraw my tongue from her mouth of the sweetest poison, and her pussy of slick hellfire, then I retreated into my own realm, where she could no longer see me, but I could still see her.

She looked distraught as she caught her balance and searched for me. Distraught and beautiful in the flowing red dress that hugged her every curve and flowed to the ground like a waterfall of silk and sheen. Crimson roses adorned her up-do like a flower crown, and a high slitted skirt paired with a low dipping cowl neckline accentuated and teased at her sensuality. The prince may not like the color, but I knew another suitor who certainly would. This curious little creature had to go find love for herself, and I certainly wasn’t to be a part of it. Even if, I had to admit, I was inexplicably drawn to her too.

## Chapter 26



The ball had begun and I was nearly too nervous to even approach the dance floor. I suppose I'd gone a bit too far that night. I could have murdered the baker more discreetly, but the idea that he was about to force his unimpressive dick on my queen was beyond unacceptable. The fact that she'd had no issue climaxing immediately after his death told me she wasn't as bothered as her moral compass wanted her to be. Those dark parts of her soul were so precious, my heart fluttered just thinking about them.

But what if she hadn't accepted the invite tonight? If I kissed her on the dance floor, would she recognize me? Would she know she was dancing with the same man who'd executed her biggest problem?

At least I knew she wasn't in the arms of *Carter the Baker*. I couldn't even say his name in my head without lacing every syllable with mockery and disgust. Fiancé. What

rubbish. No one would marry such a man when I was pursuing them. I'm sure now she would understand that.

With a huff and one last quick check in the mirror to assure every strand of hair was where it should be, I walked into the hall approaching the ball room. As always, Mason waited for me by the curtain. He had his helmet down over his eyes as he leaned against the wall, fixated on a red rose he was twirling between his fingers.

“Red, Buttercup? Really? You haven't seen enough of that color lately?” I chided him loudly enough for him to hear me.

“It contrasts so nicely with your blue though.” He pursed his lips, then he leveraged himself from the wall. He paced over and placed that offending flower behind my ear. “You should expand your horizons a bit, my lord.” The smirk on his lips was the only window to his emotions that he shared. I knew he had to stay fully armed and dressed during the event, in case of an assassination attempt, but I much preferred his cold yet honest eyes.

“Why, pray tell, would I want to do that?” I narrowed my gaze at my most trusted guard as he took a step back to



admire his work. I hesitated to throw that rose back at him in case he had a solid point to share.

“Step into the ballroom, and you’ll understand.” Mason took my hand with a gentlemanly delicateness, and he started walking me back towards the curtain. One step at a time, I followed, knowing this was the one man in the world, more than even Nero, who wouldn’t ever lead me astray.

The curtains parted at his back, then we were out into the ballroom, overlooking the dancers from atop the stairs.

And there, on the outside looking in, was my queen, dressed in seductive silk of the deepest ruby that hugged every perfect curve of her body.

“You’re right. I do think I like that color.” I nodded.

Mason chuckled. “I knew you would.” He still hadn’t released my hand as he directed me to the curving stair cases on either side of the dance floor. “Let me show you, Prince, how best to handle a little bit of fire.”

## Chapter 27



The ballroom was already alive with dance when I arrived. I skimmed the floor, looking at all the masked faces, smiling broadly under their veils. Everyone looked so happy, yet I wasn't. I should have been thrilled, but I knew that the one person who I was looking forward to dancing with on this night was missing from the festivities. I was alone, and this room full of people only reminded me that I always would be.

I sighed, trying not to think on the fact that I'd been ready to give myself to the devil but moments ago to forget this sadness inside of me.

No, that wasn't why. That was the performative reason I latched onto so I didn't feel like a bad person. The reality was, some small part of me was more appalled by the gore and horror of it than the death itself. Another part of me was almost pleased that it had happened, in a small, karmic vengeance that I wasn't allowed to indulge in. Like I'd spent

so much time being beaten into the floor, I couldn't be assed to care about one of my many disappointments coming to an end. Like it had been a mercy on me more than a horrid punishment.

What the hell was wrong with me?

I'd been truly warped from the beginning. I could blame my childhood, and it would be a fair target, but whatever brought me to this point had numbed me where I didn't want to be numb, steeled me where I shouldn't be steeled, and twisted my wants and needs in way that no good, sweet girl should ever desire. It was the reason I was here now, hoping to get whisked away by a stranger again instead of mourning my lost love, and it was why I felt such guilt that anyone might be foolish enough to value my tainted, unlovable soul.

Yet still I stepped forward. Still I melded with the happy crowd. Still I didn't miss a single beat when a stranger took my hand and twisted me in a spiral.

This stranger's mask was a helmet. Around his neck was a red scarf, and on his belt was a sheathed sword. Not standard issue. His blade was special, heavily ordained with artistry of gold and silver and sapphire from the hilt to the

sheath. A strong knight with a guiding hand, who could lead and protect.

The same knight I'd seen standing behind my dark shadow under that tainted moonlight. I was quick to give in, though I dared not acknowledge why, letting this man hold me in an intimate sway. Tonight I'd be the devil's good girl, and I'd enjoy myself so his kindness wouldn't go to waste.

It didn't matter if this man was a killer, a saint, or a mindless guard. His identity was irrelevant to me. I was here to lose myself. Here to revel in the party of it. Here to use him to forget who I was. I closed my eyes, and I gave myself to his movements.

"I thought you might be more discerning than dancing with a castle guard, Love," a familiar voice sounded from behind me before pulling me away from my armored partner and into his soft tailored suit. The masked charmer held me from behind, tracing my body with his open hands with inviting pressure. Tonight I might just accept that, too.

The guard paced around us, creating a perimeter within the crowd that only we could cross, while my new partner spun me around to face him. He squeezed me against his body. "No protests this time? Did you finally realize you wanted a

man instead of a boy?” He sported a haughty grin beneath his mask.

I forced myself into his rhythm, not wanting to talk about Carter tonight or any other night. “I was bad for him. He deserved better.”

The dark Adonis cocked his head back, staring down at me with eyes so violet, they nearly glowed. “No, my queen,” He spun me away from him, and the knight caught my hand and pulled me against his armor instead.

The guard whispered into my ear as he picked up the dance where the other left off. “You deserved to be the one to wield the blade.”

My eyes widened, but the forcefulness of his movements gave me no time to absorb those words. Wait, if this guard was by my stalker’s side that night, was this charming stranger...

No, he didn’t even know who I was. There was no way he could have figured out my name and my relationship with such a brief meeting. I’d been with Carter for a year, and not even Rowan had identified him before I’d brought him home. Even if he somehow had deduced my identity, my black and

blue dancer was a man who whispered sweet, poetic nothings into my ear. Not a man who could take off another's head.

That's what I told myself, even if my gut knew better. My instincts had a tendency to be incredibly perceptive, while my head had a tendency to deny reality, and once again, I wanted to ignore the logical part of my brain right now.

The knight was rougher than his friend, and he held me harshly against his body before he passed me back. My step was steady on these ruby heels that Nero had granted me tonight. Perhaps they held some magic, as I effortlessly kept up with both men.

"And she's adaptable." The violet eyed gentleman commented casually. "You handle both of us beautifully." I liked that complement more than I cared to admit. I'd never realized that my juggling of day to day chaos had taught me to handle anything that was thrown at me, but right now it made me feel powerful and special.

The knight moved in close, running his hands down my sides and resting them on my hips, while the other man respectfully kept his hands on my shoulders. I couldn't say if I was being shared or if these men were competing for me, but I was willing to give in to either dynamic. I urged on the knight

by suggestively shifting my hips between his strong palms, then I ground my body against the man in front of me.

“Trying to put on a show?” The guard asked, whispering in my ear, while digging his fingertips into my hips. There was a comforting harshness to his voice that was familiar in its severity. Too familiar. It reminded me entirely too much of Rowan, which only made me want to provoke him more.

“What would you do if I was?” I responded coyly, before pushing away from that soft suit and more firmly into the embrace of hard armor. He immediately responded, holding me against him and dragging my long skirt up a few inches. Nothing was exposed, yet the way he was touching me felt purely animalistic, dirty, and desperate. The kind of powerful desire that anyone could see even by vague glance.

“We would gladly oblige you.” The dark dancer closed any space between us. He placed his hand atop the guard’s and he drew the material upward another few inches. The slit in my skirt was hiked dangerously high, exposing the entirety of my thigh, but still hiding everything more erogenous. I might have wished I wore something less modest, but I couldn’t actually indulge in such fantasy on a crowded dance floor.

“Over the clothes only, gentleman.” I grinned. I shouldn’t be happy right now, yet something about their energy made it difficult to resist their rhythm. I’d passed my mourning and gave myself to celebration with deplorable quickness, but that was the point. Why couldn’t I revel in being this person tonight? I was wearing a mask. I wasn’t Elise anymore. I was a woman who could give into whatever I damn well pleased.

I needed this right now after all. If I was going to get to live out my fantasy for just one night, then I could leave reality behind for this singular moment.

“As you wish, my lady.” The pressure of my charming partner’s hard cock had me immediately regretting the demand, yet I wanted to see what else he could do at the same time. This silky smooth dress that hugged every curve of my body was perfect for both hiding in plain sight and encouraging exploration.

The other ball goers danced circles around us, but with two strong men in my orbit, I wasn’t paying them any mind. No one knew who any of us were, and there was an inexplicable satisfaction in that.



The charming stranger spun me around, then he dipped me low until it was only under the support of his strength that I wasn't falling. I bent my knee against his side, and he dug his fingertips into my thigh, always staying over the material.

I settled into that strong hold, while he hovered his lips but inches from mine, then... he dropped me. My heart jumped into my throat in that millisecond of peril, then I drew in a calming gasp as the bodyguard swept me up next. He caught me and righted me, before he held my back to his chest. He'd put himself in a prime position to feel his way all along my body. He traced my thighs, starting on the outside, then moving inside until he was dancing his fingertips over the material between my legs. He drew a line up to my red silk covered navel, then he circled each of my nipples until they were perked and visible, tenting the thin fabric on my chest. He moved his hands up to the meek spaghetti straps, and he dragged the material upward, creating the most delightfully smooth friction against my bare body underneath.

I shivered against him as his strong hand made it to my neck. He wrapped his fingers gently around my throat, then he lifted until my chin was high, and I was looking down on the man in front of us.

Violet eyes were drinking me in and the slight roll of his bottom lip against his teeth made me shiver.

“Are you sure you want to stop here, Love?” The stranger whispered into my ear. The guard sucked my other ear into his mouth, while his companion’s hot breath danced its way down from my earlobe to my shoulder. Both men nuzzled me, the guard nipping and the stranger delicately feathering kisses.

I swallowed against the palm around my neck, and I nodded silently.

Of course I didn’t want to stop there, but the last thing I could vocalize in front of these two was that the woman who they may have thought of as a pure, pretty dance partner wanted them to fuck her in front of everyone.

“No you’re not.” The guard spoke with that severity that made me jump. He squeezed my neck harder for a moment, then he moved down to the strap of my dress. Another move that felt so distinctly like my stepbrother, which, incidentally, made me damn near feral when performed by literally anyone who wasn’t him. The stranger’s careful touch slipped between my legs, sinking fabric between a growing dampness. The guard’s hands moved down to my

breasts, shamelessly massaging them through the silk, pinching and rolling my nipples to keep them visible. And in all of it, they continued to shift and move ever so slightly, keeping up the appearance of a smooth and intimate dance to any outsiders.

My heart was pounding at a thousand miles a minute when the stranger put his lips on my neck. He sucked and nipped at tender flesh, while he continued massaging my clit through my dress. The guard nipped at the other side of my neck, biting with a dominance that clearly intended to leave a mark. He'd rub my breasts, then move back up to my straps, always threatening to expose me, never letting me get too comfortable, and by the devil did that do something terrible to me.

I moaned softly, throwing my head back against that soldier's shoulder, while my dance partner had me verging on orgasm without even directly touching me. My legs were weak and shaking as he increased the pace of his stroke, and I braced one hand on the charmer's shoulder and the other on his knight's thigh to try and keep myself grounded.

Both men nipped their way down to the nape of my neck, then nudged the straps on my dress with their lips. The

supports drifted dangerously low, and it was only thanks to the knight's hands that my bust stayed up and over my body.

I dug my fingers into both of my companions, thankful for the music that was loud enough to drown out my pants and moans.

The guard clamped down roughly on my nipples, and the material fell down over his hands, exposing all but the most private portions of my breasts. That extra pace to my heart beat was what took me over the edge, and I was holding on desperately to my men as that elation took me. I could feel the stranger's lips pull into a smile as I lost myself on his fingers. I was a puppet in the hands of these men, and there was nothing I could do to keep myself from giving in.

The violet eyed masquerader took my mouth, muffling my cries with the heat of his tongue, then he passed me to his guard, who kissed me with equally dominating possession. My straps had been returned to my shoulders while the ball goes danced around us, and I found myself breathing heavily against the armored chest of this protector.

My knees were weak and I could barely get a hold on myself.

“Next time I won’t go so easy on you, Love.” My stranger whispered before taking a single step back.

His guard said nothing beyond the wicked smile he shared from beneath his helmet.

I was damn near ready to ask him to prove it right then and there when I caught sight of the clock mounted high on the wall.

*Shit.*

I only had ten minutes, and the spell would wear off.

“I have to go.” I choked out the words to wide eyes of surprise. Forcing myself to my senses, I pushed off of the guard, and I slipped away from the other man, then I started to run towards the exit. I had no time to explain, and when I was dressed like this, I felt no obligation to justify myself. This beautiful version of Elise had agency, but the version I was about to return to wouldn’t.

Though I actually wanted to stay a little longer, even if I knew that was impossible. I wouldn’t let the fantasy end here. If I hoped to have the chance to enjoy one more night like this, my partners couldn’t find out who I really was, or they’d never waste their time with me again.

I slipped from the door, sidestepping one of the guards and not waiting for my partners to have time to react. I lamented that this night had to end, but maybe one day, I'd have a love like this that lasted.

As the clock hit midnight, my clothing started to change back into its old, drab, simple form. Red silk turned to cotton and jewels turned to starlight. The roses that adorned my hair shattered into a thousand petals, and my once styled locks fell messily around my shoulders.

I frowned as I saw my reflection in the window glass of passing storefronts. There was the real Elise again, running right back into her miserable life, and locking herself back in her cage before her tormentors could notice she was missing. Who didn't even have a terrible fiancé waiting to sooth her pain.

I wished I could one day be the woman in the ball gown every day. Maybe that would always just be a dream, so long as I stayed wrapped around the fingers of monsters.

I bit my lip, when a realization hit me.

Speaking of monsters...

This time and in the garden were the first times I'd ever been able to fully get off *without* Rowan present. I could climax with the toy he'd given me, sure, but even that had always still felt connected to him. In all my self-admonishment and misery, the oppression and fear, was I somehow actually breaking my chains? Between Nero, this charming stranger, and this dashing knight, maybe, just maybe, I could be free of my step family for good, in heart, body, and soul.

## Chapter 28



“That’s twice now. What do I need to do to make her stay?” Prince Zakari scoffed as we disappeared behind the curtain, away from the rest of the party goers. He ran a hand through his hair, pushing black strands behind his head, before he forcefully removed his mask and threw it to the cobalt carpet. “Do you think she was truly in love with that little baker of hers? Is that why she rejected me?”

I reached my hand into my pocket, where a red rose had been crushed and frayed, every petal loose and soft. I rolled the velvety texture between my fingers before I addressed the prince. “She never loved him. He was a means to an end. She’ll forget his passing soon enough.”

I lifted the shattered rose up to eye level, then I puckered my lips to blow them in his direction. Zakari caught the offending confetti in a fist, then he examined the frail



petals. He lifted his gaze to mine slowly. “She might even start to revel in it.”

“While I’m certain that Elise is my true soul mate, you certainly put in a strong application, Mason.” The smirk that stretched across his lips told me he’d picked up my meaning. Though the way it disappeared just as quickly told me that wasn’t enough for him. “But then, since her fiancé is dead, there’s no reason she should be running from me anymore. If she just wants this supposed inheritance, then I can provide far more than that.” With a frustrated exhale, he continued towards his room. “She clearly isn’t in mourning, so what’s the problem?”

I looked back over my shoulder at the curtain that divided us from the ball, and the party that divided us from Elly, then I dutifully followed my liege lord. “A woman’s heart is complicated, and if she’s as special as you believe her to be, I’m sure her needs aren’t as simple as an engaging dance. You have to play to her true and honest needs. Needs that are much more devious.”

“Devious?”

“Is that not a fair assumption, considering how desperately she was grinding on your fingers in the middle of a

crowded room? Considering how she climaxed while literally covered in her ex lover's blood? Elise isn't a simple woman. She's one with a very complicated trauma and an even more complicated libido." I tried to play it off as keen observation, but Zakari was sharper than that.

"That wasn't a question or assumption. You stated it as a clear fact." His tone beget no nonsense and pure skepticism. "You speak as if you know her, Mason." He kept his back to me as he walked. I said nothing, prompting Zakari to stop abruptly and turn to face me. No response may have been too vivid a response, but I wasn't a good liar around him. At best, I could keep my secrets by omission. "... *Do* you know her, Mason?"

I remained silent.

He paced over until he was but inches from me. "Who is the girl who you've been hoping to court, Buttercup?" His words were harsh in spite of the playful nickname.

"Elise Cenere." I confirmed for him. With a deep breath, I motioned to remove my helmet. I shook a hand through my hair to fluff out the shape, then I met his violet eyes without the barrier between us.

The way he stared at me told me it was starting to come together in his head. “So you met her long before I did.”

“Yes sir.” I kept it formal despite our otherwise casual relationship.

“Which is why you knew she was hoping to marry to acquire her inheritance, correct?”

“Correct.” I nodded.

“An inheritance that will otherwise be controlled by her stepmother?”

“Yes.” *Keep going, Zak.*

“What’s her stepmother’s name?” The way his eyes narrowed pleased me, and I smiled as he put the pieces together.

“Lydia Cenere.” I said plainly and with the kind of blatant misguidance he would doubtlessly catch.

“Yes, because she married Dean Cenere.” He cocked a brow. “But before that, her maiden name was...”

*There it is.* “Lydia Mason.”

“Your mother.” He said, not a question, but a statement.

“My mother.” I confirmed.

“Elise is your... *stepsister*.” Every word he spoke was measured. “So that’s why you’ve always insisted on sleeping at your home outside the castle. You’re in love with your stepsister.”

I opened my mouth, but hesitated to confirm *that* statement. It felt loaded and nearly judgmental. Though the Prince was never one to judge, and it wasn’t like we were blood related.

Though, that wasn’t the part of that statement that truly threw me. No, it was the part about being in *love*. That was a loaded word. It seemed so obvious and so absurd at the same time.

But... of course that was true. Yes, I’d always been in love with her. From the day her father dragged my mother into their orbit, and the way she smiled so innocently and called me Roro, because Rowan was too difficult to pronounce, I’d already loved her.

But Elly was difficult. She would be repulsed if I ever told her such a thing. She was hung up on our legal relation, and she fought our chemistry for it. Which was why she loved jabbing me with words like “big brother” in an attempt to

disqualify me as a suitor. Though I was the only one who she ever showed her real face, and the only one who knew what buttons she needed to have pushed. Maybe those buttons were a consequence of trauma and conditioning, but I could accept her needs, whatever they might be. No random baker or crepe maker or high school jock would be willing to put up with the same.

The Prince however...

I looked toward my long time employer and friend. I'd taken a job in the castle in hopes that I might get strong enough to protect her, and somewhere along the line, I'd met a soul that matched mine. He was nearly as important to me as my own little stepsister. If there was one man I might be willing to share her with, it was him.

After a long pause, I nodded in confirmation. "Yes, I am."

"Have you been sabotaging me this whole time, Mason?" He started to pace, slow, calculated, and with the light step of a born predator.

"I could have locked her in a cage where you'd never find her if I wished to sabotage you." An absurd accusation.

“I could execute you for withholding this information, you know.” There was no amusement in his tone, but that certainly brought some to mine.

“I would *love* for you to try and execute me, Zak.” I all but snorted at the audacity of that statement. Prince or not, powerful or not, I knew far more about butchering flesh than his highness could ever hope to learn. Lucky for him, I quite liked him in one piece.

“You really are a master of the subtle threat.” His scowl broke in a smirk, reaffirming that fondness I held for him was just. “Instead, how about you give me a reason to trust you again.”

*Gladly.* “Elly—” I cleared my throat, “*Elise*, my dear sister, doesn’t know how to love herself. She’s been beaten down for her whole life to the point she wouldn’t know true affection if it was fucking her against a refrigerator door.”

“Oddly specific.” He gave me a knowing grin.

I cleared my throat. “Which is *why* I guided that dance exactly how I knew she would like it, in hopes of winning you her favor. Elly has some very specific kinks, and if you can’t hit them right, she won’t even give you a chance.” He nodded along in understanding, until I added. “Though I will say that

she hates herself to the point she had intentionally chosen a man who couldn't please her, as if she didn't deserve pleasure in her life. It may take some effort to convince her that you care."

"I thought murdering her problem would have communicated that clearly." He pondered. "The flowers didn't work either. Do you have something else in mind?"

"I've lived more years with Elly than I have without her. Of course I know what she needs." I rolled my eyes. "And while proving you'll kill for her is a nice start, I have another idea that might keep her at the next masquerade." It was time to push her limits. I'd been too soft on her until now. The next dance would be the last one, and then we could both leave that awful manor for good to live in the castle. "But first I have to ask, did *you* send her that dress?"

Zakari jerked slightly, taken aback by the question. "You think I would ever gift her a red dress? I assumed *you* had given it to her in light of all these revelations." He lifted a discarded petal to eye level to emphasize his point. "Was it a gift from her fiancé prior to his death?"

I shook my head. "No, even if he somehow could afford such a thing, he hadn't bothered to get her a dress even

up through the night before the masquerade. He was likely planning to repurpose something from one of his side pieces, or he expected her to provide her own attire.”

We both stared at each other as we processed this point that suddenly seemed so loud and glaring. Then we spoke in unison with the same thought:

“There’s *another* man.”





## Chapter 29



I trudged through the week after the second masquerade feeling empty and lost. Day past after day, and nothing registered anymore.

I'd had such fun, but the thrill of a dance and being a princess for the night meant little when I was still a poor, drab, dirty maid by day. This weekend would be the third and final dance, when the prince would pick his wife, and then there would be no more stunning parties to attend and no more reason for Nero to dress me up in pretty fabrics. After this whirlwind of a month, there was very little to look forward to. Carter was gone, Rowan was still Rowan, and aside from that pretty stranger and a psychotic stalker, I might never find another person who would marry me again.

To go from two willing partners to waking in a bed alone was perhaps even more of a sting. But I couldn't have stayed. The moment the bell had struck midnight, my dress

turned back to my ordinary, dirty clothing, and no one would have been enchanted by me that way. My worth to a stranger was only tied to the image I conveyed. It's not like either of the men on that dance floor wanted Elise Cenere. They wanted the beauty in red.

I crawled out of my bed on the morning before the third and final Masquerade, demotivated, yet knowing I had to start going through the motions if I didn't want a lashing from Lydia. I dressed and began dusting the dining area, when my stepmother walked in.

“Elise, dear, come join me in my office, won't you?” She staged the request as a question, but it wasn't as though I would be allowed to refuse.

“Is something the matter, mother?” I approached the demand cautiously regardless, hoping she might better explain her reasoning.

“No, everything is wonderful. I just wanted to share the news.”

Now I knew this wasn't good. I followed Lydia to her home office, and like I was some sort of client or interviewee, I sat at the seat across from her as she pulled some files from a manila folder.

“I saw the news,” she began as she started fingering through the pages. “How unfortunate your dear fiancé would suffer such an awful fate.” She spoke idly as she placed the pages in front of me. Lydia lifted her gaze to mine as she folded her hands on her desk. “I couldn’t stand knowing you’re in such pain, so I’ve been speaking with the lawyer, and I thought you’d be happy to learn this burden of marriage is no longer on your shoulders.”

I stared blankly at the page trying to process what I was reading. A challenge to my father’s will? On what basis?

“I don’t understand.” I pressed, wishing she’d just tell me what awful thing she’d done now. She seemed to love the buildup. One day, I’d return the torture, I swore it.

“Your father had dictated that you must be married in order to receive your inheritance, and your only prospect is dead.” She continued as if that explained a damn thing. “It was clearly stated in the will that once you’ve made your choice, you will receive your inheritance, but should your engagement fail...”

“My inheritance would be forfeit to his one and only love.” I read the words off the page in robotic disbelief. I

stared at the contract numbly. Father hadn't actually written that, had he?

Of course he did. The lawyer wasn't on Lydia's side, and there was no reason to doubt it. That will hadn't been touched by anyone other than his legal team. I didn't want to believe it even though the words were staring me in the face. My inheritance was always conditional, but in light of Carter's death, I hadn't realized it would also be retractable.

My lower lip quivered involuntarily, and I did my best to keep my head and composure despite myself. "I see." I whispered beneath my breath. Words she only deduced by the movement of my lips.

At times, I'd come to realize my father was as bad as my stepmother. He'd never been on my side. Even in his death, he set up a scenario that gave others the power to destroy, disappoint, and sabotage me. He always put her first, and he always would.

I took another deep breath, then I raised my gaze to meet hers. "Is that all you wanted to tell me?" I asked with forced but believable nonchalance.

"Yes, that's all." She said with a saccharine smile. "Oh, and can you get my darkest blue dress ready, dear? I plan to

wear it to the Masquerade tonight.”

“Of course, mother.” I stood, I gave her the soft bow of a servant, then I returned to my room to dress for my grocery run. Numbly, I put on my sundress. And emotionlessly I stared into the dead reflection in my mirror.

I should have been screaming. I should have been crying. There were so many emotions that should have flooded my body in that single moment. Yet I felt so many things at once that they all cancelled out, and instead I was left with cold hard nothing. What a perfect tune for my life.

I don't know what came over me in that moment, but the words “*they'll all pay for this*” echoed off every wall of my mind. Lydia, who was my tormentor, Carter who she tainted and conspired with, and my father who put me in this position.

I heard myself laugh at the fact that I hadn't listed Carter's murderer in that list. Whether it was subconscious or not, deep down, I knew that was the one and only evil in this mess that was more a favor than an act of viciousness.

As that thought lingered a second too long, I shook it off, wondering where such wickedness even came from. I wasn't like that. These deviant thoughts that invaded my mind

all too often weren't mine. I had to believe that, anyway, lest I start accepting that maybe I did like it when Rowan bent me over the counter, or when people who wronged me died, or when I imagined violent revenge. That wasn't the girl I was supposed to be. I was supposed to take all of this abuse with a smile and keep on pushing, because I was strong and tough and sweet, and my prayers would be answered so long as I never gave up.

I scoffed at the thought. Maybe that's why it was so easy for me to sell my soul to Nero for little more than a pretty dress. Because there wasn't anything good left in me. One more unfortunate reality, just like my lost inheritance and my broken life. Any hope I had of picking up the pieces and finding a new love after Carter was a sham.

Who was I trying to kid? I was being stalked by a murderer. Even if the will had no such clause, that man would assure I never found another lover. I couldn't guiltlessly subject anyone to the danger of dating me. I'd barely been able to before with Rowan's possessiveness over me, but now the consequences were fatal. Perhaps this man had been hired by my stepmother. How pointless it was to keep fighting so much.

Maybe tonight, I'd go to the ball, and I'd let that stranger have me.

Maybe I'd ask Nero to take my soul early.

Maybe I'd just fuck the masked killer who chased me through the woods, and ask if he wanted to move in together and go steady. If the devil's spell was true, at least I knew he genuinely valued me.

*What's the worst that could happen?*

My internal chuckle was small and fake. I refused to linger any longer, and I walked from the manor into town without so much as a glance over my shoulder.

I held my posture high and tall until I got to the park. And that was where the big, strong, no-nonsense mask I'd been trying to wear fell off and shattered at my feet. I dropped to my knees, buried my face in my hands, and I sobbed with everything I had.

Was I really so wrong to wish someone could save me? I was so sick of being my only advocate in the world. I hugged myself as I cried, not bothering to hide the reddened face from onlookers. I was sick of hiding my pain. It was time I stop hiding behind a mask.



I wished my stalker would find me now. I wished he'd approach me and ask me to join him. I wished he might give me the blade next time.

And then I felt a tap on my shoulder.

## Chapter 30



My approach was swift as I knelt beside my crying bride-to-be.

“What’s the matter, Love?” I removed my sunglasses that had helped to shield my identity from passersby, but with her, I wouldn’t be treading carefully today. I could only hope I might be able to win her over when she could see my face, since up until now, she only gave me the time of day when she couldn’t. “You look like someone’s broken your heart.” *Like yet another man, perhaps.*

Elise stopped crying and lifted her chin. Her eyes met mine, and I wondered, in that moment, if she recognized me just by their depth and color. I’d given myself away as intentionally as I could, while she stared at me long and hard. I could see that conclusion coming together in her head.

She opened her mouth, hesitated, then spoke. “People are awful, so that’s a reasonable assumption.” She accepted my hand, and I helped her to her feet. Her eyes were red and puffy, while she was still sniffing to keep her nose from dripping. Yet she just kept staring at my face, where the recognition slowly but obviously set in.

“I might agree with you, but I’ve met a few who I don’t mind.” I added with a smile. “Though any human who would make such a lovely woman sob is not among them.”

She blinked several times, while still fixating on the color of my eyes. “That’s sweet of you to say, but I promise this pain is purely karma.”

A curious response. “For what?”

“For existing where I’m not wanted, and inserting myself where I only do harm.” Elise nodded and turned her back on me. What a depressing thought. My entire existence was based in violence, and I actively inserted myself into positions where I got the exciting opportunity to do harm, yet even I felt justified in my own place in the world. Ironically, she’d likely contributed more to other’s lives than I generally had.

“Wait.” I reached and caught her wrist before she could leave me completely. “Will I see you at the Masquerade tonight? It’s the final night, and I hoped to dance with you one last time.”

“So you recognized me, too.” Her surprise was adorable.

“I could never mistake you for anyone else.” I assured her. She may not have known I was the crowned prince, but at least she could know I cared. She’d already seen both my ugliest and most charming faces. It was about time she saw my ordinary one.

Only half of her mouth smiled. She drew in a breath through her nose and she released it through puckered lips. “Anything’s possible.” She said, so quaint and cute and enticing.

“Even with your boyfriend?” I asked, my tongue firmly in my cheek. Though she didn’t know I was the same man as her masked admirer, I still couldn’t help but probe her to see if she’d figured that out, too.

She tugged her wrist lightly, urging me to release her, but I wanted just one more moment.

“I’m more interested in a man these days.” She said with that quiet smile.

I released her, and I let her leave, cursing the need for patience. What thoughts could be going through that pretty little head of hers?

I suppose I’d find out tonight when I claimed her as my wife.

I replaced my sunglasses as we parted ways for the afternoon, confident we would soon be reunited by night. I stole one last glance at her over my shoulder, when I bumped into a townswoman. I stumbled, losing my sunglasses as I moved swiftly to keep my victim upright. I steadied her on her feet and apologized.

“I beg your pardon,” I said with a polite bow. “How careless of me.”

“You’re the prince.” She responded, dumbfounded and wide eyed. Her gaze shot rapidly between myself and my departing queen. I all but sighed. She was an older woman, at most around fifty, and she was impeccably put together, aside from the star struck surprise on her face.

I nodded, no point in denying it. Anyone who cared to know my face knew it well. In hindsight, I wasn't sure how I should feel about the fact that my love didn't care enough to know it, herself. "And I hope to see you at the Masquerade tonight," I finished with a charming smile.

Hastily, I returned my sunglasses back to my face and walked away with a quick step, hoping for no further engagement. There was only one woman I wanted to interact with from here on.

## Chapter 31



I laid on the war table and balanced one of Prince Lazuli's knives on my finger, while servants ran about the castle preparing for the final night of the Masquerade. Such a ruckus every time. You would think they hadn't already done this twice in as many weeks.

I sighed as I flipped the knife into the air and caught the blade on my fingertip on its sharp point. A pin drop of blood bloomed from the same wound that steadied the knife.

Zakari was surely talking to Elly right now. Probably trying to sweep her off her feet with all the pretty bullshit nothings he liked to speak. That wasn't what she liked.

I should have admitted up front who I was to her and who she was to me, but as much as I was trying to accept his obsession with my stepsister, I was still not entirely keen on the idea. Once he claimed her as his bride, what would that

mean? Would she be off limits for me? Would I be expected to act as her body guard while he fucks her loudly on the throne?

I'd kill him myself if that was the case. But then again, I'd known the prince long enough that I couldn't believe he'd do that to me. She meant too much. She always had.

I closed my eyes, thinking back on that night, so many years ago now. The first night I'd ever kissed her.



### *Three Years Ago*

Shadows cast over me as I stood outside the back entrance to the dance hall at Lazuli High. Though I'd graduated years ago, I couldn't stay home knowing Elly was in there with some disgusting predator of a teenage boy. Naïve and now eighteen, she was an easy target for deplorable and worthless dicks.

“Come on, Elise.” A distinctly male voice caught in my ear, and I lifted my gaze to the exit door that was squealing



open on its rusted hinges. I stayed back in the cover of darkness, where I could observe without interrupting honest intention. “I want to show you something.”

He walked out first, trailed by a firm hand around my stepsister’s delicate wrist. He wore a cheap, ill-fitting suit, and Elly was in a short, frilly red dress that pushed up her small breasts and flared at the hips. The material barely reached her mid-thigh, threatening exposure from something as slight as a mid-dance twirl. She stumbled on heels that were too high for her comfort, and he didn’t so much as slow down as he dragged her to the dumpster. I followed their movements, doing my best to show restraint when he shoved her against the bricks and took her mouth.

I rolled my fingers into a fist, one at a time, and clenched until my short fingernails were digging into my palm. I repeated the pattern to keep myself from doing something I shouldn’t.

“What did you want to show me?” She asked so sweet and innocent as he finally let her fucking breathe.

“It’s a surprise.” He grinned, he lifted her skirt, and he slipped his hand where it absolutely was not allowed. Every muscle in my body tensed.

“T-Travis—” she started to speak, only to cut herself off as he tugged her panties down below the hemline of her skirt.

“Shhhh, just wait.” He kept working the material down until it fell to her ankles. She tried to shift away, but her heels caught on the material, and she stumbled instead. She caught herself by grabbing his shoulders. He never even motioned to steady her.

Another roll of fingers to fist.

“I’m still a virgin.” She whispered, barely audibly. “I don’t know if I want to—”

“It’s fine. You’ll like it. It feels awesome. I’ll show you.” This Travis character undid his belt and hastily freed his short, pencil dick from his pants.

Yet another rotation, and I narrowed my eyes.

“Turn around.” He commanded, but he didn’t give her a chance to comply. He spun her and shoved her into the brick wall, not caring at all that the coarse material just scratched the soft skin of her half exposed tits. “Just stay still. You don’t have to do anything.”

She opened her mouth, then closed it. Her eyes fluttered shut next, and she stilled, letting him do whatever he fucking wanted. “Okay. Do it.” She said, surely because she was cornered and not because she actually wanted this fucking idiot.

The roll of my fist slowed, and I tensed every finger until I was shaking. If I stepped in now, would she hate me? If she really cared for this date of hers, would she resent me if I beat him to a bloody pulp for touching her? I couldn’t scare her like that. I had to respect her choices.

*Respect her choices*, I demanded of my own slipping temper.

He lined up at entirely the wrong hole, and I pushed off the wall. He pressed into her ass, dry, hard, and fast, and she covered her mouth to fight the involuntary scream that followed.

“Do you like that?” He asked like a complete fucking moron. Because who doesn’t like getting fucked dry in the ass.

Elise nodded rapidly, while keeping her mouth covered. Though the water in her eyes was clearly visible. He started to pull out and push in again, and she was dragging her fingers on the wall like she needed a physical distraction. I

couldn't even fathom in what universe that would feel good for *him*.

I was damn near ready to physically rip him off of her, when she said, pitifully, "l-let's try the other hole maybe?"

My hand remained tense, and I forced myself to resume that simple open palm to closed fist flow to prevent me from stepping out of those shadows. I'd been training hard as the prince's guard since graduation, and every muscle in my body was built for killing strength. He wouldn't last long if I unleashed on him, and she wouldn't forgive me if she genuinely liked this piece of shit. Not if I murdered him in front of her. I reminded myself again that I'd respect her wishes if her wishes were worth respecting.

"Oh yeah, good idea." Travis the fuckwit nodded. Though when he pulled out of her ass with blood on his shrimp dick, the red filling my vision had nothing to do with the color on his skin.

I dug my teeth into my lip until I tasted blood. I held my own hand and squeezed until I near broke my own bones. I fought every violent fucking urge in my body, and I stepped back and stayed quiet as he fucked my stepsister into the wall for the eight seconds before he came. His eyes rolled into the

back of his head like he'd just seen god, and then he pulled out and stuffed himself back into his pants.

“That was awesome.” He said, dumbstruck.

“Yeah, wow.” Elly forced a shaky smile.

*Inhale through my nose, slow exhale through my lips.*

*One. Two. Three. Four. Five...*

Elise awkwardly reached down to collect her panties, and the moonlight illuminated that disgusting spunk as it dripped down her inner thigh. I rolled and cracked my neck.

“Let's go back inside,” he said.

“I think I'm going to go home,” she said.

“Oh cool. Well, I'll see you Monday then.” Without so much as a hug, he returned to the party, leaving Elly in the dark back lot of the school alone. When the door shut behind him, Elly dropped to a squat. She hugged her arms around her waist, and she held herself. She didn't cry. She just stared distantly at the ground, as if processing what had happened.

“If that's what sex is like, I don't think I ever want to do that again.” She spoke aloud to no one, hollow and quiet. Then she stood up and started walking home on uncomfortable, unsteady steps.

And now I had two tasks to complete tonight.

I followed her home, keeping enough distance to avoid spooking her, and I waited patiently in my room as she committed to an overlong shower. When she came out, I rapped on her door in the way I always did so she would know it was me.

She opened the door cautiously, then she looked up into my eyes with a vague hint of guilt and nervousness.

“Roro.” She said playfully. A name she’d rarely used since we’d gotten older. “What’s up?”

I leaned my forearm against the door frame, just above her head. “You look like you’ve been crying.”

“O-oh, no. I just got back from the dance. It was fun. Maybe I’m just dehydrated.” She dismissed the inquiry, and I shook my head.

“What happened?”

“Nothing happened.” Elly took a step back into her room to invite me in. I followed.

“You went to the last dance of your school life and came back three hours early, yet you want me to believe *nothing* happened?” *Don’t lie to me Elly.* As much as I’d

wanted to intervene, I had to stay back and be a quiet observer. I wanted to be the man she loved, not the one she was afraid of.

“W-well...” She paused for a bit longer than a standard breath, then she turned to her bed. “Can I ask you a question? It’s about... umm...” Her whole face flushed, and I hated that it was due to someone else’s memory. “It’s about sex.”

I swallowed hard, but kept my cool. “What about it?”

“Have you ever done it before?” She asked near inaudibly.

I sighed and rolled my eyes. “I’m not going to tell you about my sex life, El.” What a ridiculous question. I had no interest in any woman but her, and I never would. The prince was enough to keep me sated until she came around. “What did you actually want to talk to me about.”

She shrunk into herself, and took another step back into her room. “I just wanted to know... is it supposed to hurt?”

My eye twitched, and I plastered on a concerned smile. “You’re bleeding.”

“Y-yeah.” She dipped her chin towards her chest. “My boyfriend and I decided we wanted to try it. And I’d never done it before, and it... it really hurt. But it always hurts the first time, right?”

*Be calm. Do not lose it.* “No, it isn’t always supposed to be painful. You shouldn’t waste your time with any man who hurts you.” I took a step into her room, then I shut the door behind us. I made sure she noticed as I twisted the lock. “Do you want me to show you how it’s supposed to feel?”

Her eyes grew wide. “R-Rowan. You’re my brother.”

“Your stepbrother.” I reminded her for the millionth time. I stepped closer to her and she didn’t retreat. As much as I wanted to take her mouth then and there, erasing the vile flavor of *Travis*, I hesitated. “You should know what an orgasm feels like. If he can’t make you feel at least as good as you make him feel, what good is he?”

“I-I... I mean, we can’t.” The fear in her voice told me she was imagining it, while the subtle step back told me she was fighting her own desire for it. “Blood related or not, you can’t put your... your...” Her eyes dropped below my belt, and I couldn’t help but smirk.



“No, I’ll use this.” I reached into my pocket and came up with a vibrator I’d purchased for her. My hope was to give it to her as a graduation gift, to keep her content and away from men like that, but clearly the situation was more dire than I realized. Though I was more than happy to be the one to demonstrate how to use it.

“What’s that?” Her perfect blue eyes shot between the toy and my face.

“Here, just lay down. I’ll show you how to use it.”

Without saying another word, she backed up onto her bed. She laid back, and I climbed on top of her. She kept her eyes locked with mine as I softly slipped the vibrator between her legs. I stayed over her underwear, giving her a very thin barrier of comfort. “Just keep your eyes on me, and focus on the feeling.”

When the vibrator powered on, I rested it so carefully and delicately beside her clit, avoiding direct contact. I danced the device over her hood, and I explored her carefully, watching her expression for pleasure cues.

“Do you like that, Elly?” I whispered against her lips, still keeping distance, but so tempted not to. “Tell me what feels good. And let me know what doesn’t.”

“Th-that feels good.” Her voice was a breathy stutter. Her eyes were half lidded, but she kept them on me. “Rowan —” Her voice hitched as I slipped beneath her panties and came in direct contact with her clit. Her lips hung open and it looked like she was fighting just to breathe. I kept the toy right there, while she gripped my shoulders and writhed beneath me. “God, Rowan.”

*There’s no god here. Though I’d be happy to show her the devil.* “You sound so pretty when you cry out like that.”  
*What I wouldn’t give to fuck her right now.* “You know you’re beautiful, don’t you?”

I dipped a finger into her, just to feel how wet she was, then I returned that stimulation where she needed it. She was a mess, unraveling and losing herself. I couldn’t take my eyes off her as she gave in, clawing at my back, and crying my name.

“Shhhh, don’t make too much noise.” I whispered softly. Though she couldn’t seem to help the little sounds escaping her parted lips. So I opted to help her out.

It felt so right and so natural the moment I leaned down and covered her mouth with mine. I wanted so badly to taste that sound on her lips. I dipped my tongue into her hot, wet

mouth, and I claimed her ragged breaths for my own. My cock was fucking straining in my jeans, and my eyes were watering with the discomfort and need to be inside her. But my tongue in her mouth would have to be enough for me tonight.

When I finally came up for air, she was staring at me in utter shock. That was when I knew I'd fucked up.

"You... You're my... big brother." She uttered like a vile betrayal. And I pulled back at the horrible realization that that was still how she saw me, even as she came on my hand.

"I..." I was at a loss for words, with no way to explain myself. Telling her I'd wanted to do that for years likely wouldn't be the correct response. Telling her I wanted to do so much more: even worse. So instead, I backpedalled. "Did he make you feel anything like that?"

She shook her head, still stunned silent.

"Did he kiss you anything like that?"

She swallowed before she answered, then quietly spoke the words. "It felt nothing like that."

"Then he's not good enough for you." I left the vibrator with her, then I crawled back off the bed, and stepped slowly backwards to the door. I twisted the lock open, then I placed

my hand on the knob. My eyes were closed and the deepest of breaths cycled through my lungs before I twisted the knob to the point of release.

“You deserve the world, Elly,” were the last words I said before I stepped out and left her alone.

She didn't chase after me, which was fine. If she had, I don't know if I could have kept holding back. While I resented the fact that we were legally considered siblings, it was about time I showed her that I was anything but her brother. Eventually she would come around. I could see it in her eyes.

But first, I had one last task for the night. I let my blue balls subside, then I returned to that dance to wait for it to end. I stalked silently in those shadows until one 'Travis' walked out of the dance with a new date in his arms. When he bid her goodbye to head back to his car, I followed him to the quiet backside of the building.

He walked behind the dumpster, then unzipped his pants to take a piss. And that was the last thing he ever did of his own free will before I slammed his fucking head into the brick wall, again and again and again.



### *Present Day*

I idly tossed the knife upwards once more, where a palm swiped it from mid-air. The prince made no bones about the fresh slices in his palm as he twirled the blade, using his middle finger as a fulcrum, and returned it to his belt.

“You’re looking unusually melancholy, Buttercup.” Zakari stated with a cock of his brow. “Tonight will be fantastic. What do you have to mull over?”

I placed my hands behind my head, and I rested on my interlaced fingers. “Just reminiscing.”

“About?”

“Old times.” I paused, knowing that answer wouldn’t be sufficient for him. “About Elise.”

“Are you worried?” Without warning, he climbed atop the war table with me, pushed my knees down to a softer angle, then straddled my waist. “Do you think I’m going to take her from you?”

I snorted at that question, that subtle fear suddenly seeming ridiculous when voiced aloud. No one would ever take Elly away from me. Not some bullshit baker, and not the prince himself. “Absolutely not.”

“I’m not sure if I should be offended by that or not.”

Zakari pursed his lips.

“You should.” I responded playfully. “Now if you’re done, let’s get ready for the party. I think I’m looking forward to it for once.”

“I think I am, too.”

## Chapter 32



The afternoon before the ball, Lydia was, as always, doing her makeup and getting ready. I assured her dress was clean and in perfect condition. She put on that accursed necklace for the third time, flaunting its evil right in front of me.

As I finished touching up the curls in her hair, before she left to catch her driver, she turned to me. “Elise dear,” she began in a way that always filled me with dread. ‘Dear’ was just about always accompanied by something condescending, cruel, and petty. “How have you been enjoying the Masquerades up until now?”

“Excuse me?” I asked cluelessly, hoping it would end there. There’s no reason she should have had any clue I’d been attending. I was certain she wouldn’t have recognized me. “I haven’t been. I have to tend to the garden every night, so I haven’t had much time.”

“Is that right?” She raised her already high arching eyebrows. “Well, in that case, you won’t mind staying home tonight to clean the house. I suspect I’ll be chosen by the prince at the closing ceremony, and I want to make sure he’s pleased with what he sees when I give him the tour.”

“Of course, mother.” I nodded obediently. I always kept the house clean. That was hardly a task.

“Also, I have to ask, who was that man you were speaking to while you were out running your errands?” Her tone was oddly severe, and I was completely taken aback by the question. She must have been out shopping and seen me, but why would she care?

“Just a passerby.” I said. “He helped me to my feet when I tripped. I didn’t catch his name.” Did she also recognize my charming stranger from the masquerade? If she had, I worried for what that might even mean. Maybe she *had* recognized me over the last weekend.

“Did he invite you to the dance tonight?” Everything about the way she asked it implied the question was purely rhetorical.

“He simply asked if I was going. Just small talk, I assumed. Why?” There was no point in lying if she already



heard the conversation. But then, I also didn't want to reveal more than needed, in case she was fishing.

"I see." Lydia nodded along to a conversation going on only in her head, then she squared her shoulders towards me. "Would you mind getting my coat from the closet? It might get chilly tonight."

"Of course." I humored her, not daring to suggest it was unnecessary and delay her departure another minute.

I walked into her deep closet to fish out a jacket that complimented the color and style of her dress. The summer nights had been warm, but who was I to argue with the frail and demanding Lydia. I picked out a blue shawl with soft, wide knitting, then I turned to exit.

That was when the door slammed shut, and the sound of a key turning in the lock echoed through the small walk in closet.

"Since you didn't want to go to the ball anyway, you can stay in there tonight." She snapped with a laugh that didn't match her tone. "I'll be happy to stand in as the prince's date in your stead."

My eyes grew wide as all of those realizations hit me at once. From the confined feeling of the walls closing in, knowing I was locked in this tiny room, to the sinking feeling that I was going to disappoint this man who still saw unearned value in me, to the confused butterflies that hadn't realized...

This charming stranger with the deep violet eyes was actually... Prince Zakari Lazuli?

Of course my stepmother would know what he looked like from such a brief encounter, but I'd never paid attention to the royals. They were so far from any world I'd ever expected to live in, that I hadn't bothered to care. But then, why would someone like the prince be interested in someone like me? It all seemed wrong. Maybe she was mistaken.

I shook my head to throw off the thought. There were far more pressing matters at hand than the identity of this mysterious man.

"Why are you doing this? I don't even have a dress. You don't need to lock me in here." I pounded on the door, but I already knew she wouldn't be listening to reason. She never did. Her punishments were always absolute and never fit the crime.

“That didn’t seem to be an issue before.” She spat back harshly, before her footsteps started to grow distant.

The lights went out on this confining little box, and just like that, all I could see was black. I felt along the walls, desperately looking for a light switch, hoping it wasn’t only on the outside of the closet. My eyes struggled to adjust, and I found nothing as I prodded around in blindness.

I shook the door by the knob, hoping with everything I had that it might give. My last chance to find some brief happiness was on the other side of this door, waiting for me in the castle, and here I was, trapped in my stepmother’s closet, about to watch it pass me by.

“Fuck!” I screamed as I pounded a fist on that wooden door. I dropped my forehead to the panel, and I stared into the blackness where my hope went to die.

Why I’d ever thought I could be happy, I couldn’t say, but it was clear now that this would always be my life.

## Chapter 33



The last night of the Masquerade and it had all started to come together delightfully. My Belladonna was slowly embracing her dark urges, my prince was figuring out how to please her, and his knight was getting exactly as he'd always wanted. All that was left was, quite literally, to marry it all together in one perfect package.

But first, I needed to visit my dearest flower and see how she was holding up. Make sure she was getting ready and all. I was certain she'd want a special dress for the night.

I launched from the castle spire and fluttered down to the Cenere manor, expecting to find Elise in the garden, as she always seemed to be before a ball. Yet tonight, the bench was conspicuously empty. *Curious.*

I closed my eyes and spent the fraction of a second it took to detect her presence, then in a flash, I reappeared inside

the manor in an impressively dark room.

My eyes shifted to night visibility, where I found myself surrounded by dresses, coats, shoes, handbags, and really an impressive amount of clothing, even by my standards. Which was saying something considering the sheer number of suits in my closet. But even I could have only so many pairs of black leather dress shoes and finely tailored sport coats.

I removed one of my gloves to better feel the expensive fabrics. None were as nice as the materials my magic could create. Human craftsmanship would likely never be able to match the softness of demon threading, but they'd made admirable attempts. I pursed my lips as I lifted my gaze to the wounded dove, sobbing by the door.

“Belladonna—”

“Oh my god!” She yelped loudly, interrupting what would have been a slick and clever and empowering one liner, calling on the entirely wrong person no less. *Annoying*. “You scared the shit out of me, Nero. How did you get in here?” She placed an open palm on her chest and heaved in air.

“First and foremost, never say that again. ‘By the devil’ is my preferred exclamation, but I would accept literally

*anything* else.” I waved a hand dismissively, shooing that awful phrase away. “And second, I’m not sure how many more ways I can communicate to you that gates, windows, and doors are not problems for me.”

“R-right.” She laughed nervously. “Well, they’re all problems for me.” A frown marred her pretty face, then she tapped her knuckles on the door behind her. “Any chance that my soul is good for breaking down a locked door?”

I tilted my head to the side and adjusted my mask. “To interfere with the mortal realm is against the rules.”

She raised both brows. “In what way have you *not* been interfering with the mortal realm?”

“I can interfere with the course of mortal lives, by giving them gifts or tools of various significance, but I can’t take away obstacles. For example, I can give you a dress or a carriage or a chastity belt, but I couldn’t personally murder your blight of a fiancé.”

Her mouth flattened at that, and I shrugged. The truth was the truth.

“Can you give me an ax or something then? Or do I need to sell you something for it first?”

“Now you’re getting it.” I smirked at the lovely little bird in this dark cage.

“I’ve already given you my soul though. I’m not sure I have much left to offer.” The frown didn’t suit her. While I might have enjoyed taking advantage of this situation, entirely too many people already took advantage of this girl, and I had no desire to demand anything that wasn’t freely given. Being the King of Hell and a legitimately vile person weren’t the same thing, in my opinion. I had a much more thrilling scenario to look forward to if we could stop dawdling in this silly little wooden box.

“You sold your soul to go to the ball, did you not?” I reminded her softly.

“I did.” She nodded along, not yet picking up my meaning.

“And this hampers your ability to do that, does it not?”

“It does.”

“Then I owe you freedom from this cage.” I approached her steadily, removing my mask as always, and she looked up at my superior height. I rested a hand lightly on each of her shoulders, and I massaged a gentle power into her.

“Kick it down, Belladonna. Don’t let something so insignificant be what stops your journey towards happiness.”

Elise drew in a sharp breath, as if absorbing the power now flowing through her blood, then she turned to face the door. And with a hard, intentioned, and well placed kick, she broke through the wood that trapped her. Without hesitation, she reached through the hole she created, unlocked the door, then shoved herself free.

“I... I did it. That was so easy.” She was beaming, and I quite preferred that look on her.

“Much more satisfying when you save yourself, isn’t it?” I patted her on the head. That only made her laugh.

“I’m pretty sure I’m not that strong on my own.”

I wrapped my arms around her shoulders, and I shook my head with a smile. “You have no idea how strong you are on your own.” Letting my hug drift down her sides, I followed the contours of her curves, until I reached her hips, then I squeezed her firm rear for playful emphasis. “Now I believe I also owe you a dress.”

Wordlessly she nodded, and I could hear the speeding of her heart as I made her drab and dirty clothing disappear.



This time, I let it sink in how naked she was in my hands. I let her imagine what I might be thinking as my eyes raked over her body, and I reveled in the reddening of her cheeks as I rubbed circles around her pelvic bones with my thumbs. She stayed perfectly still as I danced my fingertips up her skin. She would be my painting tonight, and I was happy to slowly and precisely guide the brush.

“This color suits you best, I think.” I said as I drew a thin strap from her shoulder to her bust. I topped each strap in a delicate bow that could so easily be untied. A thought that I knew had just flashed through her mind as well. “It should be a classy dress,” I spread my fingertips over her breasts, and I drew a smooth, royal blue silk over her pert nipples, “but also alluring.” I drew each hand downward, creating a deeply plunging neckline that reached below her naval. Pressing my palms over her hips, I started to paint the skirt. “A dress that flows like water,” I twisted the fabric around her in a spiral, and the silk shimmered in the dim light of the manor, “but doesn’t leave too much to the imagination.” I drew my index finger up her center, tightening the contour around her hips and ruching the fabric with flattering lines. For a final flourish, I dragged my palm up to her neck, and I squeezed her tightly,

eliciting a sharp gasp as I formed the perfect necklace to catch the prince's eye. Not that she needed any help anymore.

Like it was a ritual, I finished the job with a soft kiss on her lips. It hadn't been necessary since we'd first sealed our deal, yet I enjoyed this more than I cared to admit to myself. She tasted so sweet and decadent on my tongue, it would be a wonder if anyone could resist her delicious poison.

“Now just to make sure nothing goes wrong, I'm going to escort you this time.” I insisted. Elise smiled and linked her elbow with mine, not protesting for even a second. One might even think she liked the idea of me being her date. Absurd, but adorable. But if she was going to grant me such an honor, then I'd make sure this final night of the Masquerade was everything she always dreamed of.

## Chapter 34



Arm in arm with the devil, I entered the ballroom on the final night of the Masquerade. Everyone was always dressed at their finest here, but tonight was a whole new level of beauty and refinement. Every woman was adorned with jewels, and every man had the most perfect suit. To think I was among that beautiful elite felt surreal.

I stepped onto the dance floor, not even looking for my dark stranger and his knight when I had such a charming man already at my side. Though he only stayed by my side for the bargain I made with him, that didn't change how intimate it felt when he swept me into a dance in the middle of the crowd, or how warm and comforting his body was as he spun and secured me against him. Nero was a perfect gentleman in every way, leading me with both dominance and care, and touching me with both respect and lust.

If he'd have asked, I would have given him far more than my soul to escape that closet. I wanted to laugh at the ludicrous realization that I was growing so fond of a man who was the embodiment of evil, yet it felt right and normal with him. Right and normal for me.

“Are you having fun, Belladonna?” He whispered in my ear when he brought me in close. A slow song started, and he held me tightly, connecting our bodies at every point. The sway of the dance was soft and intimate.

“Are you?” I asked, a touch insecure. My infatuation was surely one sided.

He dipped me low and connected our lips again, no bloodletting, contract, or deal involved. He slipped me his tongue, and sucked on it to keep it, then he righted us with unsatisfying abruptness.

“You are always a pleasure.” He whispered against my lips. When a more upbeat song filled the dance room, Nero twisted and twirled me around with a carefree smile. Our dance created a bubble within the crowd, until we had our own space just for us. “But it’s not my pleasure that I’m worried about.”

We separated for only a moment, then when Nero came back in, he twisted me around so my back was against his chest. There, he held me by the shoulders in the middle of the ballroom, while the rest of the partygoers danced circles around me. I felt self-conscious as the towns people waltzed around us in a circle, while we remained perfectly still. The gown he'd made was beautiful, but as he rubbed my shoulders over the ribbons that held it up, that fatal flaw in the design became all too apparent.

“Now tell me, Belladonna, what is it that you truly want?” He spoke warmly against my bare shoulder.

“This is all.” I said, ignoring the warmth that spread through me every time he stroked that simple bow.

“No.” He shook his head. “It isn't. You've spent day after day denying yourself, running from everything that moves you. You refuse to let yourself feel, to love, and to experience real, honest pleasure without shame. So then, how *can* I honestly please you?” He rubbed the ribbon with small circles between his thumb and forefinger. “A husband might have gained you your inheritance, but you never asked me for that. Nor did you ask for money, freedom, or wealth. A frustrated girl living a frustrated life.”

He started to tug at the loose ends. The silky material slid effortlessly through itself. “My dear, sweet Elise Cenere, stop fighting so hard against yourself.” The bows released completely. He dropped the ribbons, and my dress collapsed around me. “Let yourself feel everything you ever wanted, my dear.”

My heart stopped, panic flooded my chest, and the dancing ceased around me as everyone stared at the girl in nothing but icy blue stilettos, standing in the center of the room.

My heart restarted entirely too quickly as Nero drifted his touch down my biceps. A light, feathering, barely there caress that explored me by his own desires.

Or maybe he was tapped directly into mine, reading the quiet words I couldn't say. Deep into the needs I'd never wanted to admit I had.

I lifted my gaze, in search of my violet eyed stranger. I didn't find him. Instead, there atop the stairs, staring down at us, was someone far more menacing. A man in a skull mask, covering every identifying feature, towered over the room. He said nothing. He just watched as Nero cupped each of my breasts in his palms.

He pressed them together, while his scorching hot body heated my back, and his tempting lips brushed my neck. “One word, Belladonna.”

I swallowed. I was trembling. A cold sweat broke out on my skin.

And yet the only word I ever managed to say to Nero, was the only word I wanted to say tonight. Looking boldly into the eyes of my stalker while being touched and fondled by the devil, I said, simply and definitively, “yes.”

“Heh.” Nero laughed against my neck, then he released my breasts and let them bounce into clear view. The dance floor was silent, save the gasps of the women around me. Everyone in town was here, and the only protection I had right now was this half mask over my eyes to hide my identity. Somehow, that gave me all the boldness in the world.

Nero pinched and played with my nipples until they were perked for everyone to view. He cradled my breasts in his hands, then continued to drop that touch to my hips. He slipped his fingers down the contours of my abdomen, following a trail down to my inner thighs. He feathered that pressure to my center, then he nudged a finger into the recess.

I leaned back into him as he danced pressure over my clit with soft, teasing strokes.

And I remained unmoving, my eyes still on that demon's, as Nero played my sensitive nerves until I was panting and shaking in front of the entirety of Lazuli Kingdom. The ballroom watched as I was lifted towards climax, and I could feel every pair of eyes that rested on me. My dark stranger, Rowan and Lydia who stood somewhere in this crowd, the townsfolk who I passed every day, the grocer who sold me vegetables, the crepe maker, the chimney sweeps, and the traders. Everyone was going to watch me come for the devil. They'd see me. Imagine what they might do to me. I'd be an object of desire and wet dreams.

And something about that made me ridiculously sopping wet.

I closed my eyes and gave in, letting Nero's touch take me there. And when he felt me lose myself on his fingers, clenching onto him in a burst of fire, he whispered gently into my ear.

“Go on now, Elise. Take what you truly want.”

Nero released me and pushed me forward. I stumbled, barely able to support myself on my own two legs. My stalker



dropped down the stairs with nimble quickness. In one smooth motion, he tore off his mask, caught me, and kissed me in front of everyone.

“Is... is that the prince?” A woman gasped from the crowd.

My eyes shot open at the confirmation, as that reality truly set in. *My stalker, my charming stranger, both of them were Prince Lazuli all along?*

Dark hair and violet eyes dominated me, and immediately I put every event together with excruciatingly obvious clarity. And for some strange reason, in the arms of this powerful, regal, and sophisticated murderer, I relaxed and let him have me.

The prince wasn't shy about exploring my body. His strong hands followed every curve of my muscles, while his tongue explored every inch of my mouth. His clothed cock ground against me as I melded into him. I had nearly forgotten everyone in the room but him, when he pulled away suddenly, and flipped me around.

There I was faced with the knight who accompanied him like a dark shadow. His helmet was firmly affixed as he crawled his eyes up my naked body. “Is this what you like,

Love?” Lazuli whispered in my ear, while my head was still spinning from both lust and realization.

He tightened his grip on my shoulder with one hand, while he slipped a finger into me with the other. He added a second digit, and he rubbed along my inner walls, pumping easy moans from my throat. I was soaking his hand, and I couldn't help it.

Some of the crowd looked horrified. Others, as turned on as I was.

“So you're the one who gave her the dress.” The prince tipped his chin towards Nero with an unusual familiarity.

“I gave her so much more than that.” Nero chuckled before he joined the charming royal between my legs, slipping in another finger along with his.

The guard just kept watching me as they both withdrew their slickened digits. Nero sucked on his, while the man holding me used them to spread me for his companion, giving everyone a clear view of my clit.

“You're on fire.” The guard's tone was accusing yet seductive. “Are you embarrassed? I wonder how fast you'll come with all of these eyes on you.” There was an edge to his

voice that hit a familiar note in my heart, yet some dark place in my mind refused to place it. I leaned into the prince's support. Forming words felt impossible.

"Mason." Lazuli snapped his free hand, while using the other to keep me splayed. The knight knelt before me, and he looked up into my eyes.

My eyes that were wide with confusion and shock.

"Did... did you just say Mason?" *The guard I'd danced with was named Mason?*

Both men ignored me, addressing only each other as they negotiated my pleasure. "My lord," he stated solemnly. Suddenly I knew exactly who that familiar tone belonged to. Gone was the haze of lust and disbelief that couldn't have imagined who hid behind the helmet. Any doubt I wanted to hold onto was at last banished for good as he removed his mask, revealing the powerful bodyguard who was tall, lean, golden haired, and green eyed.

"Make her come." The prince commanded, while shock pulsed through every ounce of blood in my veins. I thrashed but the prince tightened his hold. And there I found myself trapped, terrified, and on the verge of orgasm without even being touched, as I locked gazes with Rowan Mason,

who grabbed a hold of my hips with my stepbrother's usual punishing grip.

“R-Rowan.” My voice hitched as he feathered a kiss over my clit. As he licked, flicked, then sucked on me. I spread my legs on cursed instinct, always being his good girl, and never understanding why. My dance partner held me up, and I braced myself, digging my fingers into his powerful thighs, as Rowan started playing me for the audience.

I swallowed, knowing everyone in town was about to see how effortlessly and explicitly my stepbrother knew my body. It was only the small eye mask that might keep my anonymous. “W-wait. Rowan—” I started to protest when the prince took my lips, and Rowan brushed his teeth lightly over every sensitive nerve ending I had. My muffled cries vibrated on that skillful tongue, while he sucked me into his mouth and kept me silent. He pinched down on my hard nipples while Rowan slipped in the first finger.

There was no point in fighting it. As much as I wanted to deny it, Rowan already had me crawling with the intense flare of climax. He always did. To deny it was naïve and an active lie.

I clung to Zakari completely, supporting myself on his chest as Rowan lifted my thigh and placed it over his shoulder. He kept sucking and finger fucking me with the perfect precision he always had.

My eyes were half-lidded but open, as I watched our audience taking in the spectacle, while these men made me the centerpiece of the Masquerade. It wasn't long before those around us were joining the festivities with their partners. Some retreated, running from the room, while others indulged in the same pleasure I was receiving.

I cried out into Zakari's mouth, as Rowan had me losing it on his tongue. I was reeling in orgasm, and he kept milking me for more, still sucking and rubbing me, to a point of painful overstimulation. I gripped his soft golden hair, and I buckled like he'd trained my body to do over years and years of playing me.

By the devil, I liked it, no matter how much I didn't want to. Why did it feel so different here, so out in the open? It was as if this horrible, unacceptable relationship was more satisfying now that the whole town knew. Like I could finally admit how he was the only one who eased my tension and kept

me sane, while he was also the one who drove me mad in the first place.

Knowing now that he was the same knight who joined us at the second Masquerade, it became clear that, try as I might, I'd still never been able to come without him there. Even my vibrator was something he allowed me to have only with his permission.

Rowan rose to his feet, and Zakari passed me off to him, letting him connect our mouths in an honest kiss. The first kiss he'd shared with me since the first time he ever showed me what full body pleasure should feel like.

I drank him in, and he was heaven in my mouth, just as he always was between my legs. I never knew how good I tasted when it was mixed with him. "Ready to admit how badly you wanted this, Elly." He whispered into my mouth, while I was a whimpering mess in his hands.

"No." I lied. I wanted to spur him on. I wanted him to treat me more roughly. Get me off by being as vicious and ruthless as he always was. "You're going to have to make me, *big brother*."

Rowan laughed. "You're so fucking childish, *little sister*." His clothed cock was now pressing against me, driving

me insane with the friction as he laid claim to my mouth once more. I'd nearly forgotten anyone else was there when I felt the prince loosing his belt behind me.

Zakari massaged my ass, then he pressed a cold, wet, lubricated finger into me. "Have you ever felt an orgasm through here, Love?" He purred as he started stretching me in slow, careful strokes. He fed in more and more lube, and he worked me slowly. The fact that he'd come prepared to fuck me in the ass in front of the entire masquerade might have been concerning if it didn't have me sobbing sweet pleasure into my stepbrother's mouth.

He lined up and pressed in just his thick tip. He slid in smoothly and my body hugged his length. He filled and stretched me, and the pain felt as foreign as it was enticing.

"Don't stop." I forced the words between breaths.

"I didn't plan to." He chuckled against my neck, while he pushed in another inch. The way he felt inside my ass felt so different from my pussy. He gave me the option to adjust the angle until it was the perfect delicious combination of pain, pleasure and fullness. Still inside me, he knocked away the contents of the catering table, then he sat back, keeping me on

his cock all the while. He lifted my hips for me, and he started fucking me slowly on his lap.

Rowan stood back, just watching me writhe. His hungry eyes were dark and possessive as the prince was bringing me to a completely different dimension.

I gasped each time he fucked the breath out of me, and I drew a sharp breath in each moment of relief.

Then I spread my legs, giving Rowan a full, clear view of my pussy.

“Please.” I begged Rowan.

Rowan, the trusted knight whose eyes were wide with surprise at my insistence.

Rowan, who hadn't expected me to turn the tables on him.

He shook his head, but the smirk across his lips betrayed him. He undid his own belt, he freed his erection, and he joined Zakari at the table as he shoved himself into my open invitation.

Both of them filled me at once, and their heads rubbed on each side of the walls inside me. Zakari directed my movements, digging his fingers into my hips and controlling



every rise and fall, as if using my body to work them both to orgasm. I didn't think I could take another moment when a hot tongue filled my mouth. He tasted of chocolate and crème brulee, and I knew it was Nero who was now dominating my last hole.

And I wanted him too. I wanted all of them. I wanted everyone in this goddamn kingdom to see how much they all wanted *me*.

I wanted everyone who thought I was nothing, who never even noticed I existed, to see the three most powerful men on the world bowing down for my pleasure.

“I want you inside me, too.” I breathed against Nero's lips, eliciting an immediate smile.

“Anything you want you can have, Belladonna.” He positioned on top of me, between Rowan and myself, and he pressed me back onto Prince Lazuli's chest. Slotting in between my stepbrother and I, finding just the right angle, he ran the head of his cock down my center, sliding over my sensitive and slickened clit, then he lined himself up with my already filled entrance. He spread my legs wider, and he pressed in just the head, letting Rowan's cock guide his in with it. I did my best to relax as I was stretched to a capacity I'd

never imagined, and I clawed Nero's back as he began to control the rhythm for all of us.

It was heaven or hell or something in between. I came hard, seeing stars as I dropped my full weight into the Prince's warm embrace.

"You're doing beautifully, Love." He whispered before he returned his punishing lips to my neck.

I was panting and damn near sobbing, when the devil removed himself from me, leaving empty space where I'd just come to welcome it. He repositioned, standing over us now, until the head of his cock was on my lips.

"Would you like to taste your own poison, Belladonna?"

I met the galaxies of his eyes, and a smirk slipped onto my lips. Still being so perfectly fucked, barely able to control myself, I spread my tongue flat on the underside of the dick of the devil himself, and I wrapped my lips around that thick shaft. Like a conduit, I let the men beneath me control the rhythm, matching the tempo and intensity as I sucked on Nero. And he let me do as I pleased with him, never threading his fingers through my hair or taking control. He let me prove I could pleasure him to earn my rewards.

And I was going to earn them. I wasn't going to stop until his velvet cock was tensing and pulsing into my throat, and I could taste the real power of the magic demon in front of me.

My body was coated in sweat, and my breasts bounced freely under every well timed thrust. I could put on a show unlike anything this town had ever seen.

I dug my fingers into Nero's thighs as a new pulse of release built low in my core once more. I cried against the thick head hitting the back of my throat as a different high was building from every smooth glide into my ass and that perfect spot inside me. I near blacked out as every sensation hit me at once, compounding explosions mixed with the slick, hot releases that filled me from every direction.

Someone could have asked me for my own name, and I wouldn't have been able to remember it as I swallowed down Nero. Zakari and Rowan unthreaded me from their softening dicks. Nero hopped down, Rowan stepped back, and Prince Zakari lifted me off his lap and into a princess hold. Then he turned to the stairs, he walked to the top, and he placed me securely on his throne.

I could feel the warmth of both men's semen slowly sliding out of their respective holes. I used my fingers to press that thick liquid back in, not wanting to lose any of the fluids they'd given me.

My men were all dressed and easily tidied, while I sat on the throne, naked and so freshly fucked in front of everyone.

With a cheeky smile, Zakari turned around. Rowan and Nero followed suit. Then each man took a bow.

I laughed through the tremors still rocking me to my core. Then the prince himself paced around his throne until he was standing behind me. He reached around, and he gripped my mask on each side.

“And for the grand finale,” he said with a smile in his voice. I tensed as his fingers hooked beneath the rim. He lifted my mask, revealing my face to the entire kingdom. “I would like to introduce the fine citizens of Lazuli Kingdom to my new Queen, Elise Cenere.”

## Chapter 35



I stirred the pot, while fixating vaguely on the popping red bubbles of the rolling boil. Spaghetti, a meal that was innocuous, delicious, and inoffensive. The kind of flavor that reminds you of home and good times. While my mother cooked most meals, this simple dish of red sauce and noodles was my father's special recipe, using fresh tomatoes and basil from the garden, and all of the love he held for his family. As much as I loved that recipe, today, I made it my own.

I sprinkled in a touch more of my special seasoning, then I watched the flecks disappear in the swirl of my spoon. Lydia would love it. I knew how much she liked this flavor. He'd made it for her countless times, too, and however much I resented her, she did truly love my father.

Maybe after this last meal, I could feel truly at peace with leaving this house behind. I was going to live in the castle after all. What girl wouldn't be thrilled at such a prospect?

This house was my father's, yes, but in the end, what good was he either? I placed so much of my disdain, anger, and hatred on my stepmother, but at the end of the day, they'd both created this nightmare of a life I'd endured for over a decade, and I wouldn't miss the memory of either one of them. There was more for me out there than the tainted gifts of my past, and it was about time I recognized that, just like Prince Lazuli and Nero did, and just like Rowan always had.

Today, I bid farewell to this life once and for all, and I'd do it with this simple, childhood favorite, like a warm, nostalgic goodbye to my demons.

I smiled at the thought, then I turned off the burner, and walked to the cupboard to retrieve the serving dishes.

I placed a large spindle of angel hair pasta in the bowl. I ladled two full spoons worth of sauce in next, then I sprinkled some parmesan and the last of my seasoning on top for color and flare. I was a fine chef, in my opinion. Lydia would miss me too, even if she'd never admit it.

My stepmother was already seated at the table as I placed the bowl in front of her. Rowan would be at the castle still, as he always was at dinner hour. Something I now understood far better, knowing he'd long been the Prince's

right hand. The fact that he'd come home every night was something I once thought so unfortunate. Now I reminisced on his dedication to me with warped fondness.

I placed simple garlic bread and a salad alongside her pasta, then I retrieved a bottle of my father's finest wine. Wine for a special occasion.

"I thought we could celebrate tonight," I said, smiling ever so sweetly in spite of my stepmother's scowl.

"I'll certainly be happy to have you out of my home." She spat back shamelessly. *Oh, stepmother dearest, the feeling is mutual.*

I steeled my expression as I tipped the bottle neck over her wine glass. She placed her fork in the spaghetti, and began twirling noodles around the prongs. The sauce was thick and heavy on the spindle, and dark flecks of dried Italian seasoning were indiscernible from my own special blend. I watched with anticipation as she took her first bite, then I smiled silently as she continued to her second.

"How is it, mother?" I asked as I always did, keeping my posture perfect and my chin down, so as not to disturb her meal by being improper.

“Your father’s recipe truly was the best. You could only hope to match him one day.”

My recipe was largely identical, so that was a misnomer, but no matter. I simply held a smile as she cleaned her bowl, then used garlic bread to wipe up the remainder of the sauce.

I was glad she did so. It would be a shame to waste a single drop.

“You always did like his flavors.” I betrayed no emotion in those words.

“It’s a shame talent isn’t genetic.” She shot back coldly.

“You didn’t like it?”

“It tasted old and dusty. I suspect you’ll be right back here soon once the prince is subjected to your cooking.”

Always bitter and always so harsh.

“I tried to make it special since it’s the last meal I’ll ever serve you.” I placed a hand on the dessert tray, still covered by its metal lid.

Lydia’s eyes narrowed. Her mouth contorted in a frown. “Did you poison me, girl?” She growled. Comically,



since she'd already eaten my food and would have no recourse anymore if I had. But... I hadn't. That would be too easy. Too boring.

“No, mother dear.” I shook my head, but made no further effort to hide the passive aggressive spark in my voice. Ignoring her skeptical glare, I grabbed the dessert tray and placed it gently in front of her. “I simply served you your favorite thing.” I lifted the metal cover, and I watched as her eyes bugged wide. Beneath the shield, now in plain view, was a small jar sitting on its side, lid off, and contents emptied.

I took hold of that jar, and I outstretched my hand in offering as I presented my father's urn. “His flavor really is the best, isn't it, Lydia?”

“You!” She pushed back on the table, and the wooden chair legs screeched against the hard wood laminate flooring. “You wretched, disrespectful, horrible, disgusting—”

“And *beautiful* Belladonna.” Nero finished her sentence as he appeared behind my stunned stepmother. He had her immediately restrained, one hand covering her mouth, and the other twisting her arm. “That's where you were going with that, no?”

“I might have gone with ‘Ice Queen.’” Prince Lazuli added as he entered the dining hall. “My vicious, perfect ice queen.”

Rowan walked in next, his head cocked back and his expression severe as he surveyed the situation. I met his gaze, and there we shared a silent conversation as we’d had so many times before. One I used to deny, and one I now could admit I’d always trusted.

“Rowan!” She screeched the moment Nero allowed her to talk. “This horrible woman tried to poison me! And these brutes are hurting me.”

Rowan looked to me, then he looked to his mother. He closed his eyes, drew in a slow breath through his nose, then released it at half the speed.

“Like you’ve hurt Elly for all these years?” He asked with an emotionless nonchalance.

“She deserved everything I gave her.” Lydia hissed back.

Rowan shook his head, then he put a hand on the hilt of his sword, then my stepbrother and bodyguard approached the

table. Nero handed her over to her son. And Rowan did the honor.

A blade across her throat made for a swift and messy death.

And on this full moon night, the last remnants of my old, sad life were gone. It was time to have my own Happily Ever After.

## Epilogue



In the middle of the night, I stirred from the bed, where both Elly and Zakari slept soundly after a long marathon of celebration. I squirmed carefully out of Elly's hold, then threw Zakari's arm back over him roughly to free myself. Elly slept softly. The prince slept like he'd been murdered. I knew both of their bodies all too well.

An involuntary smile graced my lips as I gazed down at my partners. Then I located my pants and stepped out onto the balcony to enjoy the peaceful glow of the full moon.

I'd found perfect Zen when the flapping of a crow's wing caught my attention. I lifted my eyes to Nero's as he shifted fully into a man.

"It's been a while since I caught you alone, Rowan." Nero addressed me. He leaned back against the guard rail, and he removed his mask, barring any barriers between us.

“Ten years, I think.” I responded with a subtle nod.

“Your wing looks much better now.”

“Nothing a little iodine and crackers can’t fix.” The devil chuckled before he approached my side, close enough to enter my personal space. There were few people who I allowed within that narrow bubble, and Nero had long been one of them. “So tell me, is it everything you hoped it would be?”

“Yes.” I didn’t need even a second to ponder that. “I always knew she’d come around eventually.”

Nero snorted, and I rolled my eyes at his amusement. “When you sell your soul to assure a girl can’t orgasm without your permission, the prophecy self-fulfills itself a bit.” He reached over and ruffled my hair. “Though in your defense, none of her partners would have even come close regardless of my interference. You’re lucky she’s naturally as fucked up as you are.”

“I’m okay with that.” I leaned over the railing and fixed my eyes on that painfully bright moon.

“I’m surprised though...” He started, and I gave him my undivided attention. “In all of her wishes, she never once asked for anything other than a dress.” With a twirl of his

finger, two glass slippers appeared in his hand. The one I'd kept, and the one I'd given to Lazuli to satisfy him. "And all I did was dress her up and free her natural aura from her guardian angel so she could attract whoever her soul most craved. Isn't it funny that, as if it was always meant to be, the first person she sucked in was your best friend. It was such a pleasure watching her turn you both into obsessed simpletons."

"What's your point?" I lifted my brows in irritation.

"No point. Just an observation." With that, he handed me both slippers and tipped his chin. "Make her happy. Or I'll be taking more than just your soul when you die."

"You're leaving? With the way you were dancing with her, I thought you'd want to stick around, too."

"Ha!" His smile was telling. "All three of you sold me your souls, remember? Enjoy your time in the mortal realm, then we'll all enjoy eternity in mine." In a flash, Nero tapped his lips to mine, then in another, he was gone. I returned my attention to the night sky, when I heard the door shut behind me. I didn't turn. I knew who it was.

Elly walked up beside me, wrapped conservatively in a satin robe. "Is something wrong, Rowan?" She asked as she

settled in at my side.

A grin settled on my lips as I turned to face her. “Not anymore.”

I placed a hand on each side of her face, and I held her still as I pressed a kiss to her lips. I melted into the taste of her. A sensation I’d dreamed of for far too long.

It took little more than a soft tug on the belt of her robe to free the knot. And even less effort had that same smooth material on the floor of the balcony. Having her naked in the moonlight, I deepened our kiss, then I lifted her up and placed her on that cold railing. She spread her legs just enough to let me in between them, and I held her there, in front of the entire kingdom.

Elly placed her hands on my shoulders, then she looked over hers at the perilous fall behind her. With a quiet smirk, I undid the button on my pants.

“Isn’t this a little dangerous?” She asked as her gaze dipped to my cock.

“Not if you hold on tight.”

In one smooth motion, she hugged my shoulders firmly, and she smashed her mouth back against mine. And in

one rough motion, I shoved into her, making her mine again and again and again under that enchanting moonlight. As I listened to her cry out my name, all I could think was, if I had to redo my life, I'd make that deal with the devil every single time.



~FIN~

## Aftertalk

Well alrighty then, I barely know what to say on this one. I started writing this story a while back, planning for it to be a super quick, maybe 10k word short story. At most, maybe a 20k word novella. And yet here we are, over 60k words later, with a whole ass novel.

This one was kind of a weird one for me, since I really enjoy writing overarching journeys and magical quests and isekai rather than just strict romance (I've repeatedly tried to write contemporary, and while it's fun at times, I'm always going to be a fantasy and paranormal girlie), and the story of Cinderella is very much... not that. But I've been on a stepbrother and stalker kick lately, and was in desperate need to put my own spin on the trope. So, naturally, I looked up the Brothers Grimm version of Cinderella, in which some magic doves pick lentils out of a fireplace and grant her a dress for each of three nights of the Prince's ball (opposed to the Disney version, which I'm assuming we all know), and this somehow evolved into a perfect vehicle for an obsessed stalker prince,

an equally obsessed and also stalker-esque gender-swapped step sibling, and well, who better to magically fix your problems than the devil himself?

I usually try to keep it a balance of plot and smut, but I think this one ended up much more smut heavy than normal. I'm not proud of the number of times I've personally reread Rowan's corn scene, even setting aside the sheer number of times I have to reread my own book for general edits, haha. But whatever. He's just my favorite kind of fucked to write. Don't judge me.

Ultimately this wasn't meant to be anything over complicated or serious or heavy. Just a fun, dirty fairy tale about an abused servant girl finding happiness on some satisfying dicks. I hope you laughed at least a couple times more than you gasped!

As always, I'd be curious to hear where this falls on darkness level for most people. I think this also ended up more comic relief heavy, so to me, I feel like it's maybe the most light hearted of the three books, but then I also felt like the guys in *There's No Place Like Oz* were so sweet towards Dorothy that the book was pretty gentle despite its themes, and the men in *We're All Mad Here* were so fucked up towards

Alice that it still ranks darkest. I don't know though.

Everyone's scale is different. Let me know where it falls for you!

On that note, my next story in the Vicious Wonders series is going to be based around *The Labyrinth*, so keep an eye out for that one! I also have a Mulan retelling started and a Charlie and the Chocolate Factory retelling outlined on the maybe list, but I'm ready to get back to monstrous men and twisted, magical worlds with unsuspecting heroines learning to stand up for themselves against trauma and self-doubt and impossible odds.

If you have any particular stories you'd love to read as a Dark reverse harem though, I'm always excited to hear from readers! Sometimes it takes one perfect word to get my mind running at a thousand miles a minute, and I love hearing from people!

All that said, if you enjoyed this story, it helps me a TON to leave a review! I always appreciate feedback, and I'm always looking to improve my craft. I do read every review, good or bad, so feel free to share what you think!

Also for updates and teasers for upcoming projects, you can follow me on social media! I'm most active on

TikTok, but I hop in everywhere regularly!

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Thanks again for reading! Until next time, go fast and take chances!

## Other works by Leann Belle:

### [We're All Mad Here](#)

A Dark and Twisted and very high heat Alice in Wonderland Reverse  
Harem

### [There's No Place Like Oz](#)

A Dark and Twisted, High Heat Wizard of Oz Reverse Harem

### [Stalking Cinderella](#)

A Dark and Twisted Cinderella Reverse Harem, with a bully stepbrother, a stalker prince, and a manipulative, gender-swapped fairy god mother

### [What Happens In Vegas](#)

A Billionaire Office Romance Comedy (Also available in audio!)

### [Sing With Me](#)

A lightly dark, erotic Battle of the Bands, Reality Show Rockstar RomCom

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A lightly dark, erotic Music Industry Romance with Secret Relationships  
and Mafia