



MARA RUTHERFORD

AUTHOR OF *THE POISON SEASON*

A
MULTITUDE
of DREAMS

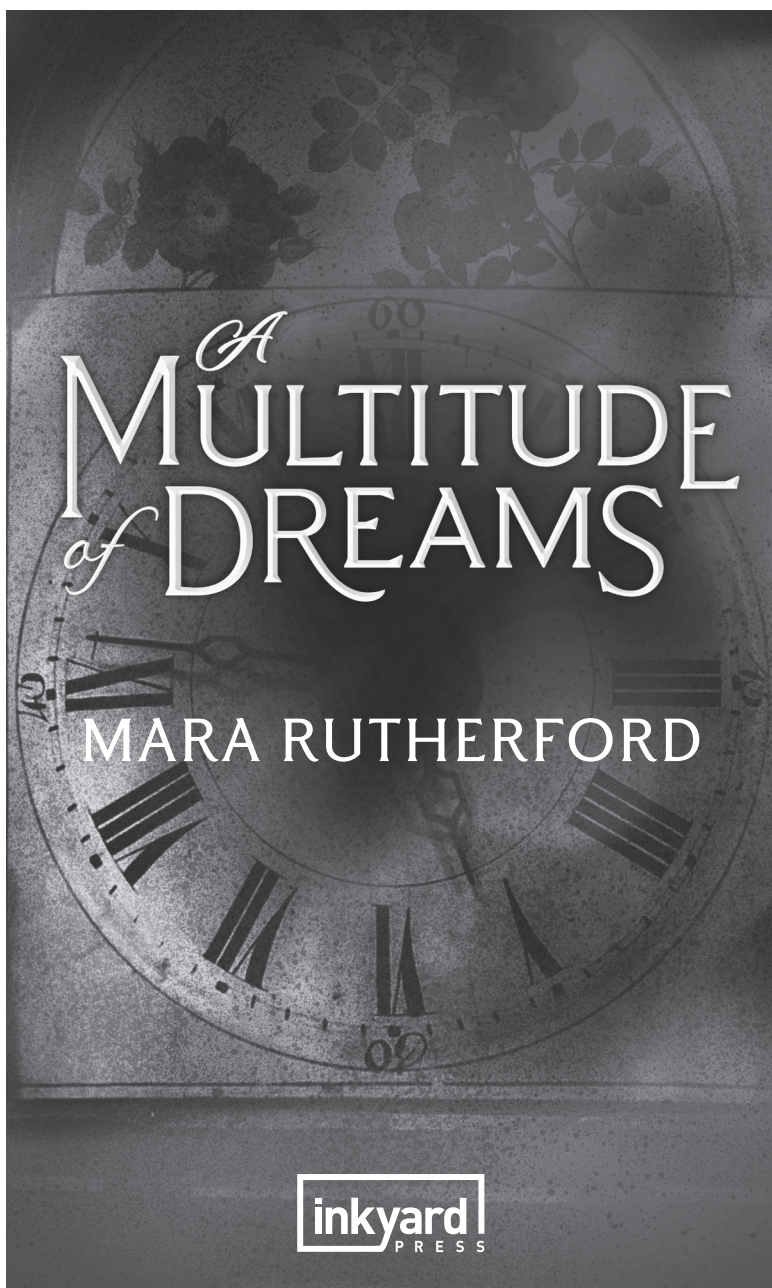
A
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A Multitude of Dreams
The Poison Season
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Crown of Coral and Pearl Series

Crown of Coral and Pearl
Kingdom of Sea and Stone



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MARA RUTHERFORD

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A Multitude of Dreams

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For Will, because fair is fair.

I love you, small fry.

“O’ happy posterity, who will not experience such abysmal woe
and will look upon our testimony as a fable.”
—Petrarch, 1348, regarding the Black Death

“There was much of the beautiful, much of the wanton,
much of the bizarre, something of the terrible, and not a little of
that which might have excited disgust. To and fro in the
seven chambers there stalked, in fact, a multitude of dreams.”
—Edgar Allan Poe, “The Masque of the Red Death”

CHAPTER 1

Eldridge Hall was a castle built on lies.

In the highest chamber of the tallest tower, where it was drafty on even the stillest day, Seraphina stood at the sole window's ledge. Even that window was a lie, for it had been hastily boarded up years ago, and a window that couldn't be seen through was just another wall. Any minute, the ebony clock in the great hall would send out three booming chimes, announcing the start of another elaborate dinner the kingdom couldn't afford.

The real time hardly mattered; the clock maker had died years ago of the *mori roja*, and if there was someone left outside the castle to repair it, the king would never risk the health of his beloved youngest daughter to find them. As she descended the steps to the dining hall, she hummed the tune to a children's nursery rhyme she'd heard in the early days of the plague, when it hadn't yet reached the city. The plague was called the *mori roja* in royal circles, but out there, beyond the castle walls, it had been called the Bloody Three.

Here was a fact: three was the unluckiest of all numbers.

It was the number of wretched older sisters Seraphina had; it was the number of times per day she had to visit the mad king in his chambers; it was the number of days it took a person to die of the *mori roja*.

And it was the time the ebony clock insisted on announcing every hour for years, as stubborn in its denial of reality as the king.

Squaring her shoulders and raising her royal chin, Seraphina entered the dining hall. Chairs scraped as lords and ladies rose to greet her. Beyond the exquisite cut crystal and bone china so fine you could nearly see through it, the king was already halfway out of his chair, ready to grace her with one of his kisses that were somehow too wet and too dry at the same time.

“Father,” she said, dropping into the easy curtsy that hadn’t come easily at all. “You’re looking well this evening.”

“Not as well as you, my dear. Doesn’t she look lovely, Lord Greymont? Lord Greymont?” The king tottered in a circle, searching for his favorite young nobleman. “Ah, there you are. Doesn’t my daughter look lovely tonight?”

“As fair as a rose,” Lord Greymont said to Seraphina with a bow. “Please, allow me to accompany you to your chair.”

She bit the inside of her cheek, already raw from her efforts not to groan every time she was forced to pretend. Lord Greymont was no better or worse than any of the other young men at Eldridge Hall, which was to say he was handsome, rich, and achingly dull.

“You always look lovely,” he whispered, his breath on her bare shoulder as unwelcome as the skin on warm milk. “But I must say that pink gown suits your complexion.” His eyes lingered at the delicate neckline a moment too long.

She arched a well-groomed brow. "And you look as dashing as ever. Though we're all a bit pale, wouldn't you say?"

"Years indoors will do that to a person, yes." He shooed a tabby cat off her chair. They were everywhere in the castle, having bred like rabbits for the past few years with no access to the outside, where predators would have kept their population in check. Seraphina sat and allowed Greymont to ease her chair into the table. He took the seat next to hers without asking. "Are you looking forward to your twentieth birthday party?"

"A lady doesn't like to be reminded of her age," she said, because it seemed like something a princess would say. In truth, she was seventeen and a half, and her favorite way to spend her birthday was with a picnic.

Lord Greymont had been paying her special attention lately, for reasons she had yet to deduce. "Forgive me, Your Highness. But if I may be so bold, you are even lovelier now than the day I met you."

She remembered the day well. She was barely fourteen, coarse and malnourished, starting at shadows as if they were specters. His compliment was hardly bold. But she pursed her lips and dropped her eyes in the appropriate display of femininity, which she had learned was a bizarre combination of modesty and coyness.

"Have you chosen a costume yet?" he asked.

"No, but I have no doubt my sisters are already scheming." She looked to the end of the table, where the young women sat. Sure enough, they were giggling behind their hands, their rouged cheeks almost garishly bright in the candlelight.

Lord Greymont cleared his throat and leaned closer. "I realize it's a bit premature, but may I request the first dance?"

“My birthday isn’t for three weeks.”

“True, but I have no doubt you will be booked solid within the fortnight. I can’t risk losing out to our dear Lord Spottington.”

Seraphina sighed. “Lord *Pottington* only asks because his father demands it. He’s about as ambitious as a garden snail.”

Lord Greymont grinned. “Don’t underestimate him, Your Highness. Even the humble garden snail has aims, slow though he may be.”

“If Lord Pottington is a snail, what does that make me? A leaf?”

His eyes drifted toward his peer, who was pantomiming something to her eldest sister. He was clumsy and awkward—and true, his complexion wasn’t clear, even at twenty-five—but Seraphina knew better than to trust appearances. They were as much a lie as everything else here.

“You, Princess, are far from foliage.”

“You did already compare me to a flower,” she said.

He swirled his wine in its cut-crystal glass, and Seraphina noted absently that the gilded rim was chipped and flaking.

“Is *fair as a rose* not the compliment I thought it was?”

“I can’t say. I haven’t seen a rose in ages.”

“Then I shall make it my life’s work to bring you one.”

She almost snorted, before remembering that a princess would never snort. “Please don’t waste your time on something as trivial as a rose.”

“And what would you have me waste it on? It’s not as if I’m doing anything of value here in the Hall.”

Seraphina took a sip of her own wine, which was heavily watered down. They had to be running out by now. Heaven

help the servant to whom it fell to deliver that news to the king. She lowered her voice so that Lord Greymont had to lean in closer. It wasn't his proximity she craved, but the pleasure of forcing others to bend to her will after so many years of doing it herself. Besides, he smelled nice, like perfumed soap, which was more than could be said of the boys she knew when she was younger.

"And what would you do if you weren't trapped in the castle?"

His eyes, which she noticed had green flecks in the brown, darted around. She wondered if he would ask her what she meant by *trapped*. No one was supposed to allude to the game they all played, particularly in the king's presence. But Lord Greymont's lips curled just a bit at the corners as he spoke. "I should like to travel the world. I think I might like sailing. I know I would, in fact."

She brightened unconsciously. "You've seen the ocean?"

"Indeed. More than once."

Not quite as dull as she'd thought, then. "You had access to a ship?"

He nodded. "Dance with me on your birthday, and I'll tell you all about it."

She'd learned long ago to couch her annoyance as teasing, though she couldn't quite keep the edge out of her voice. "You'd keep me waiting that long?"

Something in his eyes shifted, his smile suddenly wicked. He had knowledge she wanted now, and he would use it to draw her in. Not a lie, but more games. Fortunately, Seraphina was good at games, and she could be patient if the prize was something she wanted.

"It will be worth the wait," he purred. "I promise."

The wine must be stronger than she'd given it credit for, because Seraphina felt warm and a little giddy. What would the girls back home say if they could see her now, dressed in a beautiful pink gown with a handsome man at her side?

Seraphina pinched the inside of her wrist hard under the table, something she did whenever she found herself enjoying even a moment of her time at Eldridge. Happiness was complacency, and complacency was acceptance. She would never accept this life as her own, not as long as she drew breath.

Besides, what the girls back home thought of any of this didn't matter anymore. All the girls back home were dead.

After dinner Seraphina retired to the chambers she shared with her older sisters.

"A masquerade!" Rose, the youngest and most excitable of the three, squealed and fell dramatically onto one of the seven brocade fainting couches in their chambers—as if that was all ladies did: eat, sleep, swoon, repeat—upsetting a lounging longhaired ginger. "I can't decide what I should be!"

"We have weeks to decide," Seraphina said to her reflection in the vanity mirror. Behind her, Jocelyn, her lady-in-waiting and the only person at Eldridge Seraphina could tolerate, smiled.

"Lord Greymont will look handsome in a mask," she said, tugging on one of Seraphina's auburn curls. "Don't you think?"

She avoided Jocelyn's eyes as she reached for a silver brush, worth more than most men's lives, and handed it to her. It was maid's work, but Jocelyn said it relaxed her, and Seraphina couldn't deny it was soothing for her as well.

“Lord Greymont would look handsome in anything,” Rose giggled.

“Or nothing.” Nina, her eldest sister, flashed a wicked grin.

Seraphina rolled her eyes as her sisters and their ladies tittered and trilled like a small flock of sparrows. She wondered if there were any birds left outside the castle walls. Dalia, her best friend back when she’d had the luxury of choosing them, had loved songbirds. Goldfinches were a particular favorite. But when the king started hoarding the crops and livestock, people began to eat anything they could get their hands on. She hadn’t heard a bird outside her window in ages.

“Thinking of your family?” Jocelyn whispered into Seraphina’s ear.

She narrowed her downturned brown eyes, eyes so familiar that her “sisters” had gasped when they spotted her for the first time. She could still hear Giselle, her middle sister, whispering to the others in the entry of her family’s home. *She’s perfect. Well, she will be, once we clean away all the filth.*

Seraphina wouldn’t cry. She would save her tears for later, when she went to her room in the tower. A room so cramped and dim that it allowed her to believe—for one bittersweet moment every morning—that she was home.

When they’d first brought her to the castle, she’d slept in her own royal chamber, more opulent and luxurious than anything she could have imagined. But a few months into her life here she’d discovered the empty tower and began sneaking up at night. The more she allowed herself to relish in the beautiful gowns and sumptuous meals, the more she let the flattery of men like Lord Greymont warm her cheeks—and

worse, her belly—the easier it was to forget the people she had left behind to die of the *mori roja*. Not just her family, but her whole community. The whole world, for all she knew. For all anyone at the castle knew.

“I’m going to be a butterfly,” Rose said. “A beautiful pink butterfly.”

“There’s no such thing as a pink butterfly.” Nina plucked a candied cherry from one of the bowls of crystallized fruit that followed the princesses everywhere they went. Seraphina never touched it, no matter how tempting; she seemed to be the only one who remembered that the fruit was not never-ending. None of this was.

They’d been sequestered in the castle for nearly four years, and she still didn’t know where the fruit came from. No one was allowed out of the castle, and no one was allowed in. Jocelyn believed there was a secret tunnel the servants used, because though the king demanded his delicacies, he’d never told them how they were supposed to provide fresh food through what may as well be a siege. But Seraphina was rarely ever alone outside her tower—Giselle had made certain of that—and she had no idea where the tunnel could be.

“There might be pink butterflies,” Rose insisted. “You’ve never even been outside of Goslind.”

Nina plucked another cherry, mimicking Rose when her back was turned. “I’m going to be a siren.”

“What does a siren costume consist of?” Jocelyn asked.

“Cleavage,” Rose retorted before Nina could answer, and even Seraphina had to laugh. Rose wasn’t usually quick or witty.

“Ha ha,” Nina said, though she was admiring said cleavage

in the mirror. "I'm going to wear a long blue gown, with my hair down and flowing, and I'll leave my feet bare."

"Careful you don't wind up dancing with any of the Archer brothers," Jocelyn said. "They're as graceful as a herd of cattle."

"What will you be?" Rose asked Seraphina, perching on the arm of her chair. "A mermaid? A swan? Oh, what about a fairy? You'd look so lovely in a pair of wings."

"I imagine Giselle will choose for me." Giselle was in her own private room with her ladies-in-waiting. She avoided Seraphina whenever possible, forcing others to do the dirty work of keeping her in check.

"Come now, you must have some preference," Jocelyn pressed.

Seraphina raised an indifferent shoulder. Her entire life was one never-ending masquerade; she couldn't drum up enthusiasm for another. Jocelyn set the brush back down on the vanity and a shimmer caught Seraphina's eye. She plucked a golden strand of hair from the brush and held it up to Jocelyn.

"We'll need to dye it again this week," Jocelyn said. "I know you hate it."

"The henna irritates my scalp." Seraphina frowned, tilting her head to watch the light catch the trace of a scar on her jawline, rendered almost invisible by pearl powder.

"I'm sorry, darling. But what choice do we have?"

The question was rhetorical. They both knew they had no choices when it came to their lives at Eldridge. Jocelyn's entire family had died of the Bloody Three, including her infant sister. Her childhood nurse had written to Jocelyn several months after the castle gates were locked, warning her to stay away, not realizing Jocelyn couldn't leave even if she wanted

to. But Jocelyn considered herself fortunate to be here, safe and sound from the *mori roja*, and she thought Seraphina should, too.

They were safe, perhaps, but nothing was sound. Life at Eldridge Hall was like a child's wooden block tower, only the blocks were lies, the king was the child, and one wrong move didn't just mean a few weepy minutes on a nursemaid's knee. It meant death.

"I think I'll go to bed," Seraphina said, rising from her vanity.

"Let me help you change out of your gown." Jocelyn wasn't a beauty like Rose, or a coquette like Nina, but she was kind and clever. She was the only one who knew what Seraphina was really thinking, even though Seraphina liked to believe she'd gotten quite good at playing princess by now.

"I can do it myself," she said gently. "Get some rest."

"At least take an extra blanket," Jocelyn insisted, kissing her on the cheek. "It's so drafty up there."

No one liked to think about Seraphina up in the tower. It distracted from the charade. Rose waved sleepily from the settee. "May you dream of Lord Greymont and a royal wedding."

"And a royal wedding *night*," Nina added.

"Good night, Princess Imogen," Jocelyn said as she closed the door behind Seraphina.

She climbed the stairs to her tower barefoot, relishing the way the cold stone bit into the soles of her pampered feet, a ritual that kept her from ever forgetting where she came from. After locking the thin wooden door behind her, she went to the windowsill and pressed her eye to a small crack in the wooden boards, relieved when she saw her: a girl clad

in a white linen dress, her delicate features merely a smudge at this distance. She was the greatest reminder of home that Seraphina had. Every day Seraphina feared that she wouldn't come, but every night she did. Dalia, her best friend.

Seraphina waited for her to wave, just one raised hand before she disappeared into the forest as the clock began to chime once more. Dalia was the only true thing she had left, the last remaining vestige of a world she *would* return to, one day. Because she was not a princess, or the king's daughter, or even a lady.

Her name was Seraphina Blum. She was a Jew who had survived the plague because she was a pretty girl with sad eyes who happened to look like a dead princess.

And that was the most beautiful lie of all.

CHAPTER 2

Nico stabbed his shovel into the dirt, which thankfully wasn't yet frozen. Burying bodies was a miserable task under any circumstance; burying them in snow and ice was an altogether different breed of torture. He tossed a pile of dirt onto the rotting arm of a corpse, little more than a skeleton at this point, unlike its more freshly deceased neighbor.

His late father, a butcher who had turned the head of a nobleman's daughter—much to *her* father's chagrin—had reminded Nico often that he was made of softer stuff than his two older brothers. At least Nico had inherited Jeremiah's strong stomach. It came in handy for grave digging.

In all other ways Nico took after his mother, tall and lean with a perpetually furrowed brow. He'd always been Lucinda's favorite, a role he had cherished until she died of the *mori roja* in his arms. He hefted the shovel and drove it into the dirt harder than necessary, just to prove to himself that he wasn't as soft as he'd once been. His father and brothers would hardly recognize him now. Why, they'd be—

The shovel's head slammed into a rock, sending shock waves

through Nico's arm. He shook it out, scowling at the sky. Someone up there had a shit sense of humor.

"That's the last of them," Colin said, coming to stand next to Nico. Colin Chambers had been a chimney sweep before the plague, and now Nico, a gentleman—by birth if not manners—was working side by side with him. Death truly was the great equalizer.

Nico nodded. "Only three bodies this week. That's three less than last week."

Colin swiped his forearm over his brow, revealing branching red streaks on the light brown skin of his inner wrist that matched the marks on Nico's own. Built like a chimney, Colin was uniquely suited to life as a sweep, work he'd detested but which, in the end, had spared him witnessing the worst of the plague. Just before it hit, he'd been sent to the seaside for a few weeks by his employer, who had taken pity on him after listening to him cough all winter long. The plague hit while Colin was at the shore, and his employer's family had let him stay on there to look after the house while they sailed for even safer lands.

The plague had eventually spread throughout Goslind and beyond its borders to the surrounding kingdoms, but when it reached the shore, Colin found that, like Nico, he was one of the lucky few with blood immunity. He had come back eventually to check on his family, but they were all "dead or fled," as the saying went.

Nico's family never had the chance to flee. He'd been the one to care for them during their final three bloody days. His brothers may have been sturdy and strong like their father, but they'd died the same way his mother had: with blood spill-

ing from their pores, their eyes, their ears, their noses, and every other orifice imaginable. He'd never know if his father had been immune. He'd died shortly before the plague hit.

"Most of these bodies have been out here for a good while, months and months. The plague is over," Colin said, then promptly knocked on Nico's head. "Touch wood."

"Ow." Nico rubbed at his brown hair, which had grown long enough to tie into a ponytail at the nape of his neck. The barber who'd once kept his hair fashionably styled was dead, along with his tailor, his cobbler, the butcher, the baker, and the bloody candlestick maker.

"We should get back to the house. It's nearly nightfall." Colin picked the empty wheelbarrow up by the handles and turned it around toward the stately stone manor on the hill. The place they now called home.

It was strange to be a servant after so many years of having them, but not a day went by that Nico didn't thank his lucky stars for his savior, Lord Crane. Nico had gone to his neighbors in the days immediately following the plague, hoping to be of some use with his medical knowledge, but they had all been too afraid to open their doors to anyone. And considering no one had ever come to him seeking aid or refuge, he had to assume a huge portion of the population had died.

For a while he had contemplated going to Esmoor, the capital city and the epicenter of the plague. Even if no one had need of him, perhaps he could learn more about the *mori roja* and how it spread. He wasn't brilliant enough to find a cure, but there was still a chance he could help *someone*. A chance that he wouldn't fail them the way he'd failed his mother.

Finally, after Nico had consumed everything edible at

home—and some things that were decidedly not—he had set out on his own to look for other survivors. Sadly, he had found nothing but corpses, sometimes still lying in the middle of the road where they had collapsed. There weren't even enough people left to bury them.

Lord Crane had found Nico in the forest, half-starved and delirious, nearly twenty miles from Crane Manor. Crane was also immune to the plague, and after most of his servants and the farmers on his lands had died, he started making trips out into the countryside.

So far he'd taken in more than a dozen survivors, all living and working together at Crane Manor. If he'd been braver, Nico liked to think he would have done the same. But even if he wasn't saving lives, he helped the rest of the household with his medical knowledge, and that gave him the sense of purpose he'd been lacking since his family died.

Nico wasn't paid money for his work, but he was given everything he needed to live a perfectly decent life. Someday maybe he'd go back to his ancestral home, if looters or animals hadn't taken over. But for now it was nice not to be alone. He'd always considered himself a solitary, independent sort, until he'd been truly alone for the first time. He quickly realized that the company he'd kept in his prior life wasn't nearly as witty or charming as he'd thought.

They knocked the mud off their boots and went to the servants' area downstairs, following the aroma of cooking meat.

"Hurry and wash up for supper," Mrs. Horner, the cook, said as she bustled around the kitchen. "The master has a guest tonight, and he wants a formal dinner at eight."

They all wore multiple hats in the manor; Nico served as

footman, valet, undertaker, and nurse, depending on what was needed that day. Tonight he'd be a server in the dining room.

"Who's the guest?" Colin asked, munching on a scraggly carrot plucked from the cutting board when Mrs. Horner's broad back was turned.

"A girl," said Abby, a young woman whom Colin himself had found over two years ago. She was short and plump with an angelic face, and Colin had fallen in love with her the moment he saw her. But Abby had aimed her sights higher, on the only other young aristocrat at the manor, Clifford Branson.

Not that any of it mattered. Lord Crane didn't tolerate tomfoolery amongst the staff. It was one of his requirements for living at the manor, one that had little effect on Nico. Romance was the furthest thing from his mind these days.

"An immaculate?" Colin asked.

Abby nodded. Immaculates and immunes were not the same. Immunes had been exposed to the plague and gone unaffected but for red marks that appeared along the veins of their inner wrists, whereas immaculates had somehow managed to escape exposure altogether. They were rare, especially now and especially in these parts, where the plague had hit hard. Sometimes they turned up—returning to look for survivors, or just now venturing out after locking themselves away for years in a manor. No one who caught the Bloody Three survived it, as far as Nico could tell. By his estimation, at least three quarters of the population of Goslind had been wiped out in the past three and a half years.

"She came upon the manor just as Lord Crane was heading out for a hunt," Abby explained. "She's headed home, she

said. She was abroad when the plague hit, but she believes it's over. She doesn't know who survived."

Nico lowered his gaze in sympathy. He could imagine she must be very frightened, a young lady all on her own, not knowing what she'd encounter when she returned home. In the beginning Nico was certain that even without a cure, there were preventative measures they could take to slow the spread of the *mori roja*. Quarantines had saved villages from other plagues in the past. The Jews, for example, who were forced to remain in their walled quarters, often succumbed last. Of course, that led to their being accused of starting the plagues in the first place, so it was not the blessing it might have been. Between the Bloody Three or a pogrom, Nico thought it better to be betrayed by nature than slaughtered by your own neighbors.

But Nico still didn't know how the plague spread—whether it was airborne or passed through bodily fluids. Either way he had known it would eventually run out of hosts, as all plagues do. But a small part of him worried it could still be out there, biding its time, waiting for the population to recover enough for it to take root once again.

"She must be finding Goslind very much changed," Colin said. "She's fortunate to have come upon Lord Crane's lands."

Abby nodded. "She'll stay a few days and then be on her way. I'm to prepare the guest room."

"As if she'll need it," Branson said behind her. He had a nasty habit of appearing out of nowhere, with his oily black hair and leer of a smile. Abby tittered behind her hand, hiding the crooked tooth she was self-conscious of around Branson.

"Get to work, all of you," Mrs. Horner said, swatting Bran-

son with a spoon. But even she was under his spell; she giggled like a schoolgirl when he untied her apron strings with one deft tug.

Colin and Nico rolled their eyes at each other as they went upstairs to wash and change for dinner. Nico had taken some of his brothers' clothes with him when he left home, and they were almost too small for him now, proof that he'd grown. Colin liked to tease that if *he* had "the body of a god and the soul of a poet," he'd have married Abby by now, titles be damned. But he said it mostly to make Nico blush, which wasn't difficult; Nico blushed whenever anyone complimented him, teased him, or looked at him too long.

They left the room together, Colin off to the kitchen and Nico to the dining room. He was making his way through the many corridors of Crane Manor when he nearly ran into someone he'd missed in the dimly lit hallway.

"Oof," Nico said, rather poetically.

"Who's there?" a small voice asked.

Nico looked down to find a petite young woman standing before him. This must be Crane's guest. "I beg your pardon, miss. Can I be of service?"

"That would be most welcome," she said, spinning in a circle. "This house is like a labyrinth."

"Please, allow me." It had been a while since Nico had been in the presence of a lady, and it took him a moment to shake off his new, more rustic persona. It didn't help that the lady in question was young and beautiful, and Nico was blushing like mad. He was suddenly grateful they didn't have enough tallow for candles to light all the halls of the manor.

"Are you a relation of Lord Crane?" the girl asked. She had wide-set brown eyes, giving her the look of a startled fawn.

"No, Miss..."

She smiled up at him. "Elisabeth Talbot."

"No, Miss Talbot. I am one of the many people Lord Crane has taken in after the plague. I came from Mayville."

She blinked at him with her doe eyes, clearly unfamiliar with the small hamlet.

"My mother's family was from Esmoor," he added. "Lucinda Templeton."

"Oh," she said, brightening. The Templetons were well known in Goslind. Several had served as kings' advisers, and Nico's uncle was a judge who had presided over the murder trial of a famous opera singer. "And what shall I call you?"

"You don't need to call me anything, Miss Talbot. I'm just a servant here."

Before they reached the end of the corridor, she stopped him with a delicate gloved hand on his arm. "The plague changed all of us, sir. But that doesn't mean we must completely abandon who we were beforehand."

He smiled and inclined his head. "Well said. My name is Nicodemus Mott."

"Well, then, Mr. Mott. Will you please escort me to dinner?" She crooked her elbow expectantly.

He bowed, a fancy trick for hiding the world's longest-sustained man-blush. "It would be my honor."

Crane Manor hadn't seen a guest in over six months, and something about Elisabeth's presence raised the spirits of the entire household. It wasn't just that she was charming and

beautiful; it was knowing that there were survivors out there, immaculates who had made it through the plague without immunity. The world was changed, but not entirely. And with that came the hope that one day things could go back to how they had once been.

Nico helped Miss Talbot into her chair, noting that Crane had asked for the good china and silverware to be used tonight.

“Tell me, Mr. Mott,” Elisabeth said, glancing up at him. In the candlelight, she was even more beautiful, her olive complexion glowing with health and vitality. “What would you be doing with your life if it hadn’t been for the *mori roja*?”

Nico had been sixteen when the plague hit. As the youngest of three sons, he would have been lucky to inherit anything, but there had been no expectations placed on him, either. “I would have liked to study medicine,” he said. His father had ridiculed the idea, but he could dream about those things now. There was no one left to tell him not to.

“Mott is one of the brightest young men I’ve ever met,” Crane said, striding into the room. “He tends to all our injuries around the manor, human and animal alike. He would have made a fine physician.”

“He *will*,” Elisabeth said, smiling at Nico. “The world still needs physicians, surely.”

Nico was about to say something brilliant, like “thank you,” when Crane took his seat at the table, signaling that it was time for Nico to serve.

Nico’s stomach hollowed in embarrassment, and he bowed before heading to the kitchen. He’d told himself for years that there was no place for romance in his life, and he was right.

He had nothing to offer someone like Miss Talbot. Not even a witty retort.

When he returned with the carrot soup, Nico was surprised to see Elisabeth and Crane sitting in awkward silence. Crane could be stern with the servants, but never without reason, and he was generally affable with guests. Perhaps he was rusty from not having entertained in so long.

Nico set the soup down and was turning to fade into the background like a proper servant when Elisabeth placed a hand on his forearm.

“Tell me more about your family,” she said. “I’m curious how someone with noble blood came to work here at the manor.”

Nico could feel Crane’s eyes on him, and he licked his lips against the sudden dryness of his mouth.

Fortunately, he was saved by a heavy knock on the front door.

“Who the hell is *that*?” Crane asked, sounding profoundly unhappy about being interrupted.

“I’ll go,” Nico said, grateful for the excuse to leave the room. No one ever came to their door, and Nico had half a mind to grab one of the hunting rifles. But the pounding of a fist continued, and Nico found himself answering the door simply to spare Crane the noise.

A stranger stood on the threshold. He looked to be in his twenties, with sable hair to his shoulders and the fine clothing of a gentleman.

“Can I help you, sir?” Nico asked.

“I certainly hope so,” the man replied. “I’m looking for my wife, you see. I lost her in the forest.”

Nico suppressed a shiver as he glanced back into the manor. The stranger couldn't possibly mean Elisabeth.

"My name is Adrien Arnaud," the man said, drawing Nico's attention. "I live just a few miles from here. I don't suppose I could come in? It's awfully cold this evening."

"Do not invite that man inside, Mott."

He turned to see Crane standing behind him. He hadn't heard his master approach, but then, he hadn't been able to hear much over the pounding of blood in his ears.

"This gentleman says he's looking for his wife," Nico explained. Crane was several inches taller than Arnaud, but the stranger had the lean look of someone who spent plenty of time engaged in physical pursuits. Nico wouldn't want to face either of them in a fight.

"You're not welcome here," Crane said to the man. They stood nearly toe to toe, one on either side of the threshold.

"Come now. Surely we can be civil about this."

Crane was about to respond when they all heard a small cough behind them. Elisabeth stood watching, her hands folded daintily before her. "Dinner is getting cold."

There was no flicker of recognition in her eyes when she glanced at Arnaud. Not her husband, then. Who was this man, and why did Nico get the sense that he and Crane knew each other somehow?

"Leave now, before I have you driven off my land," Crane growled, slamming the door so hard it was a wonder he didn't break Arnaud's nose. Straightening his jacket, he turned to Elisabeth and took her arm.

"Nico," he called over his shoulder. "Watch from the win-

dow and be sure he leaves. Whatever you do, don't open the door for him again."

Nico nodded, unable to find his voice after witnessing the bizarre encounter.

But Lord Crane was already leading Elisabeth back to the dining room, speaking to her in a low, reassuring voice. "Come, my dear. Your hands are like ice. Nothing like a warm meal to get the blood pumping."

CHAPTER 3

It was Seraphina's midday visit with the king, who was in conversation with Lord Greymont. She sat to the side with her sisters and their ladies, embroidering a cushion. When she was a young girl in the confines of the Jewish quarter, she had daydreamed of being a lady. Not because she wanted a life of leisure, but because she wanted freedom.

Now she would give anything for her old life. Walling off the Jews was supposed to protect gentiles from their influence, but it also provided safety and community among the Jews. Then she and Dalia could go out into the woods and pick berries in the summer and mushrooms in the fall, or swim in the river when they were supposed to be doing the wash. She could still hear Dalia's giggle whenever she spoke of one of her many crushes.

"What are you thinking about, Princess Imogen?" Lord Greymont asked, coming to sit next to her. Jocelyn rose and absconded discreetly to a corner before Seraphina could catch her eye.

She flicked her gaze toward him for just a moment. "I'm

thinking about how wonderful this particular pillow will look amongst the dozens of nearly identical pillows in my room, Lord Greymont.” Beside her, an old black cat she’d named Fig stretched languidly before slinking away.

Greymont leaned in, as if he wanted a closer look, but Seraphina thought his eyes were considerably farther north than the pillow. “Lovely,” he declared before leaning back.

“Indeed,” she drawled. “Shouldn’t you be entertaining my father?”

“He looks like he’s getting on just fine.”

Seraphina turned and found that the king was, in fact, content. He was now playing a game of chess with Giselle, while Nina looked on in undisguised boredom. She was still bitter that she wasn’t allowed to wear the siren costume she’d chosen for Seraphina’s birthday masquerade. But a siren didn’t complement the angel costume the king had decided on for Seraphina. She had been fitted for her white gown, feathered wings, and the golden circlet that would sit atop her freshly hennaed hair earlier this morning.

It was Giselle who decided that Nina, Rose, and their ladies-in-waiting should go as flowers, determined to take back some control after the king had chosen Seraphina’s costume without consulting her. Nina may be the oldest, but Giselle was the craftiest, and she’d convinced their father of her plan before Nina had a chance to voice her opinion. Nina was to be an iris, Giselle a hyacinth, while Rose would go as her namesake blossom. *She* was happy, at least; she still got to wear pink.

“Now, then,” continued Lord Greymont. “We know you’re not that fond of embroidery, and the king is well in hand. What are you really thinking about?”

She wanted to tell him the truth. Not because she cared to confide in Lord Greymont, of all people, but because speaking Dalia's name out loud made her feel real. She had denied the existence of everyone she loved for nearly four years in what felt like the worst kind of betrayal. Seraphina hoped it was a relief to her parents that she'd been plucked from obscurity and sent to the castle—at least they would have died believing that their only child survived the plague—but she dishonored their memory by pretending they'd never lived.

The true princess had contracted the *mori roja* on a trip to a neighboring kingdom and died before she could return to Eldridge Hall. When Nina, Giselle, and Rose heard the news, they feared it would drive their already addled father straight into madness—as had the messenger who'd conveyed word of Imogen's death to the princesses first. Terrified of being trapped in a castle with their unpredictable and sometimes violent father after he'd ordered the walls closed to prevent the plague from reaching Eldridge Hall, they had done the only thing they could think of: create one of their father's beloved masquerades.

Seraphina remembered her last day outside the castle as if it were yesterday. She'd been scrounging around in the woods with Dalia, looking for anything edible, and her hands were covered in dark earth. They weren't supposed to leave the Jewish quarter, but as the plague struck towns closer and closer to Esmoor, the guards fled. At home it was all doom and gloom and panic, as everyone awaited the inevitable arrival of the plague. But out in the woods, it was like nothing had changed.

Dalia, so vibrant and joyful in Seraphina's memory, had

thrown a mushroom at her playfully, and it had left a smudge on Seraphina's cheek where it hit her. Her hair was in its usual loose braid over one shoulder, and she wore the shabbier of her two dresses. It was brown and plain, worlds removed from the gown she wore now, which was butter yellow and would have shown every stain, had she any reason to acquire one.

When a fine coach had traveled through the woods toward the city, they had followed it back. By the time they reached the Jewish quarter, people were already talking about how three noblewomen were passing around a portrait, asking if anyone knew the girl rendered in oils.

The women were offering a large reward for information. Seraphina's father found her in the crowd and immediately ordered her to the house, but people were staring and pointing at her. She hadn't understood why, having never seen the portrait herself. In good times her neighbors never would have turned on each other, but everyone was desperate now. Seraphina only had a moment to say goodbye to Dalia before she was ushered home.

Seraphina was horrified when the ladies and their attendants entered their house, and further mortified when one of them whispered to the other about the smudge on Seraphina's cheek, which she had quickly wiped away with her sleeve. That only made them giggle more.

Giselle, clearly the ringleader even then, whispered to her sisters that with a little hair dye and a bath, she would be perfect. Couldn't they look past the girl's *heritage* for a moment? Rose seemed afraid to touch anything and hardly said a word.

Finally, they came to some decision. "She'll do," Giselle said, though Seraphina still had no idea what for. Giselle handed

a large purse to Seraphina's father, who shook his head and refused to take the money. The fear didn't set in until her mother started to cry. The two large guards had to stoop to enter through their front door. One took a hold of her arm without a word. That was when her mother began to wail and her father fell to his knees, pleading with them not to take her.

"Just think of it as one less mouth to feed," Giselle had said, gathering up her skirts and hurrying out the door. The guards dragged Seraphina with them.

"Careful," Giselle called over her shoulder. "Don't bruise her. Father wouldn't like that."

Seraphina had never forgotten those words. It made her relish hurting herself all the more. Now she pressed a thumb to a fresh bruise on her wrist and smiled at Lord Greymont.

"I'm thinking about the ocean. I'm wondering if you've really seen it, or if you were just trying to secure the first dance at my birthday."

"I would never lie to you."

She set her embroidery down and caught a maid's eye, who hurried away to fetch tea. "All right, then. Let's play a game. It's called 'fact or fiction.' I will tell you something about myself, and you guess if it's true or false."

When his brow furrowed, he looked younger than his twenty-two years, more like the boys Seraphina had known. She had kissed two or three in her day, and though they had not been as handsome, they had seemed infinitely more real than Lord Greymont or any of the other nobles here.

"But I just told you I would never lie to you," he protested.

"It's part of the game. And now I get to see what you look like when you tell the truth, and when you don't."

He grinned, his brown-flecked-with-green eyes gleaming.

His skin, which Seraphina remembered had been a burnished bronze when she was first brought here, was a lighter shade of brown now, reminding Seraphina of Dalia's olive complexion. Imogen had been just as pale as she was now from the start, albeit with more freckles. "Very well."

She smiled her most charming smile. "My favorite fruit is a clementine."

He bit his lip for a moment, considering. "Fiction."

"How do you know?"

"Because you always choose the strawberry tart for dessert. And you eat every other part of the tart first, the crust and the cream, before you savor the strawberries. You eat them like you might never have one again."

Seraphina felt a blush creeping all the way up her neck and into her cheeks. It wasn't her fault Princess Imogen had eaten her strawberry tarts like a lusty squirrel. "My, aren't we observant."

"It's hard to look away from," he said, his voice pitched low.

She could have kissed the maid who set the tea down in front of them at that very moment, sparing her from having to respond.

Lord Greymont cleared his throat and sat back. "My turn," he said, glancing up at the maid as she handed him his tea. "Thank you, miss."

The maid startled, sloshing the tea into the saucer, but he pretended not to notice. "I sailed on a ship when I was eleven," he said to Seraphina. "From here to the Isle of Wye and back."

"Wye? What on earth for?"

"My father imported wine before the... Before. Every year he'd go to Wye and check on his vineyard. He let me go with

him, just the one time.” He sipped his tea, and when he set it down, he was grinning. “You believed every word of that, didn’t you?”

She blinked and realized she’d been staring. “I...well, yes. I suppose I did.”

“That’s because it was the truth.”

If the rumors were true, the plague had spread over the entire continent. The only places that would have been safe were islands, assuming no one brought it over on a ship. “Did your family go to Wye when the—”

“It’s your turn, Princess.”

Seraphina wanted to throttle him for cutting her off mid-sentence, until she noticed that the king was no longer playing chess. He had come to stand behind them and was watching from above, frowning beneath his beard. A stormy look had come into his usually placid blue eyes, and she realized what she’d been about to say.

She set her teacup down and rose, smoothing her gown to wipe the moisture from her palms. “Tell me, Father, who won the game?”

Nina, who was standing next to him, smiled. “Why, Father, of course. How can a princess be expected to compete with a master strategist?”

There were some lies even Seraphina was happy to indulge. The king was rotten at chess. “Oh, well done, Father,” she said, kissing him on the cheek. The princesses had spent weeks teaching her how to mimic their dead sister, from the way she kissed their father to calm his notorious temper, to the way she ate strawberry tarts. In truth, she didn’t care for strawberries. Clementines really were her favorite, though she hadn’t eaten one in years.

Placated, the darkness receded from the king's eyes as he held his arm out to his eldest daughter. "Nina can escort me today. Go back to your fun with Lord Greymont, my dear. I will see you at dinner."

After he'd gone, Seraphina took her seat again, releasing her breath slowly. She would have thought pretending to be someone else would get easier as time went on, but she only grew wearier with the passing years. To simply be herself was a luxury she'd taken for granted.

It took her a moment to realize that almost everyone had left the room. Rose and Giselle remained, playing a game of cards in a far corner. Jocelyn was observing Seraphina surreptitiously from another corner. Seraphina could never be left alone with a man, but Jocelyn knew how to be invisible.

She wasn't sure if Lord Greymont had been saving her from the king earlier or saving himself. It was forbidden to mention the plague inside the castle; anyone who attempted to escape was punished, though the attempts were short-lived after the first three servants were hanged. Everyone had to pretend that the plague had never come to Goslind at all. It was the only way to maintain the illusion, and to Seraphina's eyes, it was a role they were all happy to play. But if she was acting, maybe others were, too. It was impossible to know.

Or perhaps not impossible, after all.

"We can continue this game another time," he said, sensing the shift in her mood.

She had no idea if the king would ever willingly open the castle gates, but she couldn't go on like this forever. She had considered attempting an escape years ago, but she kept coming back to the words her father had whispered to her as she embraced him for the last time, the same thing the rabbi had

told them when the kosher food in the Jewish quarter ran out and some people refused to eat: *You shall guard your life.*

If Lord Greymont's family had a vineyard on an island, then perhaps they had a ship. And if Seraphina had access to a ship, she could get far, far away from King Stuart and his court.

"Just one more round," she said, squaring her shoulders with a smile. The king hated it when she frowned.

Greymont lowered his eyes in deference. "I am at your disposal."

The tea had gone cold, so she picked up a biscuit and nibbled daintily at the edge. It was unsweetened, as she'd expected. The sugar supply was finally running out, and if the dry goods were dwindling, it didn't bode well for their fresh food. "I am turning twenty years old in two weeks."

"Fact, of course."

Not even a second of hesitation. She met his gaze and held it, for far longer than was proper. "Are you sure that is your answer, Lord Greymont?"

He started to reply, then narrowed his eyes and leaned back against the sofa. "Why do I get the sense you're playing a different game than I am, Your Highness?"

There was something about his gaze that made Seraphina's pulse quicken. Convincing the king she was Imogen was almost shockingly simple—he had no reason to believe she wasn't his daughter, and he was half-mad to begin with. But she sometimes wondered how no one else at court noticed that she was a stand-in. Yes, Imogen had been the shiest of the princesses, and as fourth in line to inherit, she hadn't attracted the same attention as Nina and Giselle, or even Rose. But still, Seraphina was an *entirely different person*, for heaven's sake.

“If you must call me anything, call me Princess Imogen. Please. *Your Highness* always sounds so fussy and formal.”

He placed his hand on the sofa between them, so close one of his fingers brushed the fabric of her skirt. “Well, then, Princess Imogen.” His lips curled in a small smile. “If your birthday isn’t in two weeks, perhaps I can give you your gift sooner.”

Her gaze drifted from his to the finger touching her velvet gown. Seraphina had never given any thought to finding a romantic attachment in Eldridge. Diverting though a dalliance may have been, allowing anyone to get too close to her was dangerous. She was bound to slip up and reveal her true identity eventually.

But this lord wasn’t quite as dim as the others, and she knew enough of men to know he desired her. An ally at Eldridge Hall could be just what she needed; someone who would help her when the tower of lies came crumbling down around them. The plague *would* end, if it hadn’t already, and there would be worse consequences when the stores ran out than bland biscuits.

She let her hand brush his, just for a moment, as she gathered her skirt and stood. “You win,” she said as Rose and Jocelyn came rustling over.

He stood and cocked his head to the side. “Did I?”

“You were correct both times. Strawberries are my favorite fruit, and I am turning twenty in two weeks.”

“At the masquerade!” Rose smiled prettily, but Jocelyn’s eyes darted between Lord Greymont and Seraphina.

“I believe the game is still in play, Princess Imogen,” he said with an exaggerated bow. And then, in a whisper that tickled her shoulder as he passed by, “I still owe you a lie.”