

"Chokshi's tale is as sweet
as a piece of fairy fruit,
and just as wicked."

—V. E. SCHWAB,

#1 *New York Times* bestselling
author of *The Invisible Life*
of *Addie LaRue*

The
LAST TALE
of the
FLOWER
BRIDE

A NOVEL

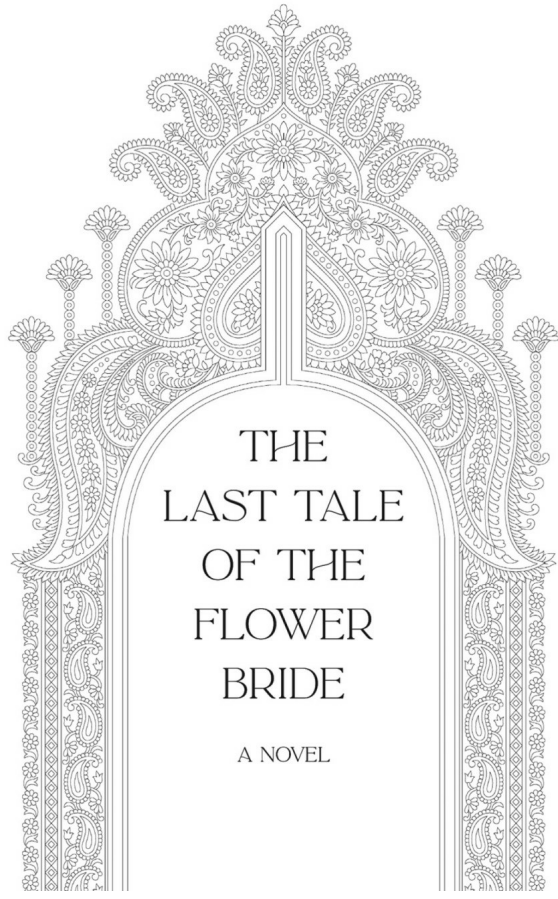
NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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THE
LAST TALE
OF THE
FLOWER
BRIDE

A NOVEL

Dedication

*For Aman, whom I would wear out iron shoes for, and for Niv, whose
friendship is the rarest form of magic*

Epigraph

Myths are but lies breathed through silver.

—C. S. Lewis

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Prologue

You warned me that knowing your secret would destroy us.

At first, it sat in our marriage like a blue-lipped ghost, hardly noticeable until a trick of the light drew it into focus. But you could always tell the days when it gnawed at my thoughts. You tried to comfort me. You stroked my face and curled my fingers to your heart.

You said: “If you pry, you’ll destroy our marriage.”

But oh, my love, you lied.

Chapter One

The Bridegroom

Once upon a time, Indigo Maxwell-Casteñada found me.

I had been lost a long time and had grown comfortable in the dark. I didn't imagine anyone could lure me from it. But Indigo was one of those creatures that can hunt by scent alone, and the reek of my desperate wanting must have left a tantalizing, fluorescent trail.

Before Indigo, I avoided places where money served as pageantry rather than payment. I clung to the opinion that they were loud and crass, the shabby but sturdy armor of a poor man. In those days, I was poor. But I had become rich in expertise, and it was in this capacity that I served as a visiting curator to *L'Éxposition Des Femmes Monstrueuses*. The exhibit had brought me to Paris on someone else's dime and, eventually, to the Hôtel de Casteñada.

Once one of the royal apartments of Louis XIV and Marie Antoinette, the Hôtel de Casteñada now ranked among the finest hotels in the world. The vaulted ceiling, a restoration of the original, I was told, still showed indifferent, muscular gods reclining amidst gold-bellied clouds. Ivy lined the walls, through which the snarling faces of stone satyrs peered and panted at the guests.

It was common knowledge that each of the Casteñada hotels centered on a fairy-tale motif. I gathered this one was an homage to Gabrielle-Suzanne Barbot de Villeneuve's *La Belle et la Bête*—Beauty and the Beast—and while I hated to admit it, something about it seemed not of this world. It was so lovely I could almost ignore the crowd of models and DJs, red-faced businessmen and whatever other brilliantly arrayed and ostensibly vapid creatures such beautiful places attracted.

“Sir?” A slim, dark-skinned waitress appeared at my side. This was the

second time she'd stopped by my table. I had chosen one near the back of the room so I might keep an eye on the entrance. "Are you sure I cannot get you anything?"

I glanced at the menu beside the haphazard collection of notes I'd prepared for the evening. The cocktails started at fifty euros. I smiled at the waitress, raised my half-filled glass of water, and then tapped the empty dish of complimentary spiced nuts.

"Perhaps another of these?" I asked. "My guest must be running late."

The waitress managed a brittle smile and walked away without another word. She probably thought I was lying about meeting someone. Even I couldn't quite believe my intended guest would deign to meet with me.

After months of searching for the whereabouts of a thirteenth-century grimoire, I had traced it to the private collection of the Casteñada family. Initially, my requests to view the piece had gone unanswered. This was not surprising. I was well known only in academic circles as a Middle Ages historian with an interest in the preservation of incunabula. I had nothing to lose but time. So I wrote letter after letter, stood for hours as the fax machine spit them out into offices around the world. I lost a tiny fortune in long-distance phone calls until, finally, I received a message one week before I flew to Paris.

*You may meet me at the hotel on the 7th of November.
8 o'clock.*

—I.M.C.

I.M.C. Indigo Maxwell-Casteñada. The heir of the Casteñada fortune.

I knew nothing about him, and I preferred it that way. I have never understood this preoccupation with the rich and famous and how they spend their existence. All that naked yearning for their lives, the hushed surprise over the coincidence of a shared birthday . . . I preferred different fantasies.

I checked my watch: 8:45 P.M.

Perhaps he'd forgotten our meeting? Or maybe he was already here and simply wrapping up a previous engagement?

Across the room, I felt a pair of eyes on me. Twenty feet away sat a couple in an isolated booth that resembled a golden birdcage. The man caught me looking and grinned.

"A diamond martini for the lady!" he shouted, snapping his fingers.

The man had a mop of yellow hair, a head too heavy for his neck. He bore a distinct resemblance to a melting candle. Beside him sat a woman

as voluptuous as a temple carving.

The bartender approached their booth, pushing a glass cart of cocktail accoutrements, and immediately set about measuring, pouring, shaking. He was followed close behind by a sharply dressed dark-skinned man carrying a velvet box. A jeweler. The man opened the box, revealing an assortment of diamonds.

“Pick,” said the yellow-haired man to the woman. “The diamond is yours.”

The woman pointed one pale finger to the brightest, largest carat. The bartender held out a frosted martini glass for the jeweler. He dropped in her chosen diamond, and it sank like a fallen star.

“À votre santé,” said the jeweler as the bartender departed with the rattling cart.

The woman, still grinning, lifted her fingers as if she might pluck out the jewel. The old man beside her grabbed her wrist—

“I said the diamond was yours. I didn’t say you could take it out of the fucking glass.”

The woman appeared stung. She looked from the glass to the man, her eyes narrowing.

“I’m fucking serious,” he said, even as he laughed. “If you want it so badly, you can find it in tomorrow’s filth.”

The woman was clearly disgusted. For a moment, I thought she might throw the drink in his face. Across the room, our eyes met. She drained the glass in one go, diamond and all. And then lifted her chin in defiance, her gaze full of ugly recognition: *You are starving prey. Just like me.*

I hid it well, but she was right: I was always hungry. A single moment of either madness or mystery had shaped my life. Ever since, I have sought proof of the impossible and bent my whole life around the feeding of it.

I fanned out the pages on the marble table, studying my notes for next week’s speech on the myth of Melusine. The print before me showed Melusine with tangled, waist-length hair, bat wings, and a coiling, serpent tail. Her hands were clasped in demure horror, as if she were clinging to some last vestige of genteel shock before she could abandon her husband for his betrayal.

Melusine had been made famous in Jean d’Arras’s fourteenth-century writing. Depending on the source material, she was something of a mermaid or a siren. One day, a nobleman came across her in a forest glade and begged her to be his wife. She agreed on the condition that he never spy on her while she bathed. The nobleman agreed, and for a time they were happy. But eventually, curiosity overwhelmed him and, one day, he

spied on her as she bathed, saw her true nature, and lost her forever.

I have always been intrigued by these not-quite women, whether they were sirens or mermaids, kinnari or selkie. The world can't seem to decide whether to condemn, covet, or celebrate them. They're damned as reminders of lust, and yet the House of Luxembourg enthusiastically claimed descent from Melusine's unnatural bloodline, and inside an eleventh-century church in Durham Castle there lived a mermaid carved in stone. Hundreds of years ago, perhaps some pagan entering a church to escape the cold would have seen that carving as a message. A password, of sorts, that even in this strange place and strange religion lay something familiar . . .

Even if she is a devil.

“Sir?”

I looked up, ready to admit defeat to the waitress and leave when I saw that she was holding a platter with two drinks. She held out an envelope: “A gift from another guest.”

The two drinks looked identical: a rich amber whiskey with a perfectly clear sphere of ice. I opened the letter.

The drink on the left will fill your belly for the rest of your days, but you will only be able to speak truths.

The drink on your right will leave you hungrier than before, but it will polish every lie that leaves your tongue.

I looked around the room; a strange tingling worked its way up from the base of my skull. Even before I reached for the glass on the right, I imagined that magic liquid gilding my tongue. I drank. The whiskey tasted like a hot knife, burnt and metallic.

Seconds later, I heard the softest laugh. I turned in my seat, and that was when I first laid eyes on Indigo Maxwell-Casteñada. Not a man at all, but a woman.

She leaned against the wall, hardly ten feet from me, wearing a column dress of shirred navy silk that looked as if it had been poured onto her body. Sapphires winked at her throat and ears. Silver flashed on her wrists.

She moved lightly. I want to say that it was gentle and serene, like a fawn through snow. But Indigo's grace was restrained, calculated, as if she knew that people like her could stomp the world into submission and she had no wish to bruise it further.

At first glance, Indigo was attractive. She did not become striking until one looked closer, noticed the way she held herself, or rather, how the light held her. As if she were something precious. Her skin was richly bronzed, her eyes large and dark, nose lightly snubbed, and her lips had a curious

fullness—the bottom lip not quite as ripe as the top. This asymmetry transfixed me.

She made her way to my table, sank into the chair opposite me, and announced: “I am Indigo and *you* chose to go hungry.” Her voice was low and rich. I had the deliciously absurd thought that each syllable was steeped in onyx and chords of music. “Why?”

“Between the two choices, I may not be able to live long without food, but I don’t have a life worth living without the other.”

She smiled.

Some individuals are like portals, the knowing of them makes the world a far vaster place. In Indigo’s presence my world widened. Brightened. There was something about her that made the eye linger. It wasn’t her beauty; it was the way she seemed superimposed on the room. A mirage that might vanish if I looked away.

“What do you recommend I drink?” she asked.

This ease, this exchange of nonsense with Indigo Maxwell-Casteñada, could not possibly be real. Thus it was from a place of disbelief that I spoke in whimsy.

“I was hoping they might serve us something less human,” I said. “Ambrosia, if they have it.”

“Is it hard to come by?”

“A little. The ancient Hindus believe it resides in an ocean of cosmic milk.”

“The sea is too far,” said Indigo with a melodic sigh I could feel on my skin. “Maybe liquid gold? Or is that unappetizing?”

“Diane de Poitiers, a famous mistress of Henry II no less, drank gold to preserve her youth.”

“Did it work?”

“Supposedly she died of it, which is to say, she didn’t get any older.”

Indigo laughed. I caught her perfume. I thought she’d smell of amber and night-blooming jasmine, but she was adolescently sweet with the sort of synthetic, sugary green apple fragrance I associated with high school girls. On Indigo, it was like cover-up, a wolf rubbing sheep’s fat into its fur as camouflage.

She snapped her fingers and a waiter appeared, bearing two glasses of Champagne.

“To hope,” said Indigo, clinking her glass to mine. “And to all the beautiful ways in which we can forget its fatality.”

After a sip, she eyed me over the rim of her flute. “Are you not starved for something?”

That famished chamber of myself shivered. “I’m always starved.”

“Good,” said Indigo.

Platters of food began to arrive: tins of caviar in silver bowls filled with ice; quail braised in pomegranate molasses and wine; a rack of lamb so succulent the meat slid off the bone without protest.

Indigo made no mention of my request to see the grimoire from her private collection. Instead, she began by asking what I thought the eternal would taste like, which season I would want to live in for a decade and why. If I tried to speak about my life, her smile dropped. If I spoke about current events, she’d turn her head. About an hour or so into our meal, I grew too curious.

“It seems that I’m offending you every time I bring up reality,” I said.

“Reality?” she repeated, with a touch of scorn. “Reality is what you make of your surroundings. And the world outside my own cannot touch me.” There was a note of sadness when she said this, as if she were a ghost and her hands now passed through things once reached for with ease.

“I know you feel the same way,” she said in that smoked voice. “I’ve looked you up, Professor. I’ve even read your books.”

The thought of Indigo trailing her elegant finger across one of my sentences made me feel exposed. She had not laid a hand on me, but I already knew the texture of her skin.

“You’re fascinated with the world we cannot see, the creatures that might have lived within them but now only exist as fairy tales. I suppose that’s why I wished to meet you.” A shy softness flitted across her face. She hesitated, her full lips jutting into a pout before she continued. “You see, I wish to live a certain way, and I’m interviewing companions for that life.”

Whenever I think of our first meeting, I am reminded that the word “seduction” comes from *seducer*, to draw aside. But Indigo did not draw me aside so much as she drew aside the world I had always lived in and showed me a way of living a world apart.

She saw straight to my naked hunger and smiled. Her chair scraped back as she leaned across the table. The flames danced; candlelight gilded her skin. She became a question, and the answer she saw on my face made her close the space between us and kiss me.

In her kiss lay wonders—the humming of firefly wings and the secret of alchemy. On her tongue was the ghost of roasted plums, forgotten poems. I was so entranced that I almost didn’t notice when she bit down. When I pulled back, her teeth looked rusty.

And only then did I realize she’d drawn blood.

Chapter Two

The Bridegroom

I was convinced Indigo would leave the moment I ceased to entertain her. I could already picture my midnight walk back to the cheap student housing in the Latin Quarter. I'd probably wait a whole day beside the landline and never see or hear from her again. I would never be able to talk—much less gloat—about the encounter. No one would believe me.

That might drive another man insane, but I'd had more than twenty years to make peace with the lightless space between what you cannot believe is a truth and what you know must be a lie.

Here was one: I had a brother once.

Even now, I could conjure the smell of blown-out birthday candles, the rough cotton of my mother's dress pulling tight over her belly. That was the day she told me she was growing a friend for me.

As a child, I liked this idea so much I tried to grow other friends so my brother and I would never be lonely. I planted sneakers, a book, and a whistle. In time, I figured they would become a warrior, a storyteller, and a musician.

When my brother was born, my mother taught me how to support his head when I held him. I marveled at the warm weight of it, the swirl of hair so fine it looked etched. He smelled like milk and dust.

"He's yours now," my mother said in her soft, rose-petal voice.

I grew taller that day. Or maybe it was that my soul shot up in size, trying to make enough room to hold him within it.

Growing up together provided endless adventure. There were quests through the woods, playtime as pirates, hide-and-seek with our father pretending not to see us under the bed. One birthday, my mother gave me a book of fairy tales. That was when I first learned about thresholds, places

where the mortal world thinned into the realm of Faerie. They could look like anything: A door in a graffiti-covered alley, a dark shadow beneath an apple tree. An ordinary closet.

I used to take that book with me everywhere. Sometimes, I even hid in the great cedar armoire at the end of our hallway to read it. I liked crouching on the warm wood with a flashlight in my lap, the sleeves of winter coats resting on my shoulders like tame birds. Best of all, I liked seeing what was lost—and could be discovered—in the belly of the armoire. Misplaced hats, pennies, the left hands of gloves, the occasional key.

I lost something there, too, though I could never be sure what it was.

One day, when I was seven years old, I saw that the armoire doors had been left open. I called for my brother, thinking he must be inside waiting for me. He often crawled into the armoire and sat by my feet while I read him a story by flashlight. We loved to pretend that the smooth wall of the closet was secretly a door to Faerie.

I called for him over and over. Finally, I went to the kitchen to ask my mother where he had gone.

She blinked at me. “Sweetheart, what do you mean? You don’t have a brother.”

I didn’t believe her at first. I looked for his clothes, his toys. I hunted for his smudgy handprints on the wall from when he had gotten into the jam jar, the notch on the doorframe when he begged to see how tall he was growing. Everything was gone.

I had no choice but to believe my mother. Now, though, as the years have softened my memories, there are days when I cannot decide whether this is a truth I cannot accept, or a lie I cannot let go of.

My brother’s absence, real or imagined, lived inside me. Because of him, I became obsessed with finding proof of the impossible. I shrouded this search in the semi-respectability of comparative mythology and folklore, but that need drove me all the same.

Until Indigo, I was lost in that search, hidden in my own thoughts. But she saw something in me. Something that turned her kiss into a knife that cut me free from the dark.

In fairy tales, a kiss marks a threshold—between the state of being cursed or cured lies a kiss. But not all kisses cure; some kill. Thresholds go both ways, after all. I wasn’t thinking about this when Indigo drew me to her beneath the chandeliers of her Paris hotel. At the time, I wished only to trap her laughter under glass. I could not hear, back then, how uncannily

triumphant the sound was.

Indigo pulled back from our kiss and reclined in her chair. The glittering world of the Casteñada bar intruded once again. Everything about this place now offended the senses, from the electronic lounge music to the fused smell of cigarettes and cologne.

Indigo stood to leave, and I braced myself to be abandoned. She reached into her slim black purse and withdrew a single key.

“Follow me,” she said.

As if I could do anything else.

I followed her past the gleaming bar, the velvet chairs, the chandeliers glinting overhead and into the main hallway of the hotel. It was cool and empty. Everything was vaulted ceilings and milky marble, which stood in contrast to the rich scarlet and brocade rug spread on the floor like a trail of blood. Indigo led me up a staircase of gold and iron, and into a private hallway, where a doorman in a red jacket stood with his hands clasped.

“I can manage alone this time,” said Indigo.

The light-skinned doorman tilted his head. He pressed a single button, which opened a private elevator cleverly disguised as a tall, cracked painting of the dryad Daphne caught mid-transformation into a laurel tree. The moment we were alone, Indigo moved closer. She was tall, but still she had to tilt up her head to meet my eyes. She put her hand on my belt.

“Do you know the tale of Eros and Psyche?” she asked.

The elevator began to climb and so did her fingers.

“Yes,” I said. Her fingers stilled. She wanted me to tell the tale, and so I did. “The god of love fell in love with Psyche, a mortal princess whose beauty rivaled even Aphrodite’s. He stole her away on a sweet wind, cloaked her in darkness, and brought her to his palace.”

I touched Indigo’s hand. Her skin was hot, pressed silk. I moved my thumb over her wrist and felt her pulse. Calm, even.

“He made her swear not to look on him. He folded away his wings and visited her in the darkness and in midnights they grew to know one another,” I said. I lifted Indigo’s hand and kissed the inside of her wrist. “But then Psyche broke her promise. She looked at him while he slept and for that betrayal, he left her.”

“And then what?” asked Indigo.

“Then she had to prove she could find him,” I said. “She endured misery after misery to be with him.”

Indigo’s silk dress scratched against the cheap fabric of my blazer. Her synthetic apple scent washed over me. I forgot about the elevator until it chimed, opening into a wide vestibule. The floor-to-ceiling windows of

Indigo's penthouse boasted the jeweled skyline of Paris. Off to the side, a white staircase spiraled into lavish upper suites. On the main level, antique winged chairs, gilt mirrors, and a single white couch adorned an elegantly austere room.

"So you know the tale in theory," said Indigo, one hand on my chest as she pushed me into the foyer. "But not in practice."

I reached for her. She drew back and undid the silk tie at her waist, held it out to me. She raised an eyebrow and looked at the floor. Slowly, I knelt at her feet.

"We can play at gods," she said. "What do you say . . . will you play with me?"

Play, worship, follow. It was all the same to me. I nodded. She lowered the silk over my eyes. It was still warm from her skin.

Her lips skimmed mine. "Don't look."

She raised me up, and I stumbled after her. The floor changed beneath me, from smooth oak to the expensive pile of her wool carpet. Moments later, Indigo pulled my wrist, and I was falling, my back on the firm cushion of her couch. Silk rustled. Her warm legs fell to either side of my hips.

"Don't look," she repeated.

I stilled beneath her. The first time she said it felt like a reminder. The second time was different. A test.

In the tales, the moment Psyche glimpsed Eros in his true form, he left her. But that was what made it a tale worth telling . . . that there was light to be found in the dark.

"Don't—" Indigo said.

I yanked off the blindfold and she startled. The city lights revealed her in sacred squares of gold—the delicate wing of her collarbone, a beauty mark on her sternum, her small, high breasts—as if this was all my mortal eyes were allowed.

"You looked," she said, her voice more curious than wounded. "Why would you do that when you know it will only make a god leave?"

I tried to look into her eyes. She was backlit by the city, her face obscured in darkness like a hidden cosmos, a whole universe I longed to know.

"To prove that I am not afraid of being tested," I said.

"Is that so?" asked Indigo. She settled more fully into my lap. My hands, which had braced her hips, climbed reverently up her waist to her breasts.

"Yes," I said.

Her lips moved to my neck. “And what if that test kills you?”

“Then it kills me.”

I felt her smile against my skin, her teeth cool and slick.

“And what waits for us in the end? When you survive all my tests?” she asked. She rose then, guiding me to her. “Tell me. Now.”

“Bliss,” I said. “Bliss eternal.”

After that the city and all its glitter were lost to me. In that second, I knew I would love Indigo forever.

I didn’t know what it would cost me.

The next morning, Indigo took me to view her private collection. After a twenty-minute drive, her black car pulled up to a wrought-iron archway. On either side, ivy and wisteria choked the high stone walls. A large, grinning crescent moon dangled from the gate, as if Indigo had speared it from the sky and kept it like a trophy.

Half-hidden in the ivy, a rectangular iron plaque announced: LE MUSÉE DE LA BEAUTÉ PERDUE. The museum of lost beauty. We got out of the car, and I followed Indigo down a white-gravel driveway and into a small labyrinth where ivory seraphim rested their wings atop shoulder-high hedges.

At the end of the labyrinth appeared a large cottage. From outside it looked rusted and forgotten, its only purpose to prop up trellises of tea roses. Inside, it was sleek and modern, the gallery walls spotless so as not to detract from the encased fragments of manuscripts and the iron pedestals holding diorite miniatures of ancient scribes and priestesses. A pair of sliding-glass doors at the far end of the room blew a climate-controlled lullaby over a trove of rare books.

“This is what you wished to see,” said Indigo, leading me to a glass-topped table.

When I looked down, there was a single torn page from a grimoire. It was highly decorated, illustrated in gold leaf and lapis lazuli. There was nothing left of the spells but a crude depiction of the sun beside a handful of Aramaic characters. It was likely nothing more than a fifteenth-century copy of the *Clavicula Salomonis*, and a poor one at that.

“I’m told it once held a spell that let people cross time and space,” said Indigo, looking at me out of the corner of her eye.

She wore a heavy sable coat, unseasonably warm for early November. Her red lips were a slash of blood.

“Why did you want to see this?” she asked.

“Sometimes I think I had a brother who left me for a different place,” I

said, the words clumsy and raw, unused to being uttered aloud. “I’ve been trying to find a way to live in this world. Barring that, I was looking for a way to leave it.”

Indigo’s gaze held a certainty I wished to rest my life against. “And now?”

“And now I wish only to stay.”

Indigo smiled, though there was a split second where her face was blank. Haunted, even. I knew that look. She might smile at me, but she, too, had hunted this spell for a reason.

Who were you looking for? I wondered. What were you running from?

Indigo kissed me. I removed her coat and spread it on the floor beneath us. Soon, the sound of her sharp, panting breaths drove all other questions from my mind. I may have entered her world that day, but soon she became all of mine.

In Indigo’s realm, the days might begin with picnics in the Jardin des Rosiers and end on the prow of a gleaming boat in the middle of the Adriatic Sea. The evenings summoned private concerts and our nights were filled with games. In these games, we took turns at being monstrous or mortal, grotesque or godly.

But at least now, no matter what we were, we were never alone.

“I want to start something new with you,” Indigo said a few months later. We were lying in her bed watching the dusk erase the city skyline. “A new chapter. A new story. There will be no glancing at the pages that came before this one. Can you live with that?”

At that point, I had a vague understanding of Indigo’s life before we met. Her parents died when she was young, she was raised by an aunt she no longer spoke to—sad and strange, but stranger still was that she possessed a past at all.

Indigo was so much like the fairy tales she loved that I suspected she was one. It didn’t matter how many times I touched her, fucked her, held her. She was a phantasm to me, proof of the impossible and thus a talisman against the absence that had haunted my adult life.

I knew how these tales went. I knew that her condition bordered on the sacred, and if I crossed it, I would lose all the magic of her. So I agreed.

“Yes,” I said. “I can live with that.”

This was a lie I kept secret, even from myself.

Chapter Three

The Bridegroom

There are two kinds of love—one born from smiles, and the other from screams. Ours sprang from the latter. I had been enchanted with Indigo from the moment I met her, but I must confess that I did not truly love her until our wedding night dissolved into nightmare.

On a Sunday morning beneath a copse of oak trees and a canopy of pale orchids, Indigo and I were wed. She wore a gown the color of bone, a small crown of ivy and white anemone. She said there would be no one else in our marriage, and thus no need for witnesses. Our scant attendees—the officiant, and the trio of musicians—all wore blindfolds. When the ceremony concluded and the papers were signed, we took Indigo's plane to a villa nestled in the rolling hills of Tuscany. And it was there, after a feast of wild boar stuffed with apples, glasses of red wine so dark they were nearly black, after I had peeled the lace from Indigo's body, traced the echoes of its patterns on her skin . . . that the nightmare found me.

For months, I thought I was cured. I believed the nightmare could not reach me from where I slept in Indigo's bed. I was wrong.

My nightmare is always the same.

I am naked and surrounded by shadows. The dark turns solid. It drapes across my knees, encircles my chest. It feels like velvet and smells of wood polish.

At first, it is a caress. And then it is not. Pressure builds in my chest, weighing me down until the shadows are over my eyes and my nose, prying apart my teeth and pouring down my mouth, my lungs are burning, and the air is full of cloth—

I woke screaming.

When I opened my eyes, I found Indigo propped on her elbow, watching