

Celine sat on the edge of the moss-covered fountain, clutching a wilting rose in her hands. She felt a kinship to the flower: petals wrinkling with discomfort, a bloom drooping sadly on an aging stem. Disgust curled in her stomach as she recalled the memory of the portly man who had given it to her earlier that evening. His eyes had shone with desire in the golden light of the ballroom as he spilled common platitudes out of his thin-lipped mouth. His grubby hands grasped at the air while he asked for her first dance. She had declined with thinly veiled disdain and stormed out into the palace's darkened garden, where she now hid from the prying eyes of society. The sounds of merriment echoed hauntingly in the distance.

The stone fountain was cool beneath her, steadying her as she took a deep breath. The saccharine scent of decaying rose mingled unpleasantly with the cool night air. Her stomach churned as she attempted to tamp down the anxiety at the thought of her prospects. Despite being the diamond of the season her first year out, she was more akin to faded painting of what she used to be. Four years, a broken engagement for each, and her mother was endlessly parading her around like a prized sow. Her mother publicly blamed the engagements ending on bad finances or bad breeding, but Celine knew the truth. She did not simper for her fiances, she did not bat her eyes and smile prettily on their arm at balls. She was headstrong, and worse: she felt nothing at all for the men her mother had betrothed her to. Now the only men who wanted her were decrepit outcasts at the edge of society. She twirled one of her curls around her finger, a habit she could not kick despite the chiding from her despotic mother.

Celine flinched as someone cleared their throat behind her. She whirled around to see who had joined her in her hideaway; she was certain to draw her mother's ire if she were found alone with a man in the garden. Her shoulders slackened as she saw a woman appraising her with sharp grey eyes. Celine's breath caught in her chest as she took her in. It was as if the world had drained the color from the lethal beauty. She had skin as pale as paper, with hair that shone silver in the moonlight tied back in a white ribbon. Her eyes were as grey as a winter storm. The only contrasts were her lips painted in a red so dark it could be mistaken for blood, and a dress to match.

"What brings a lady such as yourself out to the garden?" The stranger asked. Her voice slid over Celine like ice, elegant and crisp, making her shiver.

"I could ask you the same thing. Surely all the men would like to dance with *you*," Celine retorted defensively. She only realized what she had said after the woman's lips curved into a smirk.

"And why is that? I thought this was perfectly reasonable. I needed some air. Although, two women, alone in a dark garden," She shrugged, her tone playful as her eyes flicked up and down Celine's figure. "What could go wrong?"

"It isn't considered improper for two women to be alone," Celine replied, standing from her seat and smoothing her midnight blue skirts with gloved hands. The movement was really to calm herself as her mind raced to unravel the woman's innuendo.

"There are plenty of things society would consider improper that two women alone could do," The woman mused, swishing closer. Celine had to struggle to keep her mouth from dropping open in surprise.

"Um, could you please repeat that?" Celine replied faintly. The air seemed to thrum with anticipation. At this distance, Celine could make out flecks of red contrasting grey eyes, giving them an eerie glow. "Surely you jest."

"Perhaps I need to be clearer," The woman reached out to tuck a strand of Celine's curly locks behind her ear. Her touch left fire in its wake, though her fingers were icy. "What do you think society would do to us if they found us locked in each other's embrace, here in the garden?"

"I am to be married off to a man," Celine's body felt distant as she managed to speak. The woman smiled knowingly as she plucked the rose from Celine's fingers, placing it behind her own ear.

Celine continued quietly and lowered her eyes, unable to bear the intensity of the stranger's gaze. "Listen, this is all we have to work with right now."

"Is it?" the woman placed her fingers under Celine's chin, forcing their eyes to meet. Celine could feel her breath in the distance between them, smell the metallic perfume the woman was wearing. Her heart thumped in her chest as the woman's eyes roved to her neck. "There are plenty of things in this world that men don't know about, that go undetected. You could be one of them. You could be *fearsome*." This close, Celine could see the red on her lips was, in fact-

"I-I didn't tell you my name," she squeaked, frozen in place. The woman's eyes flicked back to hers as the smile turned strained. She released Celine's face after a tense moment, her voice taking on a sinister tone.

"Think about it, my dear. I'll be waiting. Whether it be tomorrow, or after your fifth engagement falls through... when you want to be free. I'll be waiting."

Celine blinked, processing the alluring words as the woman strode away. When she finally found the words stuck in her throat, she ran out of the hedges after her.

But the woman had vanished, leaving Celine with the fading smell of rotting roses and the realization she had finally... *felt*.