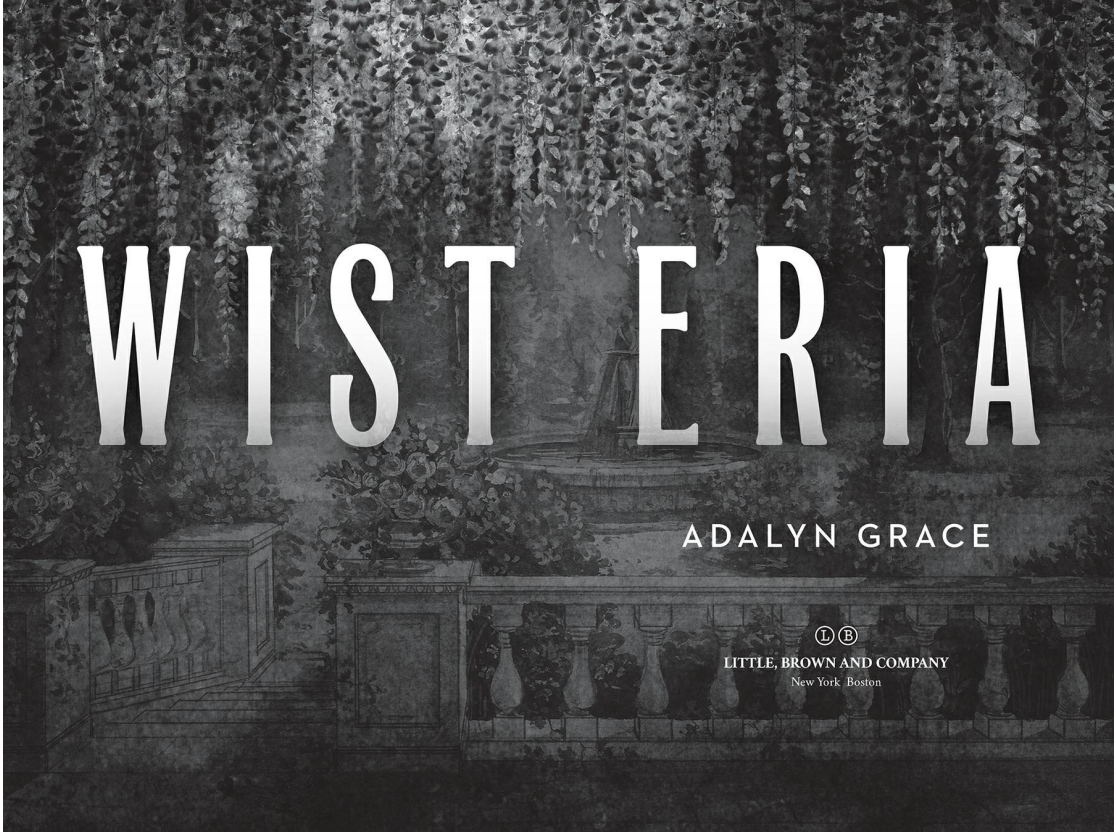




WISTERIA

#1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF THE BELLADONNA SERIES

ADALYN GRACE



WISTERIA

ADALYN GRACE



LITTLE, BROWN AND COMPANY

New York Boston

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I started this book by the fireside on a rainy day with one of my best friends working beside me. This book is for her—for her friendship, her soup, and for being one of the best and kindest humans I'm lucky enough to know.

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PROLOGUE



ON THE MORNING OF HER IMPENDING DEATH, LIFE LOUNGED BENEATH a wisteria tree.

Her magic had shaped the branches, twisting them into a canopy to shield her from the sun while she curled her feet in the grass, its dampness slick between her toes. Beside her, Fate was hunched over his latest work in progress. Life followed every twitch and pull of his deft fingers as they wove a lifetime into a tapestry. There was a glimmer in his eyes as he worked, one that Life wished to forever commit to memory.

Because soon Death would arrive to take all that she was. And once he came, there was no knowing what pieces of herself might be left. She could only hope to remember that Fate tended to bounce ever so slightly when he was particularly pleased with one of his creations, and that he had a dimple on his right cheek that looked as though someone had carved the tip of their fingernail into his flesh, forever marking him with a mischievous crescent moon. She hoped she remembered the way all the light in the world seemed to pool toward him at any given moment, and how he would bask in it. Whether it was midafternoon or an hour when only the crickets sang, her husband was radiant.

Life hoped that she would remember his hands, too. Not just how clever they were—as precise with an instrument or a paintbrush as they were with thread and needle—but how they melded against her body. She had no awareness of how she came to exist, and often wondered whether she'd been one of Fate's sculptures magicked to life, for it was his hands alone that knew her every contour. Every touch between them was familiar, instinctual.

“Enjoying the view?” Fate didn't need to peer behind him to know that Life was spying, no less struck by his beauty now than the day she'd first laid eyes on him. Fate was her summer sun—too intense for most to bear, while she tipped toward him like a flower, craving his touch.

Life shifted to her knees, wrapping her arms around Fate's neck as she looked over his shoulder at the tapestry.

Red. There was always so much red.

She'd known Fate long enough to understand why—red symbolized passion, and there was nothing he loved more. Fate's favorite stories were always rife with the color, telling tales of those who would give up their very soul to have whatever it was they most yearned for. He was never choosy with what that passion was. It could be art, literature, invention, romance, cooking, gardening.... If there was passion to be found, Fate would weave the most glorious stories out of it. For he, too, was a man of great passion.

Fate's hunger for the world and all its treasures was the very trait that Life loved most about him. Yet while there wasn't anything inherently *wrong* with passion, Life had long since found

that people too frequently lost themselves within it. Fate was no exception; too many times she'd found him hunched like a wolf before its feast, a bloodied maw replaced by unblinking, ravenous eyes as he crafted his tales.

Passion made people forget themselves. It kept them from feeling the change of seasons upon their skin or curling their toes into the grass. Passion stole their health. It made both time and families slip away as people lost themselves to their pursuits.

If Life had her way, she'd weave more blue into those tapestries. Red might have made for the most entertaining stories, but it was the calm of blue that made the happiest ones. And so Life slid her hand down her husband's arm, savoring the warmth of his skin as she whispered, "I know it's hard for you, but do remember to be kind."

His hand stilled midstitch, and Fate sighed at the familiar argument as he set his work on the grass. He stared at it for a long while, fingers twitching as he fought the urge to pick the tapestry back up. It took him longer than it should have to turn toward Life, capturing her by the waist and drawing her into his lap. "I'm kind to you. Is that not enough?"

Life slipped her fingers through the silk of his golden hair, wishing it could be the two of them here forever, rooted beneath the wisteria. She would sustain herself on his lips and would make her home within his voice, never tiring of his touch.

"I am not the only one in this world who matters, my love."

Fate's fingers curled against her waist. "You are to me."

Even knowing that this argument was futile, she should have pressed harder. Instead, the tension in her body eased as Fate laid her upon the grass. His weight was the most comforting warmth as he lowered himself onto her. His lips drew a path from her jaw to her collarbone, and Life angled her head back, eyes fluttering shut as she lingered on each sensation. She wanted to wrap his love around her. To bury herself in it. But as quickly as Fate was atop her, he was off again when someone cleared their throat from the opposite side of the wisteria.

"You're fighting a losing battle," Death said, his shadows slipping around the tree's roots, stretching along them until he stood before her. "You know it's not in Fate's nature to be kind." His voice was laced with an edge of sorrow that raised the hair on her arms. Life sneaked a sideways glance at Fate, wondering if her husband noticed.

"The next time you visit, do me a favor and bring a bell that I may fasten upon your shawl" was all Fate grumbled as he smoothed a hand over his shirt to readjust himself.

The tension in Life's chest eased. Perhaps it was cruel of her, but she was glad that Fate didn't know this was to be their final night together. He would only argue, demanding his brother save her when all Life wished was for her final hours to be spent with the sun's warmth against her skin and Fate as her companion.

Just as it was not in his nature to be kind, it wasn't in Fate's nature to understand why she needed to die. He wouldn't understand that, although she spent each morning fighting the deep lines in her skin to appear as youthful as the day they'd met, her bones had grown weary. She no longer had the energy to journey with him to remote villages or bustling cities to check in on his favorite creations and sample their art. She could no longer travel the world just to taste the finest food or the richest wine, and though Fate had promised her that he was happy, she knew he yearned for everything she'd kept him from these past several years. Age had fatigued her, stripping away all pretenses and desires so that nothing in the world sounded nicer than feeling the pulse of the earth against her skin as she rested beneath her favorite tree with her favorite people.

Life had given up on fighting the inevitable. There could be no life without the experience of death, so what choice did she have but to let herself finally succumb?

Death presented his charges with three options once he claimed their life. The first was the least favorable: A soul could choose to remain on earth, stuck where they died until they were ready for the second option, which was to move into the Afterlife. The third choice he presented them with was reincarnation, which was Life's only option. Her soul would come back in a new vessel, and so long as she existed in some capacity, souls would continue to be made.

Life had long accepted a future where she would leave her body behind and come back anew. Though she'd never tell her husband, she was excited to discover what awaited her and to try out a new form as it journeyed through every stage of life. The only thing that frightened her was her memories, for while Death believed they could find a way for her to keep them, there was no guarantee.

"You know little of my nature these days," Fate told his brother. "I've hardly seen you the past year. For all you know, I could be a changed man."

Life said nothing as the shadows melted from Death's skin, knowing full well the reason for his absence. Death could barely look at her without his emotion seeping through. Life had known she would die this year; she'd asked only that he wait until autumn so that she could enjoy the summer sun one last time. For who knew whether it would feel different in her next body? Perhaps the next one would prefer winter. Perhaps, in the future, she would hate to be warm.

"I'm glad to see you," Life whispered at last, standing to greet her brother by marriage.

"I wish you weren't." Death's whisper was a winter storm. "We don't have long. You need to tell him now, Mila, or I will."

Beside her, Fate went rigid. "Tell me what?"

Life turned to her husband, whose eyes dawned with an understanding that burned her soul. "I had hoped for one more night with you, my love, but it seems we do not have that luxury."

"No," he whispered, stepping forward to grab Life's hand. He wound his fingers through hers before she could peel back, his eyes twin flames that festered with a rage she could not turn from.

"No," Fate repeated, this time directed at his brother. "She's not going anywhere."

Only then did Death lift his eyes. "I have no say in where I am called, brother. As you cannot control your charges, neither can I." His whisper was as gentle as morning dew; never had Life heard him so quiet.

Her heart fractured when Fate's golden threads wound around her body, drawing her back so that he was positioned between her and Death. He held his hand before him as he spoke, as if to placate his brother. "There is no call." Life could not see then how Fate's expression softened. She could not see the eyes that pleaded with Death, nor his fragility. "She is my *wife*. You have taken from me everything that I've ever cherished, and I have never stood in your way. I have never asked you for anything. But I am asking you now, brother, to make an exception. You cannot take her from me."

Death's resolve splintered, and Life knew then that she would not be the one to come out ahead. There was nothing soft about his voice this time as he drew closer toward Fate, whose light dimmed before the reaper. "What, exactly, is her life worth to you?"

Life opened her mouth to speak, to argue, but Fate's golden threads wound around her tongue, holding it down as Fate promised, "She is worth everything."

Life jerked her head toward the reaper, pleading for eyes he would not show her. For a touch

he would not provide. She fought Fate's restraints, reaching out a trembling hand, but Death turned his face into his cowl and drew away.

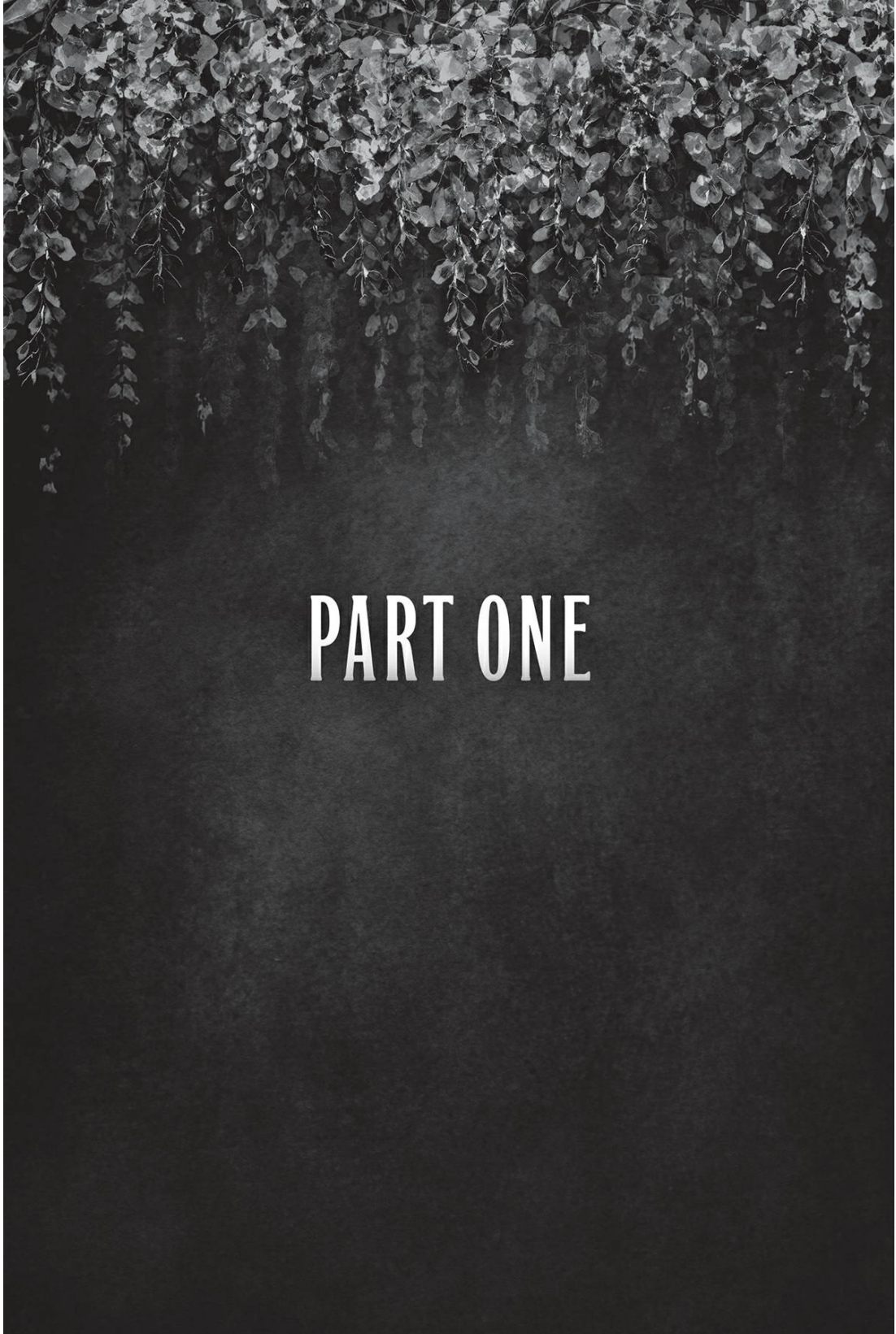
"For a life such as hers," he whispered, "*everything* may just be the cost."

Life clawed at the threads, wishing she could tell Fate that this was not their goodbye. That she wanted him to let her go in peace so that she could one day return to him. For in peace, Life hoped that she could remember all she'd left behind once she found her new body. But should the death be painful... should it be one that consumed her so thoroughly that she could think of nothing else... Death had warned her that retaining her memories might be a challenge, and Life knew without a doubt that should such a death happen, she would lose everything. She would lose *him*.

And yet the threads upon her tongue were soon shackles on her wrists, holding Life back as she felt a terrible fate carve its place within her.

And as her husband sealed his bargain with Death, he turned toward Life and promised, "I will not lose you."

But he already had.



PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE



IT'S SAID THAT THE WISTERIA VINE IS A SYMBOL OF IMMORTALITY.

Blythe Hawthorne had often admired the flower—as deadly as it was beautiful, and resilient enough to thrive for centuries even if left forgotten. Yet as she crushed a petal between her fingers and let its color bleed onto her skin, she pitied the wisteria for the fate that she and the flower shared. How tragic that they were to forever remain rooted in Aris's garden, their splendor wasted on the likes of him.

Blythe, at least, had one advantage over the wisteria—she had thorns. And when it came to Aris Dryden, she had every intention of using them.

Blythe trailed a look across the garden to where dozens of guests stood in wait. Sunlight cut through the wisteria canopied above them, bathing the courtyard in a golden haze of light that had people squinting as they chatted, their breath pluming the air.

Blythe envied their fine coats. Her skin was chilled from autumn's dampness, and the gossamer sleeves of her gown did little to stave it off. November was an unusual time for a wedding, though with Aris, she supposed she should always expect the unusual. If the alleged prince decided he wanted to get married on an autumn morning at an hour when the sun hadn't yet dried the dew on the moss, who was society to question him?

Aris Dryden was a man who got what he wanted. This day just happened to be a rare exception, for he was being forced to marry a woman he could not stand.

And to be fair, the feeling was mutual.

"You don't have to do this." It was Blythe's father, Elijah Hawthorne, who spoke. "Say the word, and I'll get you out of here."

In any other world, Blythe would have taken him up on the offer to flee Wisteria Gardens. But to secure Elijah's safety after he was falsely accused of murder, Blythe Hawthorne had spilled her blood upon a golden tapestry and bound herself to Aris—to *Fate*—for the remainder of her years. She even had a glowing band of light on her ring finger to show for it, the golden hue so faint that it was nearly invisible to the eye.

"I'll be all right," she told her father. It was no use to try to sway him with sweet words about how much she loved Aris or how happy she was to be marrying the brute. As it was, she was shivering in the damp air and itchy from what felt like a hundred layers of taffeta, and she had to keep fighting off a sneeze every time her veil brushed near her nose. She had no patience left within her to lie, and Elijah was no fool; he knew that Blythe had never intended to marry.

"You'll make a beautiful princess," he whispered, and Blythe surely would have agreed, had Aris *actually* been royalty. "But I want you to remember that Thorn Grove will always be open

to you. No matter the day or the hour, you can always return home.”

“I know that,” Blythe promised, for she understood that truth better than anything.

Only when Elijah seemed certain that there would be no talking her out of this wedding did he bend to kiss her head. He adjusted Blythe’s veil to shroud her face as he eased away. She scrunched her nose, turning to the side to sneeze.

When the lilting pings of a harp began a sauntering melody, Elijah extended his arm. “Are you ready?”

Never. A million years would need to pass before Blythe could even consider being *ready*. But instead of the truth, she told her father, “I am,” for if this was what it took to keep him from being hanged, it was more than worth the sacrifice.

As much as Blythe tried to focus, the world spun as she walked into the courtyard. The ground was a pathway of stepping stones with vibrant clovers that curved around each one; Elijah steadied her as she nearly slipped on them, her choice of shoe providing little grip.

Blythe’s heart beat against her chest like a torrent, drowning out the pinging of the harp, which slowed its tune to match her careful footsteps. She looked to the crowd, to faces that blurred into sharpened slivers of too-white teeth and hungry eyes that devoured her with every step, as if readying to pluck the skin from her bones. Blythe held her chin sharp even as her hands fought to tremble, refusing to let anyone scent her fear.

It wasn’t until she saw her bridesmaid, Signa, standing near the front of the crowd in a beautiful lace gown that the pressure in Blythe’s chest deflated. Death loomed behind Signa, his shadows winding around her own fretting hands.

Tiny shocks pulsed up Blythe’s spine at the sight of him touching her cousin. Everything in her body ached to flee from Death’s presence, and yet... he was the one Signa had chosen. Blythe would never understand *why*, but if Signa was happy and Elijah was free, then all was well in the world.

As Blythe passed her cousin, the harp song faded, and her father drew to a halt. Blythe was left with no choice but to finally turn her attention to the golden-haired man who stood before them in a coat as richly hued as a sapphire. *Handsome*, she supposed others might think him, and yet all Blythe could see was the resentment that festered within Aris Dryden like a poison. He masked it with a cleaving smile, as if ready to join the fray of predators set to devour her.

Aris stepped forward, offering Blythe his hand. Had Elijah not tensed beneath her grip, reminding Blythe of his presence, she might not have taken it.

“Hello, love.” Aris may have whispered the words, but his voice was a weapon that slipped through Blythe’s skin and struck to the hilt. “I hoped you wouldn’t make it.”

She squeezed his hand, forcing her own smile onto a face she hoped looked half as vicious as his. “I wouldn’t have missed this for the world, my darling. Though do feel free to divorce me tomorrow.” The thread between their fingers shone bright, searing into their skin so intensely that Aris laughed to cover his grimace.

“And spare you a lifetime of misery? I think not. You have no idea how much I intend to—” He froze, having been speaking so quietly that their heads were bowed, nearly touching each other, when he demanded in a dangerous tone, “What on earth are you wearing?”

Blythe didn’t need to follow his gaze down to her feet to know that he was referring to her green velvet slippers. Her favorite pair, in fact. She’d adjusted her dress just enough to allow him a glimpse. As buttoned-up as Aris was, Blythe hadn’t had any doubts that he’d notice.

So, it seemed, had their guests. A quiet tittering sounded from the audience, and though

Blythe paid it little mind, Aris's jaw tensed. He squeezed her hands, hissing words through a false smile. "You are not marrying me in *slippers*. Go and change."

Blythe curled her toes into the velvet. "And stop the wedding? I wouldn't dream of it."

If she weren't already so aware of Aris's power, she would have realized the full extent of it as his eyes flashed gold and the world fell still. Elijah's foot stopped midstep on his way back toward the guests, and Blythe reached out to stroke her finger along the belly of a hummingbird that had frozen beside her, its wings unmoving. Some of the guests had their mouths ajar, bodies bent in stilled whispers, and not a single eye blinked in awareness. Only Signa and Death continued to move, swathed in the shadows. Signa drew a step closer, though Aris halted her with a scowl that seared like a melting sun.

"Go and put on shoes." Aris bowed his head to Blythe's level, holding back none of his contempt now that their guests were frozen. "This is ridiculous. I refuse to play your games."

Blythe had earned every bit the reaction she'd hoped to from such a proud man, and the grin she sported said as much. "It seems you haven't noticed, my love, but you're already playing."

The millions of golden threads surrounding them glimmered. Several wound around her wrist, and as Aris made a motion as if to tug her forward, Blythe braced herself. Yet it was Aris who stumbled back, clutching his own wrist with a hiss of pain. He looked not at Blythe but to Signa, whose face was stony.

Had her cousin also struck a bargain with Fate? It seemed that he was unable to harm her, and Blythe's realization came in the form of a baleful laugh as she drew chest-to-chest with Aris. Or chest-to-stomach, really, given that he was a good head taller.

"I will wait out the rest of my life rooted in this spot if it means besting you," she told him, meaning each and every word. "Free the others from whatever spell you placed upon them and let's get on with this charade."

A long moment passed in which Aris did nothing. So long, in fact, that Death began to stir. Though she knew the reaper meant to help, Blythe tensed when his shadows inched closer. It was all she could do to keep her eyes on Aris, trying to ignore Death's presence by putting as much heat into her glare as she could summon. She couldn't say how long Aris matched that stare until, eventually, he gritted his teeth and grabbed hold of her skirts, tossing them over her slippers. Only then did Elijah's foot hit the ground with a slap and the quiet whispers resume. The hummingbird darted over Aris's head as the minister approached.

"Wilt thou have this woman to be thy wedded wife..." he began, and no sooner had the words left his mouth than Blythe's world swayed. She dug her heels into the earth, rooting deeper with each vow that passed his lips. "Wilt thou love her... forsaking all others... so long as you both shall live?" Though she missed most of what the minister said, her world came crashing to a halt with his last question. Blythe glanced sideways at Aris, who kept his head down and his jaw so tight that she thought his teeth might snap.

"For as long as she lives," he agreed, so curt that the minister flinched before turning his attention to Blythe.

"And wilt thou have this man to be thy wedded husband, to live together after God's ordinance in the holy estate of matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, serve him, love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as you both shall live?"

Aris shot Blythe a dark look that halted her laughter before it could escape. She cleared it from her throat and said sincerely, "I will marry him, and I will love him even more when he is

sick.”

The minister brought forward a golden ring designed to resemble a snake, set with eyes of jade. “Repeat after me. With this ring I thee wed, with my body I thee worship...”

Each word was poison on Blythe’s lips, the ring burning as Aris shoved it down her finger while reciting the vows. Blythe bit her tongue as he pressed it so deeply toward her knuckle that she’d have to oil the blasted thing to get it off. Which she certainly would be doing the moment they were out of the public eye.

“Hello, *wife*,” Aris spat, voice too low for anyone else’s ears.

Blythe smiled through the pain, curling her hands around his so that she could dig her nails into his palms. “Hello, husband.”

Neither looked away as the minister motioned them to their knees for the ceremonial prayer, and the rest of his words fell away as Blythe’s ring finger seared beneath her golden band.

It was not a ring but a shackle. One, it seemed, that neither she nor Aris would be escaping any time soon.

CHAPTER TWO



MOST DAYS, BLYTHE FOUND SOLACE IN THE ACT OF SLIPPING INTO her favorite ball gown. Yet on the day of her wedding she couldn't stop fidgeting, claustrophobic in the mountains of taffeta that'd been piled upon her. Her feet, too, were positively freezing, the morning dew sinking into the fabric and dampening the velvet soles. Had she not fought so hard to aggravate Aris, she would have long since changed into something warmer.

She reminded herself how sweet that small victory had tasted as the slippers squished beneath her toes and a perpetual chill settled into her bones. Yet all the while she kept a grin plastered to her lips as she stood beneath a wisteria awning, stuck beside Aris as they were forced to greet their guests. Surrounding her was a blur of faces she'd known all her life. Too many of them, in fact. This was no small ceremony, but a celebration worthy of a prince, where delicate chocolates and miniature cakes decorated with golden leaves were ceremoniously displayed on gilded trays and everyone's wrists and throats glittered with their finest jewels.

Charlotte and Everett Wakefield greeted the newlyweds with smiles and words of encouragement. The duke and duchess leaned into each other, a sparkle in their eyes that had Blythe wondering what it must feel like to be so in love. She likely would never know.

There were faces in the crowd that Blythe didn't recognize, too. Arrogant ones that waltzed about the reception as if in constant assessment. As Blythe scrutinized them more closely, however, she noticed their eyes were glassy and that they never uttered a word to anyone but one another. They must have been Aris's guests, as it would have drawn attention if he didn't have any in attendance.

The townsfolk never let these new guests stray far from sight. From the corner of her eye, Blythe watched as Diana Blackwater slid closer to one of Aris's enchanted puppets—a man who could be no older than thirty, who claimed a pretentious air and was neatly styled in imported fabrics. Diana positioned herself in an effort to capture his attention, though the man could spare her no notice even if he wanted to as he looped slow circles around the garden, inspecting the decor. After several moments of following after him, Diana gave up with a hiss, fanning herself in a fluster. The moment she noticed Blythe watching, her spine stiffened. Ever so slowly—as if doing so physically pained her—Diana curtsied.

It was then, as satisfaction warmed her from head to foot, that Blythe realized how irredeemable her own soul truly was. That curtsy alone almost made her soggy slippers worth it.

Almost.

"Can you not simply magic this day to its end?" Blythe asked after she and Aris were congratulated by a woman who ran a modest apothecary shop in town. Blythe had never properly

met her before, yet she smiled and accepted the woman's profuse congratulations all the same. "Must we see this charade through in its entirety?"

"You're the one who insisted on a proper wedding," Aris reminded her. "I wouldn't dream of taking such an experience away from a blushing bride."

Blythe swallowed the foul words that threatened to sear holes in her tongue. It wasn't worth getting into another bickering match with him. Especially not when her father stood in the near distance, observing the newlyweds with a cautious eye.

It wasn't that Blythe had wanted a *wedding*, exactly. Rather, she'd hoped to delay her inevitable fate for as long as possible, and had wanted something that Elijah could bear witness to. She'd wanted her father to see that she was well and that he needn't worry, which was why she now smiled so wide that her cheeks were beginning to ache. She even wound herself around Aris's arm when she wished for nothing more than to recoil. His hand snaked around her waist, gripping so tight that pinpricks shot along her skin and all she could think was how she would have to burn this gown and scrub his touch from her body the second she had an opportunity.

It wasn't until Signa approached that Aris eased his hold, his steely demeanor cracking. If Signa noticed—and Blythe assumed she would have, given that Signa tended to notice most things—she said nothing. Instead, Signa took Blythe's hands in her own. "You are the finest bride I have ever seen," she told her, and Blythe smiled despite knowing she was one of the *only* brides Signa had ever seen. Blythe couldn't believe that only a few short months ago she'd been uncertain whether she'd ever speak to her cousin again, just as she couldn't believe that she'd only known Signa for the span of a single year. After all they'd survived, it felt as though they'd shared a lifetime together.

Signa looked to Aris next, whose jaw ticked. Only Blythe could feel how greatly he deflated in Signa's presence, and while she did not favor Aris, she did pity him. Aris believed Signa to be the reincarnation of the woman he'd spent centuries searching for; he believed her to be Life, the only person Aris had ever loved. And Signa would never be his.

"Miss Farrow," Aris greeted coolly, though every part of him turned predatory as Death's shadows loomed closer. "*Brother.*"

"A shame that my invitation was lost in the mail." Death's voice was the shock of an eclipse, or the danger of seawater filling one's throat. It suffocated Blythe, so different from Fate's rich exuberance that she at once felt ensnared in an icy current and at a loss for breath.

"Have you plans for the honeymoon?" Signa asked. Despite the fact that the honeymoon was meant to be a surprise to the bride, that hadn't stopped half the people who'd greeted them from asking about it. Still, from Signa the question was odd, for surely she could not be hopeful about this sham of a marriage. She was the only one who knew just how preposterous it truly was, though Blythe suspected that Elijah was also leery. And yet the warmth in Signa's eyes was so genuine that Blythe's stomach curled. Leave it to the girl in love with Death to be optimistic about Blythe being bound to Fate.

Signa, in part, had always reminded Blythe of an owl. Her eyes were unnervingly large, and whenever she was lost in her thoughts she often forgot to blink. Blythe had long since made up a game in which she would count how long it took Signa to remember, and Blythe played it then as her cousin stared Fate down with a pinch between the brows. It had been thirty seconds so far, and still Signa had not blinked. It was no wonder so many people found the girl odd; it was a wonder, too, that she never complained of dry eyes. Signa only stirred when Death steadied a gloved hand on her shoulder, and Blythe wondered whether he, too, counted the seconds. Or

perhaps the couple filled their evenings staring into each other's eyes and seeing who could be the most unnerving and go the longest without blinking.

"Why do you want to know, Miss Farrow?" Aris asked, the timbre of his voice earning the reaper's attention. "Would you like to join me, instead?"

Death, to his credit, did not take the bait. Though his eyes were dark, fathomless things, Blythe got the distinct impression that the reaper was watching *her*. Every inch of her skin crawled, and the hair upon the back of her neck stood alert. As Blythe smoothed it back down, Signa chided, "This situation is only as bad as the two of you make it. If you're stuck with each other from here on out, I'd hope that at the very least you stop trying to kill each other."

Blythe bit back her scoff. How easy that was for Signa to say. She wasn't the one who had to spend the rest of her living years with this beast.

"I *can't* kill her," Fate corrected in a flat monotone. "You saw to that when you made me vow not to hurt her. It's no matter, though, as her pathetic human life will soon pass and one day I shall build my bed atop her bones and sleep soundly for the rest of eternity."

As silly as the imagery was, it sparked a fire in Blythe's chest. "Don't sound so eager, husband. I plan to live at least a century more, if only to spite you."

Signa pressed her lips together, and Blythe knew her cousin well enough to recognize there was something on her mind as she took hold of Blythe's gloved hands. "Let me know the moment you've returned home," Signa whispered, an urgency in her tone. "There's something I really must tell you."

Blythe wanted to tell her that whatever it was, it needn't wait. And yet Signa was already being pushed forward by the never-ending line of guests eager to congratulate the new couple on a happy marriage. The next time Aris decided to throw a soiree, they would need to discuss the list of attendees beforehand.

Quickly, Blythe promised, "I will, of course," before Signa and Death were swept away.

Blythe hadn't the faintest awareness of how long she stood there, lips frozen into a false smile and her tongue thick from repeating her thanks. It was a relief when the line ended and she was finally able to get her hands on a glass of champagne.

She watched as the others drank, then waited for Aris to try a sip before she cautiously took the flute from his hand and drank that. She ignored his scowl and waited five minutes to ensure nothing happened before taking another sip.

Across from her, a striking woman with deeply suntanned skin and a pompous man of fair complexion greeted fawning guests. They wore outfits adorned with gold, and the woman's hair was nearly a perfect match. They had the glassy eyes of the other marionettes, though these two at least spoke to those around them with pleasant smiles.

"Who are they?" Blythe asked, squinting at the golden haze around the couple to distinguish the thousands of threads woven around their bodies.

Aris polished off his champagne. "They believe themselves to be my parents," he said, as simply as if he was telling her that the month was November.

It was not the response she'd anticipated, and Blythe cleared her throat before she could choke on her drink. "What do you mean they *believe* themselves?"

Aris's eyes shone for the briefest moment as one of the staff passed by. Blythe watched as his threads ensnared the maid, altering her path so that he could pluck two more flutes from her serving tray. Blythe reached out, expecting that one of them was for her until Aris made fists around both stems. "Someone had to play the part. It wasn't as though a prince would be allowed