

CHAPTER 1



THREE LUSCIOUS LEMON TARTS glistened up at Catherine. She reached her towel-wrapped hands into the oven, ignoring the heat that enveloped her arms and pressed against her cheeks, and lifted the tray from the hearth. The tarts' sunshine filling quivered, as if glad to be freed from the stone chamber.

Cath held the tray with the same reverence one might reserve for the King's crown. She refused to take her eyes from the tarts as she padded across the kitchen floor until the tray's edge landed on the baker's table with a satisfying thump. The tarts trembled for a moment more before falling still, flawless and gleaming.

Setting the towels aside, she picked through the curled, sugared lemon peels laid out on parchment and arranged them like rose blossoms on the tarts, settling each strip into the still-warm center. The aromas of sweet citrus and buttery, flaky crust curled beneath her nose.

She stepped back to admire her work.

The tarts had taken her all morning. Five hours of weighing the butter and sugar and flour, of mixing and kneading and rolling the dough, of whisking and simmering and straining the egg yolks and lemon juice until they were thick and creamy and the color of buttercups. She had glazed the crust and crimped the edges like a lace doily. She had boiled and candied the delicate strips of lemon peel and ground sugar crystals into a fine

powder for garnish. Her fingers itched to dust the tart edges now, but she refrained. They had to cool first, or else the sugar would melt into unattractive puddles on the surface.

These tarts encompassed everything she had learned from the tattered recipe books on the kitchen shelf. There was not a hurried moment nor a careless touch nor a lesser ingredient in those fluted pans. She had been meticulous at every step. She had baked her very heart into them.

Her inspection lingered, her eyes scanning every inch, every roll of the crust, every shining surface.

Finally, she allowed herself a smile.

Before her sat three perfect lemon tarts, and everyone in Hearts—from the dodo birds to the King himself—would have to recognize that she was the best baker in the kingdom. Even her own mother would be forced to admit that it was so.

Her anxiety released, she bounced on her toes and squealed into her clasped hands.

"You are my crowning joy," she proclaimed, spreading her arms wide over the tarts, as if bestowing a knighthood upon them. "Now I bid you to go into the world with your lemony scrumptiousness and bring forth smiles from every mouth you grace with your presence."

"Speaking to the food again, Lady Catherine?"

"Ah-ah, not just any food, Cheshire." She lifted a finger without glancing back. "Might I introduce to you the most wondrous lemon tarts ever to be baked within the great Kingdom of Hearts!"

A striped tail curled around her right shoulder. A furry, whiskered head appeared on her left. Cheshire purred thoughtfully, the sound vibrating down her spine. "Astounding," he said, in that tone he had that always left Cath unsure whether he was mocking her. "But where's the fish?"

Cath kissed the sugar crystals from her fingers and shook her head. "No fish."

"No fish? Whatever is the point?"

"The point is *perfection*." Her stomach tingled every time she thought of it.

Cheshire vanished from her shoulders and reappeared on the baking table, one clawed paw hovering over the tarts. Cath jumped forward to shoo him back. "Don't you dare! They're for the King's party, you goose."

Cheshire's whiskers twitched. "The King? Again?"

Stool legs screeched against the floor as Cath dragged a seat closer to the table and perched on top of it. "I thought I'd save one for him and the others can be served at the feasting table. It makes His Majesty so happy, you know, when I bake him things. And a happy king—"

"Makes for a happy kingdom." Cheshire yawned without bothering to cover his mouth and, grimacing, Cath held her hands in between him and the tarts to protect from any distasteful tuna breath.

"A happy king also makes for a most excellent testimonial. Imagine if he were to declare me the official tart baker of the kingdom! People will line up for miles to taste them."

"They smell tart."

"They *are* tarts." Cath turned one of the fluted pans so the blossom of the lemon-peel rose was aligned with the others. She was always mindful of how her treats were displayed. Mary Ann said her pastries were even more beautiful than those made by the royal pastry chefs.

And after tonight, her desserts would not only be known as more beautiful, they would be known as superior in every way. Such praise was exactly what she and Mary Ann needed to launch their bakery. After so many years of planning, she could feel the dream morphing into a reality.

"Are lemons in season this time of year?" asked Cheshire, watching Cath as she swept up the leftover lemon peels and tied them in cheesecloth. The gardeners could use them to keep pests away.

"Not exactly," she said, smiling to herself. Her thoughts stole back to

that morning. Pale light filtering through her lace curtains. Waking up to the smell of citrus in the air.

Part of her wanted to keep the memory tucked like a secret against her chest, but Cheshire would find out soon enough. A tree sprouting up in one's bedroom overnight was a difficult secret to keep. Cath was surprised the rumors hadn't yet spread, given Cheshire's knack for gossip-gathering. Perhaps he'd been too busy snoozing all morning. Or, more likely, having his belly rubbed by the maids.

"They're from a dream," she confessed, carrying the tarts to the pie safe where they could finish cooling.

Cheshire sat back on his haunches. "A dream?" His mouth split open into a wide, toothy grin. "Do tell."

"And have half the kingdom knowing about it by nightfall? Absolutely not. I had a dream and then I woke up and there was a lemon tree growing in my bedroom. That is all you need to know."

She slammed the pie safe shut with finality, as much to silence herself as to prevent further questions. The truth was, the dream had been clinging to her skin from the moment she'd woken up, haunting and tantalizing her. She wanted to talk about it, almost as much as she wanted to keep it locked up and all to herself.

It had been a hazy, beautiful dream, and in it there had been a hazy, beautiful boy. He was dressed all in black and standing in an orchard of lemon trees, and she had the distinct sensation that he had something that belonged to her. She didn't know what it was, only that she wanted it back, but every time she took a step toward him he receded farther and farther away.

A shiver slipped down the back of her dress. She could still feel the curiosity that tugged at her chest, the need to chase after him.

But mostly it was his eyes that haunted her. Yellow and shining, sweet and tart. His eyes had been bright like lemons ready to fall from a tree.

She shook away the wispy memories and turned back to Cheshire. "By the time I woke up, a branch from the tree had already pulled one of the bedposts full off. Of course, Mama made the gardeners take it down before it did any more damage, but I was able to sneak away some lemons first."

"I wondered what the hullabaloo was about this morning." Cheshire's tail flicked against the butcher block. "Are you sure the lemons are safe for consumption? If they sprouted from a dream, they could be, you know, *that* kind of food."

Cath's attention drifted back to the closed pie safe, the tarts hidden behind its wire mesh. "You're worried that the king might become shorter if he eats one?"

Cheshire snorted. "On the contrary, I'm worried that I will turn into a house should *I* eat one. I've been minding my figure, you know."

Giggling, Cath leaned over the table and scratched him beneath his chin. "You're perfect no matter your size, Cheshire. But the lemons are safe—I bit one before I started baking." Her cheeks puckered at the sour memory.

Cheshire had started to purr, already ignoring her. Cath cupped her chin with her free hand while Cheshire flopped deliriously onto one side and her strokes moved down to his belly. "Besides, if you ever did eat some bad food, I could still find a use for you. I've always wanted a cat-drawn carriage."

Cheshire opened one eye, his pupil slitted and unamused.

"I would dangle balls of yarn and fish bones out in front to keep you moving."

He stopped purring long enough to say, "You are not as cute as you think you are, Lady Pinkerton."

Cath tapped Cheshire once on the nose and pulled away. "You could do your disappearing trick and then everyone would think, *My, my, look at the glorious bulbous head pulling that carriage down the street!*"

Cheshire was fully glaring at her now. “I am a proud feline, not a beast of labor.”

He disappeared with a huff.

“Don’t be cross. I’m only teasing.” Catherine untied her apron and draped it on a hook on the wall, revealing a perfect apron-shaped silhouette on her dress, outlined in flour and bits of dried dough.

“By-the-bye.” His voice drifted back to her. “Your mother is looking for you.”

“What for? I’ve been down here all morning.”

“Yes, and now you’re going to be late. Unless you’re going as a lemon tart yourself, you’d better get on with it.”

“Late?” Catherine glanced at the cuckoo clock on the wall. It was still early afternoon, plenty of time to—

Her pulse skipped as she heard a faint wheezing coming from inside the clock. “Oh! Cuckoo, did you doze off again?” She smacked her palm against the clock’s side and the door sprang open, revealing a tiny red bird, fast asleep. “Cuckoo!”

The bird startled awake with a mad flap of his wings. “Oh my, oh heavens,” he squawked, rubbing his eyes with the tips of his wings. “What time is it?”

“Whatever are you asking me for, you doltish bird?” With a harried groan, Catherine ran from the kitchen, crashing into Mary Ann on the stairwell.

“Cath—Lady Catherine! I was coming to . . . the Marchioness is—”

“I know, I know, the ball. I lost track of time.”

Mary Ann gave her a fast head-to-toe glance and grabbed her wrist. “Best get you cleaned up before she sees you and calls for both of our heads.”



CHAPTER 2



Mary Ann checked that the Marchioness wasn't around the corner before ushering Cath into the bedroom and shutting the door.

The other maid, Abigail, was there already, dressed identical to Mary Ann in a demure black dress and white apron, attempting to swat a rocking-horsefly out the open window with a broom. Every time she missed, it would nicker and whip its mane to either side, before flying back up toward the ceiling. "These pests will be the death of me!" Abigail growled to Mary Ann, swiping the sweat from her brow. Then, realizing that Catherine was there too, she dropped into a lopsided curtsy.

Catherine stiffened. "Abigail—!"

Her warning was too late. A pair of tiny rockers clomped over the back of Abigail's bonnet before the horse darted back up toward the ceiling.

"Why, you obnoxious little pony!" Abigail screeched, swinging her broom.

Cringing, Mary Ann dragged Catherine into the powder room and shut the door. Water had already been drawn in a pitcher on the washing stand. "There isn't time for a bath, but let's not tell your mother that," she said, fiddling with the back of Catherine's muslin dress while Cath dipped a washcloth into the pitcher. She furiously scrubbed the flour from her face. How had she managed to get it behind her ears?

"I thought you were going into town today," she said, letting Mary Ann peel off her dress and chemise.

"I did, but it was fabulously dull. All anyone wanted to talk about was the ball, as if the King doesn't have a party every other day." Taking the washcloth, Mary Ann scrubbed Catherine's arms until her flesh was pink, then spritzed her with rose water to cover up the lingering aroma of pastry dough and oven fires. "There was a lot of talk about a new court joker who will be making his debut tonight. Jack was bragging about how he's going to steal his hat and smash the bells as a sort of initiation."

"That seems very childish."

"I agree. Jack is such a knave." Mary Ann helped Catherine into a new chemise, before pushing her down onto a stool and running a brush through her dark hair. "I did hear one bit of interesting news though. The cobbler is retiring and will be leaving his storefront empty by the end of this month." With a twist, a dish full of pins, and a touch of beeswax, a lovely chignon rested at the nape of Catherine's neck and her face was haloed by a cluster of jovial curls.

"The cobbler? On Main Street?"

"The very one." Mary Ann spun Cath around, her voice dropping to a whisper. "When I heard it, I immediately thought what a fine location it would be. For us."

Cath's eyes widened. "Sweet hearts, you're right. Right next to that toy shop—"

"And just down the hill from that quaint white chapel. Think of all the wedding cakes you'd be making."

"Oh! We could do a series of different-flavored cobblers for our grand opening, in honor of the shoemaker. We'll start with the classics—blueberry cobbler, peach cobbler—but then, imagine the possibilities. A lavender-nectarine cobbler one day, and the next, a banana-butterscotch cobbler, topped with graham cracker crumble and—"

"Stop it!" Mary Ann laughed. "I haven't had supper yet."

"We should go look at it, don't you think? Before word gets out?"

"I thought so too. Maybe tomorrow. But your mother . . ."

"I'll tell her we're going shopping for new ribbons. She won't mind." Cath swayed on the balls of her feet. "By the time she finds out about the bakery, we'll be able to show her what a tremendous business opportunity it is and even she won't be able to deny it."

Mary Ann's smile turned tight. "I don't think it's the business opportunity she's bound to disapprove of."

Cath flitted away her concern, although she knew Mary Ann was right. Her mother would never approve of her only daughter, the heir to Rock Turtle Cove, going into the men's world of business, especially with a humble servant like Mary Ann as her partner. Besides, baking was a job fit for servants, her mother would say. And she would loathe the idea that Cath planned on using her own marriage dowry in order to open the business herself.

But she and Mary Ann had been dreaming of it for so long, she sometimes forgot that it wasn't yet reality. Her pastries and desserts were already becoming renowned throughout the kingdom, and the King himself was her grandest fan, which might have been the only reason her mother tolerated her hobby at all.

"Her approval won't matter," Cath said, trying to convince herself as much as Mary Ann. The idea of her mother being angry over this decision, or worse, disowning her, made her stomach curdle. But it wouldn't come to that. She hoped.

She lifted her chin. "We're going forward with or without my parents' approval. We are going to have the best bakery in all of Hearts. Why, even the White Queen will travel here when she hears word of our decadent chocolate tortes and blissfully flaky currant scones."

Mary Ann bunched her lips to one side, doubtful.

"That reminds me," Cath continued. "I have three tarts cooling in the pie safe right now. Could you bring them tonight? Oh, but they still need a

dusting of powdered sugar. I left some on the table. Just a teeny, tiny bit." She pinched her fingers in example.

"Of course I can bring them. What kind of tarts?"

"Lemon."

A teasing smile crept up Mary Ann's face. "From your tree?"

"You heard about it?"

"I saw Mr. Gardiner planting it under your window this morning and had to ask where it came from. All that hacking they had to do to get it unwound from your bedposts, and yet it seemed no worse for wear."

Catherine wrung her hands, not sure why talking about her dream tree made her self-conscious. "Well, yes, that's where I got my lemons, and I'm certain these tarts are my best yet. By tomorrow morning, all of Hearts will be talking about them and longing to know when they can buy our desserts for themselves."

"Don't be silly, Cath." Mary Ann pulled a corset over Cath's head. "They've been asking that since you made those maple–brown sugar cookies last year."

Cath wrinkled her nose. "Don't remind me. I overcooked them, remember? Too crisp on the edges."

"You're too harsh a critic."

"I want to be the best."

Mary Ann settled her hands on Cath's shoulders. "You are the best. And I've calculated the numbers again—with the expected costs attached to Mr. Caterpillar's shop, monthly expenses, and the cost of ingredients, all measured against our planned daily output and pricing. Adjusted to allow some room for error, I still think we would be profitable in under a year."

Cath clapped her hands over her ears. "You take all the fun out of it with your numbers and mathematics. You know how they make my head spin."

Mary Ann sniffed and turned away, opening the wardrobe. "You have no trouble converting tablespoons into cups. It's not all that different."

"It *is* different, which is why I need you on this venture. My brilliant, oh-so-logical business partner."

She could almost feel Mary Ann's eye roll. "I'd like to get that in writing, Lady Catherine. Now, I seem to recall we had chosen the white gown for tonight?"

"Whichever you think." Stifling the fantasy of their future bakery, Cath set to clipping a set of pearls to her earlobes.

"So?" Mary Ann asked as she pulled a pair of drawers and a petticoat from the wardrobe, then urged Cath to turn around so she could adjust the corset laces. "Was it a good dream?"

Cath was surprised to find that she still had pastry dough beneath her fingernails. Picking at it gave her a good excuse to keep her head lowered, hiding the blush that crept up her throat. "Nothing too special," she said, thinking of lemon-yellow eyes.

She gasped as the corset tightened unexpectedly, squeezing her rib cage. "I can tell when you're lying," said Mary Ann.

"Oh, fine. Yes, it was a good dream. But they're all magical, aren't they?"

"I wouldn't know. I've never had one. Though Abigail told me that once she dreamed about a big glowing crescent shape hovering in the sky . . . and the next morning Cheshire showed up, all grinning teeth hovering in the air and begging for a saucer of milk. Years later and we still can't seem to get rid of him."

Cath grunted. "I'm fond of Cheshire, yet I can't help but hope that my dream might portend something a bit more magical than that."

"Even if it doesn't, at least you got some good lemons out of it."

"True. I shall be satisfied." Though she wasn't. Not nearly.

"Catherine!" The door swung open and the Marchioness floated in, her

eyes saucer-wide and her face purple-red despite having been recently powdered. Catherine's mother lived her life in a state of constant bewilderment. "There you are, my dear darling! What are you—not even dressed yet?"

"Oh, Mama, Mary Ann was just helping me—"

"Abigail, stop playing with that broom and get in here! We need your help! Mary Ann, what is she wearing?"

"My lady, we thought the white gown that she—"

"Absolutely not! Red! You will wear the red dress." Her mother swung open the wardrobe doors and pulled out a full gown overflowing with heavy red velvet, an enormous bustle, and a neckline that was sure to leave little unexposed. "Yes, perfect."

"Oh, Mama. Not that dress. It's too small!"

Her mother picked a waxy green leaf off the bed and draped the dress across the covers. "No, no, no, not too small for my precious little sweetling. This is going to be a very special night, Catherine, and it's imperative that you look your best."

Cath traded a glance with Mary Ann, who shrugged.

"But it's just another ball. Why don't I—"

"Tut-tut, child." Her mother scurried across the room and framed Cath's face in both hands. Though her mother was bony as a bird, there was no sense of delicacy as she pinched and squeezed Cath's face. "You are in for such a delight this evening, my pretty girl." Her eyes glimmered in a way that made Catherine suspicious, before she barked, "*Now turn around!*"

Catherine jumped and spun to face the window.

Her mother, who had become the Marchioness when she married, had that effect on everyone. She was often a warm, loving woman, and Cath's father, the Marquis, doted on her incessantly, but Cath was all too familiar with her mood swings. All cooing and delighted one moment and screaming at the top of her lungs the next. Despite her tiny stature, she had a

booming voice and a particular glare that could make even a lion's heart shrivel beneath it.

Cath thought by now she would have been used to her mother's temperament, but the frequent changes still took her by surprise.

"Mary Ann, tighten her corset."

"But, my lady, I just—"

"Tighter, Mary Ann. This dress won't fit without a twenty-two-inch waist, although just once I'd like to see you down to twenty. You have your father's unfortunate bones, you know, and we must be vigilant if we're to keep from having his figure too. Abigail, be a dear and bring me the ruby set from my jewelry cabinet."

"The ruby set?" Catherine whined as Mary Ann undid the corset laces. "But those earrings are so heavy."

"Don't be such a jellyfish. It's only for one night. Tighter!"

Catherine pinched her face together as Mary Ann tugged on the corset strings. She exhaled as much air as she could and gripped the side of the vanity, willing away the sparkles dancing before her eyes.

"Mother, I can't breathe."

"Well then, next time, I hope you'll think twice before taking a second helping of dessert like you did last night. You can't eat like a piglet and dress like a lady. It will be a miracle if this dress fits."

"We could—wear—the white one?"

Her mother crossed her arms. "My daughter will be wearing red tonight like a true . . . never you mind that. You'll just have to go without dinner."

Cath groaned as Mary Ann cinched the corset one more time. Having to suffer through the bindings was bad enough, but going without dinner too? The food was what she looked forward to most during the King's parties, and all she'd eaten that day was a single boiled egg—she'd been too caught up with her baking to think about eating more.

Her stomach growled in its confinement.

"Are you all right?" Mary Ann whispered.

She bobbed her head, not wanting to waste any precious air to speak.

"Dress!"

Before Catherine could catch her breath she found herself being squashed and wrangled into the red velvet monstrosity. When the maids had finished and Catherine dared to peek into the mirror, she was relieved that, while she may have felt like an encased sausage, she didn't look like one. The bold color brought out the red in her lips and made her fair skin appear fairer and her dark hair darker. When Abigail settled the enormous necklace onto her collarbone and replaced her pearls with dangling rubies, Catherine felt, momentarily, like a true lady of the court, all glamour and mystery.

"Marvelous!" The Marchioness clasped Catherine's hand in both of hers, that peculiar, misty-eyed look returning. "I'm so proud of you."

Catherine frowned. "You are?"

"Oh, don't start fishing now." Her mother clucked her tongue, patting the back of Cath's hand once before dropping it.

Catherine eyed her reflection again. The mystique was quickly fading, leaving her feeling exposed. She would have preferred a nice, roomy day dress, covered in flour or not. "Mama, I'll be overdressed. No one else will be so done up."

Her mother sniffed. "Precisely. You look exceptional!" She wiped away a tear. "I could scatter to pieces."

Despite all her discomfort, all her reservations, Cath couldn't deny a hot spark behind her sternum. Her mother's voice was a constant nag in her head, telling her to put down the fork, to stand up straight, to smile, *but not that much!* She knew her mother wanted the best for her, but it was oh so lovely to hear compliments for once.

With one last dreamy sigh, the Marchioness mentioned checking on

Cath's father before she fluttered out of the room, dragging Abigail along with her. As the door to her chambers closed, Cath yearned to fall onto her bed with the exhaustion that came from being in her mother's presence, but she was sure she would rip an important seam if she did.

"Do I look as ridiculous as I feel?"

Mary Ann shook her head. "You look ravishing."

"Is it absurd to look ravishing at this silly ball? Everyone will think I'm being presumptuous."

Mary Ann pressed her lips in apology. "It is a bit of butter upon bacon."

"Oh, please, I'm hungry enough as it is." Cath twisted inside the corset, trying to pry up some of the boning that dug into her ribs, but it wouldn't budge. "I need a chocolate."

"I'm sorry, Cath, but I don't think that dress could fit a single bite. Come along. I'll help you into your shoes."



CHAPTER 3



The White Rabbit, master of ceremonies, stood at the top of the stairs with a puffed-up chest, smiling twittishly as Catherine's father handed him their announcement card. "Good eve, good eve, Your Lordship! What a stunning cravat you're wearing tonight, so perfectly matches your hair. Like snowfall on a balding hill, is how I'd describe that."

"Do you think so, Mr. Rabbit?" asked Cath's father, pleased with the compliment. He spent a moment patting his head, as if to confirm the flattery.

The Rabbit's gaze darted to the Marchioness. "My dear Lady Pinkerton, I'm sure my eyes have never seen such rare beauty, such outstanding elegance—"

The Marchioness brushed him off. "Get on with it, herald."

"Er, of course, I am your humble servant, my lady." Flustered, the Rabbit stuck his ears straight up and raised a trumpet to his mouth. As the ditty echoed throughout the ballroom, he proclaimed: "Presenting Whealagig T. Pinkerton, the most honorable Marquess of Rock Turtle Cove, accompanied by his wife, Lady Idonia Pinkerton, Marchioness of Rock Turtle Cove, and daughter, Lady Catherine Pinkerton!"

As the Marquess and Marchioness descended the steps into the ballroom, the White Rabbit's pinkish eyes skipped to Catherine, widening as they took in her voluminous red gown. His nose twitched with

repugnance, but he was quick to mask it under another sycophantic grin. "Why, Lady Pinkerton, you look so . . . er. So very noticeable."

Cath attempted a faint smile and moved to follow her parents down the steps, but as soon as she looked down into the ballroom she gasped and reeled back.

A sea of black and white stretched before her.

Ivory-tailed dress coats and ebony elbow gloves.

Pale starfish fascinators and crow-feather bow ties.

Chessboard leggings. Zebra face masks. Black velvet skirts trimmed in rhinestones and icicles. Even some of the Diamond courtiers had pasted black spades onto their stomachs to disguise their identifying red marks.

Noticeable, indeed.

There was still the rare spot of red in the crowd—a rose tucked into a buttonhole or a ribbon lacing the back of a gown—but Cath alone wore red from head to toe. As if her dress weren't enough, she felt sudden redness rushing up her neck and across her cheeks. She felt eyes snagging on her, heard the intake of breaths, sensed the glower of distaste. How could her mother not have known this was one of the King's black-and-white balls?

Realization hit in quick succession.

Her mother had known. Staring at her mother's billowing white dress and her father's matching white tuxedo, Cath realized that her mother had known all along.

Another trumpet ditty muffled in her ears. Beside her, the White Rabbit cleared his throat. "So devastatingly sorry to rush you, Lady Pinkerton, but there are more guests waiting to be presented . . ."

She glanced at the line that had formed behind her, more members of the gentry peeking around one another and gawking at her.

Dread settling at the base of her stomach, Catherine picked up her skirt and started toward the masses of penguins and raccoons.

The ballroom of Heart Castle had long ago been carved from a

gargantuan chunk of pink quartz, from the floor to the balusters to the enormous pillars that supported the domed roof. The ceiling was painted in murals depicting various landscapes from the kingdom: the Somewhere Hills and the Nowhere Forest, the Crossroads and the castle and rolling farmlands stretching to all horizons. Even Rock Turtle Cove was depicted above the doors that led out to the rose gardens.

Large windows marched along the southern edge of the room, heart-shaped and cut from faceted red glass. The feasting table, overflowing with fruits, cheeses, and sweets, stretched the length of the north wall, beside the partition that separated the dancers from the orchestra. Crystal chandeliers encircled the ceiling, warming the walls with the light of thousands of white tapered candles. Even from the steps Cath could hear a few of the hotheaded candles ranting about the ballroom's draftiness and would someone *please* shut the door down there.

Catherine set her sights on the feasting table—a place of comfort in the crowded ballroom, even if her dress was too tight for her to eat anything. Each step was a struggle with her body pin-straight, her corset constricted against her ribs, and the bustle dragging along the stairs. She was grateful to finally feel the hard click of the ballroom floor beneath her heels.

"My dearest Lady Catherine, I did hope you would be in attendance tonight."

Her gratitude vanished. It figured that Margaret would latch on to her first, before she'd hardly taken two steps toward the food.

Catherine schooled her expression into delight. "Why, Lady Margaret! How do you do?"

Margaret Mearle, daughter of the Count of Crossroads, had been Catherine's closest bosom friend since they were toddlers. Unfortunately, they had never much liked each other.

Margaret had the great hardship of being unbearably unattractive.

Not the homely-caterpillar-waiting-to-turn-into-a-beautiful-butterfly sort of unattractive, but the sort of unattractive that gave those around her a sense of hopelessness. She had a sharp chin, tiny eyes spaced too close together and overshadowed by an overhanging brow, and broad, inelegant shoulders that were made more prominent by her ill-fitting clothes. If it weren't for the gowns she wore, Margaret would have been frequently mistaken for a boy.

An unattractive one.

Though Margaret's physical shortcomings were a favorite conversation topic of Catherine's mother ("She would not be such a very dreadful case if only she would snug up her corsets a bit more."), Catherine herself found Margaret's personality to be far more offensive, as Margaret had been convinced since childhood that she was very, *very* clever and very, *very* righteous. More clever and more righteous than anyone else. She excelled at pointing out how much more clever and righteous she was.

Given that they were such dear friends, Margaret had long seen it as her role to point out all of Catherine's inadequacies. In hopes of bettering her. Like any true friend would.

"I'm quite well," said Margaret as they shared a mutual curtsy, "but I feel wretched to inform you that your dress is unduly red."

"Thank you so much for that insight," Cath said through her crushing smile. "I have recently made the same observation."

Margaret's face puckered, squinching up her small eyes. "I must warn you, my dearest Catherine, that such an endeavor to capture attention could lead to lifelong arrogance and vanity. It is much wiser to let your inner beauty shine through a drab gown than to attempt to conceal it with physical accoutrements."

"Thank you for that advice. I will keep it under consideration." Cath refrained from casting an unimpressed glance at Margaret's gown, which was drab and black and topped with a sobering fur cap.

"I hope you will. And the moral of that is 'Once a goldfish, forever a goldfish.'"

The corner of Cath's mouth twitched. That was one more of Margaret's delightful quirks—she was a living encyclopedia of morals that Cath could never make any sense of, and she could never tell if the morals were nonsense, or if she was just too dim to understand them. No doubt Margaret would assure her it was the latter.

Not that she was going to ask.

"Hm. So true," Cath agreed, scanning the nearby guests in hopes for an excuse to abandon Margaret before she built up any momentum. She could be impossible to escape from when she got to carrying on.

Not far away, Sir Magpie and his wife were drinking cordials beside a heart-shaped ice sculpture, but Catherine dared not escape to them—it could have been her imagination, but her jewelry had an uncanny way of disappearing around the Magpies.

Cath's father was entertaining the Four, Seven, and Eight of Diamonds. Even as Cath spotted them, her father reached the climax of some joke and the Four fell onto his flat back, laughing hysterically and kicking his legs in the air. After a moment it became clear that he couldn't get back up on his own and the Eight reached down to help, still chuckling.

Catherine sighed—she had never been skilled at slipping easily into a joke half told.

And then there was the Most Noble Pygmalion Warthog, Duke of Tuskany. Cath had often found him to be awkward and distant and a terrible conversationalist. As their eyes met, she was surprised to find that he was watching her and Margaret.

She wasn't sure which of them turned away first.

"Are you looking for someone, Lady Catherine?" Margaret inched closer—uncomfortably close, settling her chin on Cath's shoulder—and followed her gaze.

"No, no, I was only . . . observing."

"Observing whom?"

"Well. That's a fine waistcoat the Duke is wearing tonight, don't you think?" she asked, aiming for civility as she inched out from beneath Margaret's chin.

Margaret curled her nose in disgust. "How could anyone notice his waistcoat? When I look at the Duke, all I see is the way he insists on turning up his nose at everyone else, as if being the Duke of Tuskany were any great achievement."

Cath cocked her head. "I think his nose does that naturally." She pressed a finger to her own nose and pushed upward, testing it out. It didn't make her *feel* elitist . . .

Margaret blanched. "For shame, Catherine. You can't go around mocking everyone else like that! At least, not in public."

"Oh! I didn't mean to cause offense. It's just sort of snout-like is all. He probably has an excellent sense of smell. I wonder whether he couldn't track down truffles with a nose like that."

Cath was spared from her defense by a rough tap against her shoulder.

She turned and found herself staring at a black tunic covering a puffed-up chest. Her gaze traveled upward to a scowling face half hidden by a single eye-patch and messy hair peeking out of a white beret.

Jack, the Knave of Hearts, who had been knighted out of pity after losing his right eye in a game of charades.

Her mood sank even further. This ball was off to the most horrible of starts. "Hello, Jack."

"Lady Pinkerton," he drawled, his breath smelling of mulled wine. His eye darted toward Margaret. "Lady Mearle."

Margaret folded her arms over her chest. "It is of intolerable impoliteness to interrupt a conversation, Jack."

"I came to tell Lady Pinkerton that this is a black-and-white ball."

Cath lowered her eyes and tried to look sheepish, though with every reminder she was becoming less embarrassed and more annoyed. "There seems to have been some miscommunication."

"You look stupid," said Jack.

Catherine bristled. "There's no cause for rudeness."

Jack huffed, scanning her dress again. And again. "You're not half as lovely as you think you are, Lady Pinkerton. Not a quarter as lovely even, and I've only got one eye to see it."

"I assure you I don't—"

"Everyone thinks as much, just won't say it to your face like I will. But I'm not afraid of you, not one little bit."

"I never said—"

"I don't even like you all that very much."

Catherine pressed her lips tight and inhaled a patient breath. "Yes, I do believe you told me that the last time I saw you, Jack. And the time before that. And the time before that. You've been reminding me how much you dislike me since we were six years old and dressing up the maypole, if I recall correctly."

"Yes. Right. Because it's true." Jack's cheeks had reddened. "Also, you smell like a daisy. Except, one of those awful, stinky ones."

"Naturally, one of those," said Catherine. "Heaven forbid I mistake that for a compliment."

Jack grunted, then reached up and pulled on one of her curls.

"Ow!"

The Knave had swiveled on his feet and marched away before Catherine could think of a response, though she would later wish she had taken the opportunity to give him a good kick in the shins.

"What an oaf," Margaret said after he had gone.

"He most certainly is," agreed Catherine, rubbing her scalp and wondering how long she'd been there and how much longer she would have to stay.

"Of course," Margaret continued, "it is most deplorable of you to encourage such oafish behavior."

Catherine spun toward her, aghast. "I do not encourage it."

"If that's what you believe, I suppose we must agree to be disagreeable," said Margaret. "And the moral of that is—"

But before she could extrapolate some nonsensical proof of ill behavior, a blare of a trumpet echoed through the ballroom. At the top of the steps, the White Rabbit proclaimed in his nasally voice—

"PRESENTING HIS ROYAL MAJESTY THE KING OF HEARTS."

The White Rabbit blew the horn again, then tucked the instrument against his side and bowed. Cath turned with the rest of the guests as the King emerged at the top of his own private staircase. The entire chessboard of aristocrats rippled with bows and curtsies.

The King wore full regalia—a white fur cloak, black-and-white-striped pantaloons, glossy white shoes with diamond-studded buckles, and a heart-tipped scepter in one hand. This was all topped with the crown, trimmed with more rubies and diamonds and velvet and a central heart-shaped finial.

It would have been a striking ensemble, except the fur had some syrupy substance near the collar, the pantaloons were bunching around one knee, and the crown—which Catherine had always thought looked too heavy for the King's tiny head—had slipped to one side. Also, His Majesty was grinning like a loon when Catherine rose from her curtsy.

And he was grinning at her.

Catherine stiffened as the King jostled down the steps. The crowd fanned out to allow him through, creating a direct pathway, and before Catherine could think to move aside herself, the King was standing before her.

"Fair evening, Lady Pinkerton!" He arched up onto his toes, which drew even more attention to his minuscule stature. He stood at least two hands shorter than Catherine, despite the rumor that he had special-crafted shoes with two-inch soles.

"Fair evening, Your Majesty. How do you do?" She curtsied again.

The White Rabbit, who had followed in the King's wake, cleared his throat. "His Royal Majesty would like to request the hand of Lady Catherine Pinkerton for the first quadrille."

Her eyes widened. "Why, thank you, Your Majesty. I would be honored." Catherine dipped into a third curtsy—her practiced reaction to anything that was said in the King's presence. It was not at all that he was an intimidating man. Much the opposite. The King, perhaps fifteen years her senior, was round-bodied and rosy-cheeked and had a tendency to giggle at the most inopportune times. It was his very lack of intimidation that kept Catherine on her best behavior, otherwise it would be too easy to forget that he was her sovereign.

Handing his scepter to the White Rabbit, the King of Hearts took Catherine's hand and led her onto the dance floor. Cath told herself it was a mercy to be swept away from Margaret, but the King's company wasn't much of an improvement.

No, that wasn't fair. The King was a sweet man. A simple man. A *happy* man, which was important, as a happy king made for a happy kingdom.

He simply wasn't a clever man.

As they took the position of top couple on the dance floor, Cath was struck with a surge of dread. She was dancing with the King. All eyes would be upon them, and everyone would think she had chosen this dress for no other reason than to catch his eye.

"You look lovely, Lady Pinkerton," said the King. He was speaking more to her bosom than her face—a result of his unfortunate height, not any sort of ungentlemanliness, and yet Catherine could not keep her cheeks from flushing.

Why, oh why, couldn't she have fought against her mother's wishes, just this once?

"Thank you, Your Majesty," she said, her voice strained.

"I am indeed fond of the color red!"

"Why . . . who isn't, Your Majesty?"

He giggled his agreement and Cath was glad when the music began and they entered into the first figure. They turned away from each other to walk down the outside lines of couples, too far apart to speak. Catherine felt her corset pinching beneath her breasts and she pressed her palms against her skirt to keep from fidgeting with it.

"This is a delightful ball," she said, joining the King at the end of the line. They took hands. His were soft and damp.

"Do you think so?" He beamed. "I always love the black-and-white balls. They're so . . . so . . ."

"Neutral?" Catherine supplied.

"Yes!" He sighed dreamily, his eyes on Catherine's face. "You always know just what I'm thinking, Lady Pinkerton."

She looked away.

They ducked beneath the outstretched arms of the next couple and released hands to twirl around Mr. and Mrs. Badger.

"I must ask," the King started as they clasped hands again, "I don't suppose you may have . . . by chance . . . brought any treats with you this evening?" He watched her with shining eyes, his curled mustache twitching hopefully.

Cath beamed as they raised their hands so the next couple could duck beneath. She knew the King was stretching up on his tiptoes but she respectfully did not look down. "In fact, I baked three lemon tarts this morning, and my maid was going to ensure they made it to your feasting table during the festivities. They might be there now."

His face lit up and he twisted his head to eye the long, long table, but they were much too far away to pick out three little tarts.

"Fantastic," he swooned, missing a couple dance steps and forcing Catherine to stand awkwardly for a moment before he picked it up again.

"I hope you'll enjoy them."

He returned his attention to her, shaking his head as if dazed. “Lady Pinkerton, you are a treasure.”

She stifled a grimace, embarrassed by the dreamy tone in his voice.

“Though I must confess, I have a particular weakness for key lime tarts as much as lemon.” His cheeks wobbled. “You know what they say—key lime is the key to a king’s heart!”

Cath had never heard that before, but she let her head bounce in agreement. “So they do!”

The King’s grin was effervescent.

By the end of the dance Catherine felt ready to collapse from the strain of appearing joyful and attentive, and she felt only relief as the King air-kissed the top of her hand and thanked her for the pleasure of the dance.

“I must find these delectable tarts of yours, Lady Pinkerton, but I hope you’ll keep the final dance for me as well?”

“With pleasure. You honor me so.”

He giggled, mad as hops as he adjusted his crown, then took off waltzing toward the feasting table.

Cath withered, grateful that the first quadrille was over. Perhaps she could persuade her parents to let her leave before that final dance of the evening. Her plotting made her feel guilty—how many girls would love to receive such attention from the King?

He wasn’t an offensive dancing partner, only a tiresome one.

Thinking a bit of air might help her cheeks recover from the stretched-out smile, she headed toward the balconies. But she hadn’t gone a dozen steps through the crowd of black crinolines and white top hats before the candlelit chandeliers flickered as one and went out.



CHAPTER 4



THE MUSIC SCREECHED AND DIED. A cry arose from the guests as the ballroom was plunged into darkness.

There was the sound of breathing, the crinkle of petticoats, an uncertain stillness. Then there was a spark and a flicker. A ring of candlelight spiraled around one of the center-most chandeliers and a haunting glow stretched across the domed ceiling, leaving the guests drenched in shadows below.

Hanging from the lit chandelier was a vertical hoop that Catherine was sure hadn't been there before.

Lounging inside the hoop, apparently as comfortable as if it had been a chaise lounge, was a Joker.

He wore close-fitting black pants tucked into worn leather boots, a black tunic belted at his hips, and gloves, also black—not the white dress gloves the gentry wore. His skin glowed like amber in the firelight and his eyes were rimmed in kohl so thick it became a mask. On first glance, Catherine thought he had long black hair too, until she realized that he was wearing a black hat that hung in three points, each tipped with a small silver bell—though he held so still, they didn't ring, and Catherine could not recall the tinkle of bells when the candles had gone out.

When—*how*—had he gotten up there?

The stranger hung suspended for a long moment, dwelling in the stares

of the guests below, as the hoop slowly spun. His gaze was piercing and Catherine held her breath as it found her and, at once, seemed to stall. His eyes narrowed, almost imperceptibly, as he took in her flamboyant red gown.

Cath shivered and had the strangest urge to give him a nervous wave. An acknowledgment that, yes, she was aware that her dress was *unduly red.* But by the time her hand had lifted, the Joker's attention had skipped on.

She dropped her hand and exhaled.

Once the hoop had made a full circle, a ghost smile lifted the corners of the stranger's lips. He tilted his head. The bells jingled.

There was an intake of breath from the watchful crowd.

"Ladies. Gentlemen." He spoke with precision. "Your Most Illustrious Majesty."

The King bounced on his toes like a child waiting for the Christmas feast.

The Joker swung himself up in one fluid motion so he was standing inside the hoop. It spun another lazy half turn. They all listened, mesmerized by the hesitant creak of the rope that attached it to the chandelier.

"Why is a raven like a writing desk?"

The hoop stopped spinning.

The Joker's words blanketed the ballroom. The silence became resolute. With the stranger facing toward her again, Catherine caught a flicker of firelight in his eyes.

Then, upon realizing that a riddle had been posed, the crowd began to rustle with murmurs. Hushed voices repeated the riddle. *Why is a raven like a writing desk?*

No one proposed an answer.

When it became clear that no one would, the Joker stretched one hand out over the audience, closed tight in a fist. Those beneath him took a step back.

"You see, they can each produce a few notes."

He opened his fist and, not a *few* notes, but an entire blizzard of black and white papers burst from his palm like confetti. The crowd gasped, reeling back as the pieces swarmed and fluttered through the air, so thick it seemed the entire ceiling had disintegrated into paper notes. The more that came, the more the crowd cooed. Some of the men upended their hats to catch as many of the notes as they could.

Laughing, Catherine lifted her face to the ceiling. It felt like being caught in a warm blizzard. She held her hands out to the sides and gave a twirl, delighting in how her red skirt ballooned out, kicking up a papery snowdrift.

When she had gone three full circles, she paused and tugged a slip out of her hair—thin white parchment, no longer than her thumb, printed with a single red heart.

The last confetti pieces looped down to the floor. Some spots in the ballroom were ankle-deep.

The Joker was still peering down from his hoop. In the tumult, he had removed his three-pointed hat, revealing that his hair was black after all, messy and curling around the tops of his ears.

"Though admittedly," he said when the crowd had quieted, "the notes tend to be very flat."

The bells on his hat tinkled and up from the base of those three tiny points an enormous black bird arose, cawing as it soared toward the ceiling. The audience cried out in surprise. The raven circled the room, wings so large their flapping stirred up the mounds of paper below. It took a second turn around the ballroom before settling itself in the chandelier above the Joker.

The audience began to applaud. Catherine, dazzled, found her hands coming together almost without her knowing.

The Joker tugged his hat back onto his head, then slipped down from

the hoop so he was hanging from a single gloved hand. Catherine's heart lurched. It was much too high to risk the fall. But as he let go, a red velvet scarf had become tied to the hoop. The Joker spun languidly toward the floor, revealing white and black scarves in turn, all knotted together and appearing seamlessly from his fingers, until they had lowered him all the way to the ground, kicking up a swirl of paper notes.

The moment his boots touched the floor, the circle of light from the chandelier spread out through the ballroom, each taper catching flame in fast succession until the room was once again ablaze.

The crowd clapped. The Joker dipped into a bow.

When he straightened, he was holding a second hat in his hands—an ivory beret with a decorative silver band. The Joker sent it twirling on the tip of a finger. "I beg your pardon, but does anyone seem to be missing a hat?" he asked, his voice cutting through the applause.

A moment of uncertainty ensued, followed by an offended roar.

Jack, halfway across the room, was patting his tangled hair with both hands. Everyone laughed, and Catherine remembered Mary Ann saying that Jack had intended to steal the Joker's hat as a means of initiation.

"My sincerest apologies," said the Joker, smiling in a very unapologetic way. "I haven't the faintest idea how this hat came to be in my hands. Here, you may have it back."

Jack stormed through the crowd, his face reddening fast as people chortled around him.

But as he reached for the still-spinning hat, the Joker pulled away and turned the hat upside down. "But wait—I think there might be something inside. A surprise? A present?" He shut one eye and peered into the hat. "Ah—a stowaway!"

The Joker reached into the hat. His arm disappeared nearly to his shoulder—far deeper than the hat itself—and when he pulled back he had two tall, fuzzy white ears clasped in his fist.

The crowd leaned in closer.

"Oh my ears and whiskers," the Joker muttered. "How cliché. If I'd have known it was a rabbit, I would have just left him in there. But as it can't be helped now . . ."

The ears, when he pulled them out, were attached to none other than the master of ceremonies, the White Rabbit himself. He emerged sputtering and peering round-eyed at the crowd, as if he couldn't fathom how he had gotten into a beret in the middle of the ball.

Catherine pressed her hands over her mouth, stifling an unladylike snort.

"Why—I never!" The Rabbit stammered, flopping his big feet as the Joker settled him onto the floor. He swiped his ears out of the Joker's grip, straightened his tunic, and sniffed. "The nerve! I will be speaking to His Majesty about this blatant show of disrespect!"

The Joker bowed. "So very sorry, Mr. Rabbit. No disrespect was meant at all. Allow me to make amends with a heartfelt gift. Surely there must be something else in here . . ."

As Jack made another swipe for his hat, the Joker nonchalantly pulled it out of his reach and jingled the hat beside his ear.

"Oh yes. That will do." Reaching in again, he emerged this time with a very fine pocket watch, chain and all. With a flourish, he presented the watch to Mr. Rabbit. "Here you are. And see there, it's already set to the proper time."

Mr. Rabbit sniffed, but when the glitter of a diamond set into the watch's face caught his eye, he snatched it out of the Joker's hand. "Er—well. I'll consider . . . we shall see . . . but this *is* a fine watch . . ." He gnawed on the watch's hook with his large front teeth, and evidently determining that it was real gold, slipped it into his pocket. He cast another unhappy glare at the Joker before scrambling off into the crowd.

"And for you, Sir Jack-Be-Nimble, Jack-Be-Quick." The Joker offered the hat to Jack, who grabbed it away and slammed it onto his head.

The Joker started and raised a finger. "You may wish to—"

Jack's eyes bugged and he whipped the hat off again. A lit tapered candle was sitting in a silver candlestick on top of his head. The flame had already burned a smoldering hole into the top of the beret.

"Hey, I'm trying to get some sleep!" cried the candle.

"I beg your pardon." The Joker reached forward and pinched the flame with the fingertips of his leather gloves. A curl of smoke wrapped around Jack's head as the corner of his good eye began to twitch. "That's peculiar. I thought for sure you'd be jumping over the candlestick, but this is all upside downward indeed."

The guests were in fits, many laughing so hard they didn't hear the echoing caw of the raven as it dropped off the chandelier and swooped toward them. Catherine took a startled step back as the raven brushed past her ear and settled onto the Joker's shoulder. The Joker did not flinch, even as the raven's talons dug into his tunic.

"With one last bit of wisdom, we must bid you a good night." Reaching up, the Joker tipped his own hat to the crowd. "Always check your hats before donning them. You never know what might be lurking inside." The bells jingled as he pivoted on his heels, making sure to face everyone in the audience.

Catherine straightened as he turned her way, and—*winked* at her?

She couldn't be sure if she'd imagined it.

His mouth lifted quick to one side and then, before her very eyes, his entire body melted into inky blackness. In the space of a heartbeat, the Joker had transformed into a winged shadow—a second raven.

The two birds fluttered toward a window and were gone.



CHAPTER 5



THE NEW COURT JOKER was all anyone would talk about. Even the dancing went forgotten as the guests realized that the paper notes covering the floor contained more than just hearts—some had black diamonds, red spades, white clubs. Some, the shadow-profile of a raven. Others: a crown, a scepter, a three-pointed joker's cap. Some guests made a game of collecting as many of the different designs as they could, hunting for shapes they might have missed.

The giggle-mug King was jollier than Cath had ever seen him. Even halfway across the ballroom she could hear his pitched voice demanding that his guests confirm that, yes indeed, it was the most astounding entertainment they'd ever known.

Catherine's stomach growled, vibrating through the boning of her corset. She'd been so enchanted with the Joker's performance she'd forgotten all about her gown's constrictions and her deepening hunger. She tried to be inconspicuous as she squirmed inside the dress, adjusting herself in the tight bodice, and sneaked toward the feasting table. She spotted Mary Ann laying out a plate of truffles, standing out from the other maids with her beanstalk height and the straw-colored hair that had slipped from the edges of her bonnet.

Perking when she spotted Catherine, Mary Ann lowered her head and tugged at one corner of the tablecloth as if to straighten it. "What did you think of the performance?" she whispered.

Cath's fingers fluttered yearningly over the platters of food. "I thought court jokers only told bawdy jokes and made wisecracks about the King."

"It makes me wonder what else he might have up that slee—er, hat of his." Mary Ann swept a tray off the table and curtsied. "Truffle, milady?"

"You know I can't."

"Just pretend to be considering it so I can stand here a while longer. The royal servants keep trying to coerce us attendants to bring out more food, and if I have to go back down to that kitchen I'm sure to melt. Besides, there's plenty food out already when taking into account the number of guests here tonight and the rate at which it's being consumed, and they don't need any more no matter what they say. Right awful waste it'd be."

Catherine steepled her fingers. "Are those caramels?"

"I think so."

"How do you think chocolate caramels would be with a touch of sea salt on top?"

Mary Ann stuck out her tongue in disgust. "Why not throw in a dash of pepper while you're at it?"

"Just a thought." Catherine gnawed on her lower lip, eyeing the chocolates. Yes, sea salt, whatever Mary Ann might think. The pantry at Rock Turtle Cove was always well stocked with it, being so close to the shore, and once, being in an experimental mood, Cath had sprinkled a bit into her hot cocoa and found it surprisingly pleasant. It was just the thing for these truffles. A bit of saltiness to brighten the sweetness, a bit of crunch to reflect on the smooth caramel . . . why, she could make a salted caramel chocolate torte. It could be one of the bakery's signature treats!

Her stomach rumbled.

"Cath?"

"Hm?"

"You look as though you're about to start drooling, and I would hate for you to stain that dress."

She groaned. “I can’t help it. I’m so hungry.” She wrapped her arms around her stomach as another growl rumbled through the velvet.

Mary Ann’s brows creased briefly with sympathy, but then her face brightened. “That dress must have been a smart choice all the same. You danced top couple with the King!”

Cath bit back another, deeper groan. No doubt her complaints of having to dance with the King were nothing compared to carrying heavy food-laden trays through a sweltering kitchen.

Her eye caught on a hulking shape at the other end of the feasting table and she jolted. “Who is that?”

Mary Ann glanced over her shoulder, but just as quickly withdrew. She tipped her head closer. “His name is Peter Peter, and the tiny thing beside him is his wife. I haven’t caught her name yet.”

“Tiny thi—oh.”

The wife Mary Ann had mentioned was indeed a slip of a girl, almost invisible beside the massive bulk of her husband. She had a back that seemed permanently hunched—from work, not age, Cath could guess—parchment-white skin and stringy blond hair. She looked ill, one hand pressed against her stomach and having no apparent interest in the food before her. Her face shimmered with a thin layer of perspiration.

On the other hand, her husband was as intimidating as a troll. He stood well above the other guests and would have dwarfed even Cath’s barrel-chested father. He wore a black riding coat and breeches that barely fit, the material stretched taut across his oxen shoulders. Catherine suspected that if he moved too fast he would split any number of seams. He had frizzing red hair that was in need of both a washing and a comb, and a brow currently stuck in a scowl.

Neither Peter Peter nor his wife looked at all pleased to be at the King’s ball.

“But who *are* they?” she whispered.

"Sir Peter owns the pumpkin patch outside of Nowhere Forest. One of the kitchen maids told me they were granted a knighthood after his wife won a pumpkin-eating contest a fortnight ago. I understand Jack came in second place and has been demanding a rematch ever since." Mary Ann harrumphed. "I wish someone would think to give me a knighthood for all that *I* eat."

Catherine chuckled. One wouldn't know it to look at Mary Ann, but she had an appetite to rival Cath's own. They'd bonded over their love of food years ago, not long after Mary Ann had been hired on as a household maid.

Her laughter was eclipsed by a shadow falling over them. Thick fingers descended on Mary Ann's tray. "What're those?"

Mary Ann squeaked and Catherine flushed, but Sir Peter didn't seem to notice either of them as he popped a truffle whole into his mouth. If he'd heard them talking about him and his wife, he showed no sign of it.

"Er—caramel truffles, sir," said Mary Ann.

"Unsalted," Cath added. "Unfortunately."

Up close, she could make out the start of whiskers on Sir Peter's chin and dirt beneath his fingernails, as if he'd been too preoccupied with his pumpkin patch to bother cleaning up for his first royal ball.

"Sir Peter, isn't it?" she stammered. "I have not yet had the pleasure of making your acquaintance."

His eyes narrowed as he sucked the chocolate from his dirty thumb. Catherine winced.

Beside her, eyes cast on the ground, Mary Ann ducked away from the table.

"Ohm, mwait!"

Mary Ann paused.

Sir Peter swallowed, leaving bits of chocolate in his teeth. "I'll be taking more of those. These are all—what's it called? Compliments of the King, right?"

Mary Ann half curtsied again. "Of course, sir. You're welcome to enjoy as much as you like. Is there anything else I can bring you?"

"No." He claimed another truffle, and hardly seemed to chew before swallowing.

Hiding in his shadow, Lady Peter watched the truffle travel down her husband's throat and turned green before casting hesitant eyes up at Mary Ann. "Might you—" she stammered, her voice barely a whisper. "—have any pumpkin pasties? We sold some pumpkins to the royal pastry chefs yestermorn and heard tell they would be making them for the ball, but I haven't—"

"You don't be needing no more pumpkin!" her husband barked, spittle flying from his mouth and landing on the tray of truffles. Cath and Mary Ann both grimaced. "You've had plenty enough already."

Lady Peter shied away.

Clearing her throat, Cath edged in between Peter Peter and the truffles. "Mary Ann, why don't you go see if the Knave would like to sample the caramels? He's so fond of sweets."

She felt Mary Ann's sigh of relief before she retreated with the tray.

Catherine curtsied. "I am Catherine Pinkerton, daughter of the Marquess of Rock Turtle Cove. I'm told you were recently granted a knighthood?"

His eyes darkened beneath his prickly red eyebrows. "Suppose we were."

"And this must be your wife. It's a pleasure to meet you, Lady Peter."

The woman's shoulders hunched against her ears. Rather than curtsy or smile, she shrank away from the introduction and took to scanning the contents of the feasting table again, though Cath thought she saw her gag at the sight of all the food.

Catherine clung helplessly to her manners. "Are you well, Lady Peter? I'm afraid you're looking a little pale, and it is so warm in here. Would you like to accompany me for a turn around the balcony?"

"She's well enough," Peter snapped. Catherine took half a step back,

startled at his vehemence. "Just been eatin' some bad pumpkin of late, like she don't know better."

"I see," Catherine said, though she didn't. "Congratulations on your win at the pumpkin eating contest, Lady Peter. You must have eaten quite a lot. I've been longing to make a pumpkin pie lately, myself."

Peter spent a moment picking at his teeth with his nail and Catherine backed away again, having the peculiar sensation that he was trying to figure out the best way to cook and eat *her.*

"She eats 'em raw." He sounded proud of this fact. "You ever eaten raw pumpkin, Lady . . . *Pinkerton*?"

"I can't say that I have." She had made a few pumpkin pies and one pumpkin mousse in the past—the stringy pulp and slimy seeds that she'd had to scrape out before cooking the flesh had been less than appetizing. Glancing around Sir Peter, she asked his wife, "I can see how one might be feeling poorly after such a meal. It's a shame you aren't feeling well enough to partake in the King's table."

Lady Peter's gaze flickered up and she whimpered before letting her head hang again. She looked moments away from being sick all over the astounding feast.

"Are you sure you don't want to sit down?" Catherine asked.

Lady Peter responded meekly, "Are you sure there aren't any pumpkin pasties lying about? I think I might feel a bit better, if only . . ."

"See? No bother talking to her," said Peter. "Dumb as a Jack-O'-Lantern she is."

His wife tightened her arms around her waist.

Catherine's anger burbled. For a moment she imagined him choking on one of those chocolate caramels, and how she and his wife would stand over him laughing, but her fantasy was interrupted by the Nine and Ten of Diamonds squeezing sideways in between them. "Do pardon me," the Nine said, reaching for a honey-drizzled fig.

Cath gladly took a step back.

"These shindies always like this?" Peter asked, snarling at the courtier's back.

The Ten turned to him with a jovial smile and held up a glass of wine as if in salute. "Not at all," he said. "We used to keep standards."

Cath blanched. The courtier was gone in an instant, leaving Peter with a flaming face and searing eyes. Cath forced a smile. "The courtiers can be a tad . . . uppity, sometimes. With strangers. I'm sure he meant no offense."

"I'm sure he did," said Peter, "and I'm sure he ain't the only one." He stared at her for a long moment, before raising his hand and tipping his tattered hat. "Been a pleasure, *milady*."

It was the first sign of manners he'd shown, and it was about as believable as the Duke of Tuskany claiming he could fly.

Sir Peter grabbed his wife by the elbow and pulled her away. Cath wasn't sad to see them go.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Or, why is a raven like a writing-desk?

It's commonly believed that when the Hatter posed his unanswered riddle in *Alice's Adventure's in Wonderland*—"Why is a raven like a writing-desk?"—Lewis Carroll did not have an answer in mind. However, after years of being pestered, Carroll finally gave in with a response, recorded in the preface he wrote to the 1896 edition of *Alice*: "Because it can produce a few notes, tho they are *very* flat; and it is nevar put with the wrong end in front." (Note that the misspelled *nevar* is *raven* backward. Unfortunately, the misspelling would soon be caught and "corrected" by some industrious editor and Carroll's clever wordplay would be lost in future editions.)

All of that is to say that Carroll's "official" answer to the riddle was the inspiration for Jest's debut performance at the black-and-white ball in Chapter Four.

Over the years, countless fans and readers have added their own interpretations of the riddle. The answer that Hatta gives in Chapter Eighteen ("Because they both have quills dipped in ink"), was one that I was quite proud of myself for coming up with, but soon learned that I was not the only one to think it. This answer was credited to David B. Jodrey, Jr., in *The Annotated Alice*[1], along with dozens of other brilliant and amusing answers recorded over time. (My personal favorite comes from Tony Weston, one of the winners of a contest posed by *The Spectator* in 1991: "Because a writing-desk is a rest for pens and a raven is a pest for wrens." I imagine that Carroll, with his love of wordplay, would approve.)

Speaking of the Raven, I was unable to limit myself to abusing the work of only one great author in this book, I had to meddle around with two. Most of Raven's dialogue is inspired by (and sometimes blatant reworkings of) lines from the poem "The Raven" by Edgar Allan Poe. Though readers are free to interpret the character however they see fit, I rather like the idea of Raven being the same bird that tormented the heartbroken narrator in Poe's classic work. As "The Raven" was first published in 1845, twenty years before Alice's Adventures in Wonderland, the time line was too perfect to pass up.

Lastly, I'm sure it will surprise no reader, fan, or scholar that I have taken an abundance of liberties, not only with Carroll's story and characters, but also with the societal rules and norms of Victorian England. I hope you'll forgive any inaccuracies, or even chalk them up to creative license if you're feeling generous, and I sincerely hope that the spirit of Lewis Carroll will find more amusement than offense in my attempts to expand on his crazy, kooky, quirky world.

It is Wonderland, after all.

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1. Martin Gardner, ed., introduction and notes to *The Annotated Alice: The Definitive Edition*, by Lewis Carroll (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1999).