

## A TERRIFYING AILMENT

IT WAS AN AFFLICTION.

At least, that was how I'd read about it in books written by girls far smarter than me, ones whose parents didn't decorate them in jewels or try to discourage their ever-curious minds. The act of falling in love, of needing someone to the point that you could not breathe; that was an ailment and one that surely needed to be cured.

It weakened your mind, destroyed your independence, and took away any rationality you happened to possess. Good women were lost to love every day, and they were so rarely recovered. Any woman of ambition would do her best to avoid it—giving only into marriage when it benefitted her societally and not daring to let anyone have the upper hand in the game of love.

Not that anyone outside of those books thought of it in such a way. Oh no, if you listened to my dear Wren, my nanny's only child, you would think that the idea of falling in love was a good one.

Which was funny because Wren was not currently in love. I could say with absolute certainty that she had never been, yet in the background making mooneyes at her was the very last person

she would even consider. Wren ignored Luka Kinsley's adoration with such skill that I could hardly believe that it was not purposeful; how someone could write off his frequent attempts at gathering his words around her as mere hatred was beyond me.

Yet all the while, she preached of love and how very obvious and great it was.

I laughed as I ate my caviar hors d'oeuvres, determined to eat as much food as possible and therefore no longer be considered a lady—anything to not have to be courted to begin with. I was already betrothed anyway, destined to marry one of the Kinsley boys to save my father's fortune. It was just that my father hadn't gotten around to mentioning it to anyone. Mainly because if he did, my mother would wring his neck.

The last time my mother had been home, she'd told my dear father that she would sooner break his fingers than let him touch her before he figured out a way to get me out of his mess. My father had promptly sat under his desk in his study and cried after the incident, phoning his few friends and pretending that my mother had ever felt an inkling of affection for him. She'd hated him from the moment that she set eyes on him; she only ever wanted his money.

My mother had never loved anyone other than herself.

I was almost sure that she didn't care whether I liked the person that I married either, though she did try to sell me on the idea that being in love would likely make the act of pawning me off that much easier. She just didn't want that person to be the only noble in existence that I found tolerable, Luka Kinsley.

Luka, who was currently mooning over my maid. Even though he would never have her. Helping him with his affections was fun, however, and I did, admittedly, enjoy watching him fail.

Unfortunately, the awful timing of Luka's besotted glances allowed for the moment in which a suitor decided to strike, a young man stepping beside me and swallowing awkwardly as he tried to act casual. The mysterious suitor's fingers were so

tightly wrapped around a champagne flute that I was surprised he didn't shatter it. I had never seen a man look more terrified in my life; two, large deer ears jutted out the top of his head, and they were perked straight upwards, almost calling more attention to him than his wide, mollified eyes and his pallid tan skin.

A fae, but I could not even begin to remember which one. Maybe one of my father's business associates? But then, he was a bit young for that.

And I don't think any man who dealt in business would have looked at me with such horror when they realized that I was staring at them.

The suitor opened his mouth, and then he closed it. Almost as soon as his eyes met mine he turned away, nearly giving me whiplash with the speed at which he did it.

"—Excuse me?" I began.

The man looked very near crying, and I swear I heard him whimper my name, "Winry."

Which was worse because that meant he knew me, and I was awfully rude for not knowing who he was.

I grimaced, immediately jerking away from him... And looking directly into the eyes of my nanny across the room. Iridessa had decided to keep my father company for a portion of the party so that he would not be alone, and she looked right back at me as I stood beside the doe-eyed young man. Her questioning glance was terrifying enough; if she knew that I had met someone and not bothered to learn their name, she would have surely been disappointed in me. Iridessa was never mad, but the look in her eyes spoke volumes.

Oh god.

"—Winry! Yes, yes, that is my name," I said, nodding quickly and turning back to him, almost exhausted from the sheer effort of that alone. If Luka or Wren could have just somehow found me and saved me instead of dancing around

each other the whole party, I would have cried in relief. “I am Winry Laurent. The heir apparent and Lowell’s only child.”

Wren, Luka, someone—save me!

But again, Wren and Luka were ridiculous. And now I had.... What’s his name to contend to with neither of them anywhere in sight. Exhausting, really.

Admittedly, I did rather like the awkward way that he smiled, if only I could have ignored the dark red blush spread across his cheeks. His expression practically screamed his desperate desire for my attention. “You have such a nice name,” he said strangely, and then, perhaps realizing that he was acting far too off for any proper girl to ever stomach, he finally stated his name in response, “Eli, Eli Monet.”

Ah. I could feel the caviar coming back up. The Monets, father’s new business partners; they produced equipment for the growing healthcare industry in Whyne, making tools that worked outside of the limitations of healing magic—

I had undoubtedly been introduced to him before, considering our parents had been working together for at least four months at that point, and father had thrown a party nearly every month in an attempt to chase away the loneliness of my mother refusing to visit him. Eli was an only child too, so...

Not good.

“I, uh, forgive you if you did not know. I was a bit too quiet when they tried to introduce the two of us,” he said, scratching at the back of his neck, and I was quietly thankful for that while also feeling a tinge guilty at the same time. Unlike my close friend Wren, I made a habit of knowing people’s names.

Unlike Wren, I could not lie and say that I already knew his name to seem more polite.

“You have a rather nice name too, Eli,” I said, because that was the only thing I could do to save myself from the embarrassment of being caught unaware... The added humiliation of

Wren's eyes meeting mine as I tried to avert my gaze while Wren very obviously mouthed, *are you okay?*

That was something I could not avoid.

Tact. Wren needed tact something awful, and I immediately looked away from her.

"Truthfully, I've come because my friend Nikolas came up with a rather stupid line he thought I should use, but... Upon getting closer, I did not think that it was a good idea," Eli admitted with a frown, both his human-like and deer ears turning red with the admission. "Nikolas is much better at talking than I am."

Nikolas. Nikolas Harding? I raised an eyebrow at that, immediately scanning the ballroom as I moved closer beside Eli, eager to see the eligible bachelor. Nikolas was the one all the girls talked about when they weren't mooning over Adam Harlow. He was supposedly a catch when it came to fae, aside from the scales, which Wren thought were disgusting, but the other maids disagreed.

What on earth kind of line could Nikolas have given Eli?

"A line?" I asked, narrowing my eyes as I took in the bachelor from the sea dancing with another girl and looking far too proud of himself—Iridessa would likely say something along the lines of, *a little heartbreak would suit him*. I had to agree, there was a man who was used to getting what he wanted.

"He told me to ask to join your... society of wallflowers. It was much better worded when he said it," Eli admitted, the white patches on his skin seeming even brighter as he resigned himself to his fate of flushing, his crush more than obvious. "But I couldn't think of anything better to say either. This is my fourth ball here, and I've only managed to say a word to you before, which was sorry," he admitted, "because I accidentally stood on your dress."

"Then you're doing a great job today," I informed him with an enthusiastic nod, knowing all too well that it was important to

encourage men like him, if only because he was doing a great job of fulfilling Luka's role at that moment. So long as Eli was there, it seemed like the others stayed away, likely because men always seemed to have some stupid pact with each other—If a girl told a boy to leave her alone, he wouldn't, but if another man were trying to monopolize her time, he would.

Thus was the awful way of the world; Wren had assured me that it wasn't just like that in high society.

Still, Eli wasn't unbearable, I mean, when you considered the tendency of every suitor in Whyne to immediately ask to—

"Can I dance with you," he asked, and all of my hopes were shot down. One look at him— his big brown eyes looking stunned to be talking to me, his tanned skin flushed to the heavens, and his awkward, pleading smile—I knew that I couldn't say no. He would die if I did.

*He is definitely no Adam Harlow*, I thought as I provided him my hand, nodding at him. He probably never would be.

He would also never be as stupidly fun as Luka Kinsley, nor as bold and determined as Nikolas Harding, but Eli Monet?

Well, I thought that I could dance with him again as I hesitantly put my hand in his, if only for the way that he pulled me closer, his voice unwavering as he asked, "what are your interests, Winry?"

"Well, everyone laughs, but I find that I only like extraordinarily useful plants," I informed him, and for the first time, a man nodded when I said that, so I continued. "And science. I'm very fond of science, and reading, and building things, and business as well," all things that men did not like for women to say, but Eli only nodded.

"I assume you've read Bott's Herbalism then," he began, for once, his voice not wavering, and my face lit up. "It's considered the book to have right now concerning medicinal plants."

"No, but I've read so much about that book!"

“I have a copy of it,” Eli admitted, “at my parents’ library, with annotations from Bott’s himself.”

My jaw dropped, and at his resounding beam, I felt a strange tingle of satisfaction, one which I could not name. Perhaps it was just indigestion, or so I would tell myself later that night.

“Maybe someday, if you would like...,” Eli began.

“You would let me read it?” I exclaimed, grabbing his hands all too tightly, my face aching from the grin it held.

And when he gave just the slightest of smiles back, I felt it begin.

Not love, but something. Something dangerous and new.

Something that grew stronger when he told me, “and if you are that interested in herbalism, I’m sure my uncle might like to meet you too. He does experimentation, you see, with the plants in the greenhouse, and if you’d like, perhaps I could bring you along.”

And though I was not stupid enough at that moment, and I would have to find a thousand different reasons to justify it—because all of the benefits must be considered, and I would hate to lose out on a better opportunity—I thought something resoundingly stupid, an idea that perhaps maybe someday in the very distant future I could find myself happy with Eli.

If I were ever willing to let myself fall ill with that dreadful illness known as love, that was. And that would take far more than one book—perhaps a microscope and a whole greenhouse, maybe a few foreign plants and petrified specimens.

Maybe.

