

PROLOGUE

↔ The Prince ↔

When I finally reached her, all was completely still. The room was bathed in the kind of quiet where you couldn't hear a bee buzz or a toad croak even if you listened really, really hard. The dust motes hung motionless in the shafts of sunlight. The only sounds were my breath and my footfalls on the rug.

I gazed down at her, asleep on her bed of feather pillows. Never before had I seen beauty like this. Even if Mother had not long ago banned from the castle anything that might be considered pleasing to the eye, I would have never been prepared for this. Little did Mother know that tucked away on the grounds of our very own castle lay such loveliness.

The painting I had seen of the girl did not fully capture her true beauty. Her complexion was two part peaches and one part cream. Lips of cherry red. Raven-black hair, so silky it glowed. Her clothing was endearingly old-fashioned — layers of petticoats, a three-pointed collar, sleeves of lace. No one wore that anymore, but on her it looked fetching.

This was my moment. Here lay my destiny. I knew it as well as I knew my own name. (Okay, perhaps that last part was not exactly true because Mother had never given me a name. Nevertheless, I knew what I had to do.)

Before I got too nervous, I bent down and ever-so-gently let my lips fall upon hers. They felt as soft as they looked. While I had always assumed that the recipient of my first kiss would actually be awake and standing upright, it was pretty good as far as first kisses went.

I pulled away. At first, nothing happened. Then her eyelids began to flutter, and suddenly her eyes were wide open. I jumped back in surprise.

The girl sat bolt upright and stared at me. Her eyes were brighter than the bluest sky, although still a bit unfocused. She opened her mouth to speak, but only a squeak came out. She raised her hand to her neck in alarm, then cleared her throat a few times. She tried again. This time her voice was loud and clear.

“Pardon my rudeness,” she said, “but WHO THE HECK ARE YOU?”

“Me?” I asked, surprised. No one had ever asked me that question before.

“Yes *you*,” she said, looking wildly around the room. “Who are you?”