

ALICE IN THE PRISON OF HEARTS

SAMPLE

B. A. LOVEJOY

Copyright © 2022 by B. A. Lovejoy

All rights reserved.

No part of this sample may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

 Created with Vellum

PROLOGUE: THREE YEARS, SIX
MONTHS, NINE DAYS, ELEVEN
HOURS, AND TEN MINUTES AGO
—IF MEMORY SERVES

The sitting room was crowded with plates and presents. The dimmed lights shined on discarded pieces of parchment paper sitting on nearly every surface as well as the parting gifts sitting not that far from them, an assortment of various letters and trinkets—objects left to us by our father on the off chance that he did not come back. At that time, it was merely an off chance and far from a real possibility.

We didn't realize that he would not be returning, or that that night would be the last he would see of Oxford. We didn't even know where he was going at that moment. No one could have imagined the reality; the concept of talking cats and dancing flowers were far from real in our world, and things like Wonderland simply didn't exist.

Things like Wonderland simply couldn't exist.

And so, we held onto the hope that he would be like any other soldier and return home. Thousands had left already, after all, and we were promised that thousands would return soon, that the war would be over almost as quickly as it had started—but unbeknownst to us, my father was going to a far

different place than the other British soldiers, and he was going alone.

Perhaps he knew that his chances of coming back were slim, and that was why he humored our theatrics... it was better for my sister and I's sake, as well as our mother's. Though she didn't look like she believed any of it.

My mother looked like she'd rather be scrubbing grout as she sat there glowering in the corner and leveled my father with the occasional glare. Colored tissue paper hung from the walls behind her and notes written in adoration sat on the table beside her, but my mother looked like she could have choked the man she called her husband. Like if my sister and I weren't in the way, she would have stormed across the room and dragged him by the ear out onto the lawn to shout at him like she had the night before, throwing her heels at him and screaming to the high heavens that he hadn't the faintest idea what he was doing.

It was strange, because I really thought she'd get over it by the time of the party, but just an hour before she had tied his best tie just a little too tight and given him a scowl that almost dared him to say something.

My mother could be a bit odd like that, so my sister and I just had to make up for it, drowning him with affection and telling him how he was the very best father a man could be while doing our best to ignore the way that my mother murmured insults under her breath.

She really wasn't in the mood.

Riotous laughter poured out of my father and I as we spun, and his hand reached out to pull Mary into the fray, her high, lilting laughter joining in the merriment as in the background the large, wooden radio in the living room continued to blare, the likes of the Andrews Sisters, Jack Buchanan, and Glenn Miller spilling through the speaker, lifting our spirits and

causing my mother to silently bob her rolled cigarette to the beat. Upon the coffee table sat sausage rolls, wrapped prunes, egg and cress sandwiches, and savory cheese scones—all my father's favorites, of course, as he never had much of a sweet tooth.

My mother would normally not cater to him in such a way, but all things considered? A going away party was the place for such indulgences, and she had even allowed my sister and I to hang paper garlands made from my father's far older notes from the walls—which seemed later on like more of a morose celebration of his leaving traditional academia for the unknown. Though, in retrospect I suppose be it war or Wonderland, he was doing just that.

The smell of smoke hung in the air, my mother's lipstick was smeared, and my father's collar sat slightly rumpled—which I did not think much of at that moment but would reflect upon afterwards for years to come. I always assumed that at the last moment, right before my father walked out the door, my mother had apologized and the two had made up. Perhaps she regretted being angry, I knew I would. I would always wonder about the crinkle in the corner of my mother's eyes and the flakes of black mascara upon her cheeks. I would think of the way that she smoked near endlessly that day and for days prior; I would think about the yellow tint that stained the edges of her pink nails, and the way that days afterwards, upon nicking one of them rolling a cigarette, I saw her cut them short for the first time in my life as she cursed under her breath, her eyes glued upon a rare photograph of my father as she shook her head to herself.

Pretend that you did not see that, Alice, she said, and I did, indulging myself in the delusion that the two of them had come to terms before he left.

It was easier to indulge in optimistic delusions, like that my

mother would have bothered to apologize to my father the night he left, or my father would go away for only a matter of months, a year at most, and that the war would soon come to an end. That night I pretended that his laugh would not be the last one I would hear from him or that, a year later, I would not see my mother tearing through his papers in the middle of the night, destroying his office as she searched for a deck of cards in his desk; one that she ripped into with trembling hands. I pretended not to see as she sought the pack out and ripped up every single card, stomping them harshly into the ground before staring at the man on the white paper box and throwing it into the fireplace with the speed and accuracy of a professional cricket player.

No. Certainly I did not see that, because if I had seen that, I would lie in my bed years later wondering what it meant, and what she knew. Perhaps I'd remember it in a fit once while resting in another land, staring up at my ceiling and telling myself that it couldn't be true before turning on my side and returning to the more concrete portions of my memories, the ones I had chosen not to forget.

The ones in which my father, tall and grey, continued to say goodbye.

“One for Eleanor,” he insisted as the song drew to a close, his face somehow gravely serious despite the fact that in front of him his two self-proclaimed favorite girls were laughing, their eyes alight with joy and their hands still desperately tugging on him. The fact that he somehow managed to deny us was a miracle, and I watched as he walked past us and stuck his hand out to my mother, reaching to lace his fingers through hers before she could roll another cigarette. “Dance with me, Eleanor,” he said, and I thought I saw his hand tremble.

Her eyes met his, there was a sharpness to her features but

also a vulnerability that I would rarely see again, a thawing of who she was.

“The love of my life,” my father said, and suddenly that all went away as she shook her head sharply at him, pulling him into her as she stood up in front of him and whispered some unheard words into his ear.

“You should dance with your daughters again,” was the only audible thing she said, but when her eyes moved to the two of us, she changed her tone, swallowing as she saw our waning smiles.

That morning, she had told Mary that she reminded her of my father, patient and caring. I was insulted and asked her what I reminded her of as I stood there in my fitted blue dress, my hands clenched at my side, and my face defiant as I waited for her to tell me the same—that I was like my father, and she adored that about me.

As she looked at me in that moment, with my father’s hand outstretched in front of her and my stare unwavering upon her as I dared her to deny him, I wondered if she remembered what she told me, if Mary and I’s opinions mattered a little more because of it.

You unfortunately remind me of myself, Alice, she had said, and there was more than an ounce of pity to it that made me furious. I wanted to be like my father, not her. I would do anything to not be like my mother, a doe eyed socialite who had become taken with her family gardener’s boy and watched him during every major social event. Sure, she had ended up marrying my father, which was rather intelligent of her considering the fact that other, far richer men must have seemed more enticing than the son of the poorest of her family’s hired help; but my mother was ditzy and small minded in my opinion. She always had been.

I wanted to be determined and smart, calculating and

strategic. Nothing like my housewife mother, who had come from money and somehow convinced her reluctant husband to pursue far more financially adequate careers as a result.

Surely, she must have known it at that moment. Surely, she must have known how I wanted to be compared to him and not her when she stared my sister and I down in that foyer, finally relenting when I wrinkled my nose in disappointment at her reaction to him.

“A dance,” she said softly, her voice wavering as he more insistently held out his hand. “Just one,” and yet she frowned all the same and acted as if she’d have rather wrung his neck. “I suppose you owe me that, Reginald.”

He nodded, likely knowing that he was in trouble. “Then I should make it worthwhile,” he said, his fingers flexing around hers as if she would slip right through his grip, and his body moving even closer to her, so close that his breathing moved the wispy strands of hair strewn across her forehead as she swallowed audibly. Her eyes traveled his person as if she could memorize him in that single second, and she shook her head as he spoke again. “This isn’t goodbye, Eleanor.”

“No, you and I will never get that, will we?” She said, and there was almost a dare hiding within those words, a slight lilt to her tone that challenged him to tell her otherwise. He didn’t, of course, as people never challenged my mother, but he did look in her eyes with a gaze so intense that it almost seemed he looked right through her. Her blue, narrowed eyes did the same as she looked back defiantly, and his hand tightened around hers, the silver of his wedding band gleaming in the firelight.

A thousand unsaid words crossed between their stare, and yet my sister could only say one thing...

“I want to be loved like that,” Mary whispered as my mother’s hand rose to my father’s shoulders, her eyes rimmed with tears and the softest sniffle escaping her as my father’s hand

rested upon the small of her back and the corners of his eyes crinkled as she whispered something in his ear.

“I’m sure Peter will give you that,” I whispered as my sister and I stood to the side of the room, a sort of bitterness filling me as the small golden ring, one passed down for generations in Peter’s family, glistened upon my sister’s finger and my parents smiled at each other—reminding me that I was the one who was alone, as I always had been. “You’re the type to marry,” I remarked, knowing that I was not the type—some of us were not made for love. I likely was one of them, seeing as how I’d only fallen in love once and there he was, marching off to marry my sister.

The bitterness, however, was short lived as my sister turned upon me, the corners of her mouth lifting, a knowing smile painted across her features. “It may not be now,” she said, a slight laugh playing in my older sister’s voice as the sweet tones of Doris Day began to fill the air. “And it may not be here—but some day you will be too, if you want it,” she said with an air of certainty that I had thought only my father owned as she presented her hand to me, “for now, however, you will just have to settle for me,” she said, and though I was certain that a biting comment lingered somewhere near the back of my throat, and that the gold of her wedding band would irritate me—I couldn’t help but hesitantly sigh as I placed my hand in hers, a smile tugging at the corner of my lips.

It was the same smile that would tug on my lips a year later as I danced with her when the father daughter dance came up at her wedding. It would pull at me when my mother stood behind me and pulled my hair back from my face months after that, swearing that the boys in town were blind. It would bloom fully when I would sit on Peter’s couch and let my head fall back, laughing at the essays he read out to my sister and I even as jealousy prickled at the back of my mind.

And it would insistently yank at the corner of my mouth when I would sit beside Kaeden Hart years later, my legs crossed primly at the ankles as a familiar pink hue climbed up the back of his neck as I watched him read; thoughts of my father, of the way that he looked up at me as he danced with my mother, and how his hands tightened around her fading away as I reached up to kiss Kaeden's cheek in a rare moment of intimacy—indulging myself during one of the few moments in which no one else truly knew where the two of us were.

As I watched Kaeden smile, I slowly began to forget how it felt to say goodnight to my father that day, unknowing that the next morning I would not wake up in time to say goodbye to him. When Kaeden put down his book and looked at me fully, I forgot the silent pride I felt when I watched Peter accept his faculty position with my family, or how I missed the gardens of Oxford. And when a laugh escaped Kaeden's lips, I forgot how it felt for that brief moment when my mother spoke up for me against the Glenshires.

"You can't wait for me to finish the page, can you?" Kaeden remarked, his hand raising to his cheek cupping the skin beneath it, indulging me with a rosy hue as he looked at me with raised brows, his hand collecting mine from where it sat upon my thigh.

"I assure you," I remarked in that one hazy moment, looking as innocent as I could. "I have no idea what you're talking about," I said, but his fingers wove through mine as he insistently tugged me closer.

I laughed as his fingers held on firmly to mine, and his hand pulled mine to his lips as his eyes lingered on me.

I forgot everything but him and the way that my heart beat so loudly underneath his stare. I was enamored by the way that his mouth ghosted over the thin skin on the back of my hand as he gave it a light kiss, and the way that I could see him begin to

fall deeper and deeper down a rabbit hole that I also found myself spiraling down. “Alice,” he said then in a different time and a different place than my family, but so warmly that it made me feel the same sense of comfort and home, “we should be dancing,” he proclaimed, as if that were a logical statement and he was not just another lovesick fool. “If you don’t dance when you’re happy in Wonderland, you risk an outbreak of dancing that could happen at the most unfortunate of times. If it’s bad enough, it will infect everyone,” he said, and it very easily could have been a lie, but I’d learned to accept nearly everything I heard when it came to Wonderland. Especially when it came from him.

I always believed Kaeden.

I laughed. I smiled. I let him take my hand in his with a subtle grin, and I kicked his thigh in insistence. “Then we should be dancing, shouldn’t we?” I said, and he obliged, perhaps urged on by the secrecy of our affair, and enchanted by the way I looked at him with puckered lips.

Home played the song from a small, wooden music box as I stood in front of Kaeden, my hands weaving together behind his neck, and his lips pressing lightly against mine. Not once, not twice, perhaps endlessly as he danced with me, pulling back every so often to provide a laugh or smile, and sending my heart soaring in the process, any hint of sensibility far from my mind’s shore.

“I think you are the finest whatchamacallit dancer I have ever met,” Kaeden murmured as we continued our uncultured, unguided waltz, and I adored it when he smiled, just as I adored it when the cuckoo bird in the wooden clock whistled inconspicuously, and the paintings in their frames sighed enviously. I adored the way that Wonderland felt like home, and I almost thought I belonged, that I had found my place just as my parents had once found theirs.

For a moment, I forgot everything else him and I; I forgot about my mother dancing in the sitting room with her husband just before the war, her husband's pesky playing cards tucked just out of sight as she smiled at him one last time.

I laughed just as I did with Mary and stomped twice as clumsily. I spun endlessly and smiled fondly, and I kissed him back again and again just as he did me. "Someday, there will be no hiding, no sneaking," I promised him, knowing that the Crown Court would be done with thinking of kings soon enough and the rumors that swirled around the two of us would someday go away as well as the waiting for an announcement of marriage or something. "You and I will not have to live our lives in secret," I told him, and he silenced me with a single kiss at that moment, which I told myself was because he was just so moved.

I could be sentimental and sappy every now and again. Especially when it came to kissing Kaeden.

Dreams passed between those lips, because we never really could think of it ending. Beautiful, red accented palaces and large libraries, gorgeous dresses, and tender arms wrapped around me until the end of time—I didn't dare speak those ideas to him, but I dreamed them all the same. We would have a glorious, brilliant ending—one with another man on the Cards throne, and the Joker standing endlessly in the pillory...

Perhaps that wasn't Kaeden's dream, but it was mine.

Perhaps his dreams were simpler, more mundane. Perhaps they were of children or promises. Perhaps they were of nights spent lying together, his limbs tangled up in mine and his mouth pressed firmly to my crown.

"I love you," he whispered for that single perfect moment, the one where the Jabberwock was gone and the Clock Turning was far from beginning—and it didn't matter. Nothing he said

mattered, not anymore. None of those dreams mattered, his nor mine—because the truth came into play just weeks later.

All of it faded away when that same man, the King of Hearts, took a step towards me in a crowded room as a glittering mirror shined dimly behind me, and a tenacious court called for my head. Then, as his lips parted and struggled to find the words to explain in front of everyone and everything, a golden chain hanging limply from his hands—it all came back like a flash of lightning—

And suddenly, as his mouth closed once more and the tears brimmed his eyes, I wondered how I could have dreamed of staying in Wonderland in the first place, and how I could have been so stupid as to fall for someone who I always knew would be trouble to begin with—

Because Kaeden Hart was my enemy all along—and I was utterly, hopelessly, ridiculously in love with him.

Which made me the biggest fool in all of Wonderland.

THE BIGGEST FOOL IN WONDERLAND

I didn't have to look to know they were watching. I could feel their eyes peering out from the balconies and windows surrounding me, and even if I hadn't felt their stares, I would have still known they were there watching me. They were also watching me. Ever since the day I would found in Hearts by the Crown Court and commanded to remain on the estate, everyone had been watching me, egged on by the myth that I had been the one to orchestrate the Jabberwock's attack.

A myth that the Crown Court and Thomas Caard did nothing to dissuade. My hands tightened at the very memory as I bit down on my lip and tried my best to even my temper. I failed at that, of course, and soon gave up, deciding to stop panting and start moving. Lamenting never did much of anything.

Long, wooden splinters dug into my palm as I swung once again, forming an arc like the ones I had seen just hours before during the Card Guards' sword practice and promptly missed my target.

Again.

The tall, wooden dummy that stood in front of me's painted mouth twitched just a centimeter higher at the corner, pulling the dried lead paint to the point that it was peeling off as the makeshift scarecrow looked down at my pathetic tools, mocking me as he usually did—

Only this time with the added benefit of my unskilled swing further cracking the remainder of my stolen wooden sword in the process, and me dropping said sword as well for added measure—because there was truly nothing embarrassing about that. No, not at all. Not when I had just watched the Card Guards perform their simple routines flawlessly just hours before that very morning, and turned down the offers of help from nearly all the Cards on the Hearts Estate. I'd long since realized that their help was, for the most part, a ruse, and I would end up ungodly sore and disappointed mere hours later when a number two card, of all rankings, beat me to a near pulp on the lawn, leaving far too many bruises that looked like the red roses that practically covered the place. My spirits were on the ground.

Instinctually, I looked up only to realize that my sword had not entirely left my hands, unfortunately, and only the handle still remained.

Lovely.

My eyes scanned across the third-floor balconies for just a moment, and I almost breathed a sigh of relief when I found them full of people I didn't know. A blessing, really, I counted myself as lucky for a single moment until the clapping began.

I sighed in frustration, clapping was never good. Especially not in the Land of Hearts. Just the other day, the Queen of Hearts had wandered away from her handlers and applauded my efforts, thinking me to be a young, rather poorly dressed boy trying to be a knight. I knew right away that it wasn't her, however, because if it were, the claps would be

much quicker and I would hear her stifled chortle; which left one person.

The one person I wanted to see the least in Wonderland.

At least the Queen of Hearts would have driven the others away, forcing them to look away and scurry down the halls out of fear—but him? He attracted attention now more than ever, and he kept it.

Kaeden always held my attention.

If scarecrows could laugh, I believe they'd sound a lot like the creak from the bucket atop the head of my new 'friend,' considering the fact that it had made nearly the same sound almost every day for the past two weeks as it watched me fail over and over again. My eyes snapped up to follow the scarecrow's and I was unsurprised when they immediately landed on Kaeden. There was no one else that it could be.

"Are you mocking me?" I murmured; my question inaudible as I scowled up at him.

Whether that was his intention, I did not truly know, as I did not happen to know any of said king's intentions anymore, nor even him at that point. For all I knew, Kaeden's straight-faced, raised brow composure was not actually an acknowledgement of the effort that I'd put in, but rather a painful mockery of my failure, one that he hid behind his supposedly 'shy' demeanor. His only good point was that he was nice to look at, which really, was a shame but pretty true to the way the world worked—the worst people were always unfortunately good looking.

I did not trust him as far as I could throw him anymore, which, I suppose, was why it shouldn't have come as a surprise that one of the Duchess's beautiful, doting girls was standing beside him when I whirled on my foot to face him—impatiently tapping her toes as he leaned over the edge of the balcony to watch me, but still.

It was somehow worse that she was there. She was pretty. She probably had the patience to stand beside him and wait for the rare sentence that escaped his lips. All of them did. They acted like he was so interesting, despite the fact that they hardly even knew him at all.

“Then again, I hardly know him either,” I sighed, my shoulders sinking just an inch as I struggled to keep my composure and return his stare with a proper glare.

My frown flickered when his eyes locked on mine, the corner of his mouth falling as he inevitably realized the depth of my failure and that I didn’t find it funny at all. He probably saw the handle still in my hands and the scarecrow devoid of a single dent. Kaeden had probably noticed the fact that I had failed to acquire a teacher, despite my insistence that this be the groundbreaking hobby to break through the mind-numbing mundanity of my time in the Land of Hearts. I shot him a defiant look as he gave an awkward swallow, his hands locking on the balcony as the girl beside him reached for his arm to pull him along.

“Won’t you show me the gardens?” I mocked, because they always said that. “Go step on poison ivy, you prat. It would suit you well enough.” My eyes broke away from Kaeden’s as I gave my scarecrow a defiant kick, only to find that my toes didn’t appreciate it all that much, and that the pain of cracking them against the wooden frame made me grit my teeth. “I hope someone burns down your stupid little gardens and has the foresight to do it with you two in it,” I muttered, doing my best to stand through the pain as I set my tender foot down on the ground and tried to stand normally, staring at the hedges with accusations dancing behind my eyes.

The Duchess’s girls loved the gardens, they loved walking with Kaeden, they loved navigating the maze and ‘stumbling’ into him even when he refused to even touch them at all. They

dreamed of running into the Queen in said gardens and somehow wooing her with their perfection, convincing Kaeden that they were perfect for him with her help. Never mind the fact that she never remembered their names. I watched them from my window day after day as I listened to the chiming of a faraway clock, wondering if I had ever looked so foolish and stupid and so utterly in love—

He had likely told the new girl all of those ‘secret’ things he had told me by now. He was so quick to show his cards, and perhaps even quicker to ‘fall.’ He had probably only known her an hour and had already begun to—

“You’re letting your thoughts get away from you again, Alice,” Thomas remarked in my ear. “Daydreaming about me again?” He asked, and for all I tried to remain composed and respectable in front of the King of Hearts and the members of the Crown Court, I stumbled, inadvertently bringing all eyes back to me after I had only just narrowly escaped the various judges and jurors who darted through the halls—another thing I did not want.

“I’d rather eat dirt.”

“Now, is that something you should say to your devoted guard?” Thomas asked, his hand reaching out for me and not dropping even when I shrugged away from his touch. “Especially with the Caterpillar and the Crown Court watching,” he said, and I didn’t so much as bother to look up to check whether they were there or not before I rolled my eyes.

“Oh please, the Caterpillar pays other people to watch me,” I said to him, flicking at the embroidered red six on his uniform and reminding him of his recent demotion, “like you.” The teasing smile on Thomas’s face dropped into a full-on glower, and I could see the irritation simmering beneath his skin. “Who do you think the Crown Court will promote next to elusive role of Joker?” I asked him as I began to walk away,

content to prod him as much as possible. If I could not be alone, then I would make him miserable whenever he was within my company, exacting my revenge throughout round-about means.

Between Kaeden, and the Crown Court he had invited to take up residence in his humble abode, and my newly minted, sorely disappointed guard; I had seldom a single moment to myself. I felt more spectacle than woman at that point, and the various covered walkways and balconies jutting from the walls of the rounded courtyard of Hearts Estate did not help things very much.

Nor did the fact that I was, technically, all things considered, a prisoner.

A special one, thankfully gifted with rooms and my own bed by sole virtue of being a king's 'favorite,' but that did not change much.

"Your trial won't go well if you stomp around like that, you know people find angry young women rather unappealing," Thomas informed me. "It makes it look like I'm doing a bad job."

"Yes, well, I'll try to smile more so you can get promoted."

"That's all I ask," Thomas said, failing to sense my sarcasm. Or maybe if he had, he chose to ignore it, which would have been just like him these days.

"I hope they demote you all the way down to two, you insufferable bastard," I muttered, clenching my hands so tightly that the splinters from my sword handle dove somehow even deeper beneath my flesh.

I yearned for the clock tower, for Home, for the smell of ammonia and the reek of rusty metal clocks—perhaps even still yearned for Oxford though I had to admit that I still felt my chest tighten when I looked back at Kaeden and the way that he lingered against the balcony, still watching me from afar

even though other, far more lively young maidens did their best to pull him away.

But I was working on that; taking the medicine prescribed to me and swearing to myself that, at the end of the day, I would not love Kaeden Hart.

I swore that to myself fairly often those days, as seeing him nearly every waking hour did not help very much in the way of not wanting him—he was still dreadfully handsome, and unbearably funny. I'd likely have to kill him to stop wanting him.

Sometimes I dreamed about sneaking into his room and choking Kaeden in the middle of the night, but he always woke up the second my hands went to his throat and looked at me with those big, dark eyes as he carefully pressed a kiss to each of my wrists. It was hard to wake up at that point in my dream, before he whispered my name and rolled me onto my back, but I managed to do it, waking up with actual steam rolling off my face and the distinct urge to scream gnawing at the back of my mind.

It was hard to hate someone like Kaeden.

It was easy to hate someone like Thomas.

“I should put a bell on you. It would make it easier to know when I’m supposed to put on a show,” I remarked, dragging my eyes away before they could make contact across the courtyard and doing my best to school my body language of any emotion, even if my reddened face reeked of embarrassment. I simply told myself that it could be misunderstood as anger from afar by those who did not know me well enough, and Kaeden most certainly did not know me well enough. Not anymore.

Thomas, however...

Thomas snorted as my attention fell back to him, his hazel eyes dancing with mirth and that same stupid crooked smile tugging upon his lips as he unabashedly looked me up and

down, taking his job as guard serious in a way that far more often than not annoyed me. His eyes landed on the handle within my grip immediately, of course, and it was no sooner than they did that than I dropped it down to the ground, casting him a defiant glare that almost dared him to say something.

Unfortunately, he did.

“Are you going to ask for a new one this time or just wait?” Thomas asked just a heartbeat later, and if he thought I looked angry before, I could not imagine how I looked then. Not that Thomas ever took any notice of that. “You know you would be able to get far more if you batted your pretty little lashes and begged.”

Disgusting.

“I will bat my pretty little lashes to get a proper metal blade, then strike you with it,” I remarked, kicking the handle away from my feet before changing directions in a futile effort to lose Thomas. I turned back on my heel just quick enough to see Kaeden finally look away, giving into to the girl beside him’s tender touch, and I wished that I had kept walking in the other direction. “I doubt injury would discharge you back to your previous position, you’d likely still be stuck with me and I with you day after day until this trial comes to an end. Do you truly wish to better arm me?” I said, only to hear Thomas chuckle.

I hated his raucous laugh.

I hated his stupid hazel eyes and his abundance of freckles. The way that he scrunched his nose and his light brown hair that was always perfectly coifed. I hated how he guarded me and yet acted as my friend—I’d sooner choke Thomas in his sleep than spend time with him.

The Caterpillar knew that. Kaeden knew that. I made it obvious, but Thomas and I were both being punished, and so...

I momentarily daydreamed about running for the fence at the edge of the estate again even as it vanished from sight, but I

knew how that would go. I would run at the barrier and then end up landing in another odd part of the estate again. My room, a study, the Walrus's temporary bathtub—once or twice I'd even ended up at the King's bedroom door, and a flurry of guards thought I'd come to kill him.

I really did wish that I was in the dungeons at that moment, rather than free to run about.

"All I'm saying is that your life would be much easier if you chose to capitalize on the King's little crush," Thomas rebutted, and I felt strangely sick at the idea. Even more ill than I felt when the girls clasping at Kaeden's arms pushed their perfect little lips to his cheek.

Awful, I could taste how bitter I was in the back of my mouth as I looked away, only catching a glance of her holding his upper arm. I could feel my eyes burn in that sort of awful, maddening way, the one where tears really do want to spill over, but I managed to force them back. "I'm not capitalizing on him," I replied, as I felt deeply saddened by the idea of it all—of Kaeden's eyes brightening if I gave him any regard, and the way that he would smile if I were to lean too close to him, looking far more alive than he had in a little over a month. All while not knowing that I was doing it for my own benefit, and that I was using him—"Don't mention him anymore," I commanded, and decided then and there that it was not my imagination, and the courtyard was indeed stretching out in front of me, as if Ava, the Heart's estate, could prevent me from doing approaching Kaeden with nefarious intent by making my walks longer.

I'd have to take a whole bottle of lovesickness medicine that night, and hope that Ava wouldn't say anything as she refilled it for the umpteenth time that week, raising her eyebrows at me from one of the picture frames in my loaned bedroom.

I hated Kaeden and yet I could not bear to use him. I detested him, and yet I could not bear to bat my lashes, to touch

his knee and see that light in his eyes of which I was so fond, to let him hold me and praise me, brushing the loose hairs from in front of my eyes.

And all for what? A better room and a newer sword?

And that was if he still loved me; or ever had to begin with.

I couldn't stomach doing that—even to him.

Even to awkward, beautiful little Kaeden Hart. A man with fake sweetness in his eyes and a lilting laugh, with long limbs and a knowing smile—A man who I professed to love.

“Do not say such stupid things again,” I barked at Thomas, since just telling him not to do things didn’t feel like enough. I had to insult him as well. At least to appease the estate and stop the courtyard from stretching out any further. The moment I did that, the grass squeezed together and the walk shortened; though I did almost trip over a mound of sod as a result.

To his credit, Thomas did not respond, which was good, very good, considering he could very well have, and if he had, I would have lost what little grip on myself I had only recently regained.

I would not be crying over Kaeden Hart.

I would be storming across the yard and doing my best to cast him as far out of my troubled mind as possible. I would be ignoring him at every opportunity and doing the things he so loathed, then trying not to notice when he looked down at me with a heartbroken smile and begging eyes. I would be working on the problem of trying to get back home while knowing that he had a way locked within the very castle that I was imprisoned within, but not daring to ask him the reason why—why on earth would he keep it from me?

I tried to school my breathing as I walked away, clenching my hands close to me as Thomas trailed not that far behind and I watched the familiar, awful sight begin again the moment that I entered the open hallways of the Heart’s Estate; a dark, emer-

ald, green hue beginning at my palms and branching its way up my wrists.

Only in Wonderland did envy have a list of symptoms.

And only in Wonderland was it the only ailment without a cure.

Without a second thought, I reached into the pockets of my dress and withdrew the small, white cotton gloves Fitzgerald had gifted to me not that long ago. The ones that he had told me to wear, because he couldn't stand to see my skin turn green any longer, and it vexed him as to why I would have anything to be jealous of to begin with.

Of note was the fact that I noticed his looked very similar to mine, and when I turned to look up at him, he pulled the edge of his sleeve down lower, his pale skin going red as he immediately excused himself.

I tugged them on then, my eyes drifting to the ground as I tried to temper myself. I would die from this, I was sure—I could only hope that the various people stomping through the halls in Hearts didn't look my way. The last thing I needed was for someone to notice me—

“—Jealousy really doesn’t suit you,” a low voice hummed in my ear almost immediately, and I cursed every Kingdom in Wonderland.

“Be quiet, Claude,” I remarked, unsurprised to find that he was there when I needed him least, and that he stood as close as always, not even close to struggling to keep up. “You’re three hours late,” I remarked, “I very nearly had to talk to the Caterpillar because of you.”

He chuckled as he slid into place beside me, matching me step for step. “Many apologies, I did tell him I didn’t care to talk to him today and I find he is much too boring,” Claude shrugged as if that were reason enough, “it’s not my fault he didn’t listen.”

“Nothing is ever your fault,” I mumbled. I forgot that Claude had a tendency to just show up out of thin air, and that he seemed so well in touch with what moments I wanted him to appear least during, his body almost always coming into view when I felt at my lowest.

I felt his lips pressed against my cheek, and I had to stop and turn, looking back at him for a moment, not thinking to school the misery from my features or to ready myself first.

If I wanted to hate Kaeden, then I really, really wanted to hate Claude.

But for some reason, I couldn’t bear to, even when I was mad at him, and the man he had hidden in his house trailed not that far behind Claude and I. Something about Claude made people naturally want to like him—perhaps now more than ever.

Perhaps it was the smile that he gave at that moment, or the way his arm spread out for me to walk beside him. It could have had something to do with the warm air and gentle breeze that almost always surrounded him, making him feel like a warm summer’s night.

Or maybe it was because of the scars.

The long, black scars with scabs still chipping off of them. The ones that marred his face and upper body, that ripped through his ears and previously perfect features. The ones that Jaxton had left when Claude had thrown himself in front of him, desperate to save Roisin and to stop the locket containing Manon from being similarly mauled as the locket was broken beyond repair. Perhaps it was his uneven breaths, or the gauze still wrapped heavily around his waist, the smell of apples heavily permeating the air around him as he refused the care of doctors and sought desperately to keep them away.

Or perhaps it was the way he looked at Thomas, his eyes still firm and trusting, with just a hint of uncertainty in his gaze.

I didn't know if he believed Thomas had done it or not, whether he was of the same opinion as the rest of the court that I was to blame, and I was never alone with him long enough to ask. A part of me suspected that even if I was, it would have hurt to see his reaction just at hearing me ask the question.

Claude came to visit me day after day, even when I first refused to so much as acknowledge him, he came, and he waited.

Waited, waited, and waited for me to be his friend again.

A whole month had come and gone, and our friendship was never fully reclaimed—or so I told myself as I walked into his waiting arm, burying my face in his scarred chest for a moment before wrapping my arm around his waist and beginning to walk again.

“Tried sword fighting again?” Claude asked as I gave a petulant huff, one that disguised the lightest of sniffles as he pressed me into his side, his hand raising and his arm angling to keep me far from view when small prickles of moisture began to pattern my skin. “The sword won today, I take it?”

Oh bugger, I had sworn I would not cry.

“Would you believe I broke it?” I remarked, my voice uneven as my eyes stayed directed towards the ground, and beside me, he gave a warm laugh.

“I'll speak to Kaeden about getting you a new one again,” he replied, only to catch my eyes sliding in his direction. “—I mean, I'll see to Kaeden about getting you a new one for the very first time, as that one has never been replaced before. Not once,” he said, stiffening ever so slightly as he guided me along, obviously holding another secret within his chest and choosing to keep it in. Even if I already knew that Kaeden had replaced the sword more than once. “Though perhaps after the trial ends today, maybe you could try to talk to him yourself—” he began, and just as suddenly averted his eyes, catching the menace in

my gaze. "Right," he said, immediately accepting the rejection of his idea. "I don't know why I thought otherwise," he said, pulling me into his side just a little tighter. "I'm happy to go with you again," he said. "Even if we will be remarkably late."

"As always," I responded, my eyes drifting up to look at the palace in front of us, and then cutting back to catch a glimpse not only of Kaeden, but my guard as well.

Thomas's eyes did not move from mine. They did not so much as blink.

"I have a surprise for you today," Claude began to prattle at my side, unaware of how I stared at the man behind me, or the fear I felt holding the Joker's eyes. "We're one step closer to keeping you from standing trial, which is good, all things considered, since it is Wonderland and we generally attend to assume guilt first, innocence second..." he admitted, shaking his head as he continued to complain about the dubious fairness of the justice system, completely ignorant to how Thomas dominated my thoughts.

I could not help but think that he must have been so close to getting what he wanted—and it was only because of a single decree that he was now trailing behind me, waiting for the day when the trials would end and his old life would start anew, or perhaps more freedom would be allocated to him...

The thought of that sent chills down my spine.