



Spectacular (Caraval #4)

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Category: YA&Teen

Description: Welcome, welcome back to the ENCHANTING WORLD of Caraval!

Return to the legendary magic and the whimsical wonder with this BEAUTIFULLY ILLUSTRATED holiday novella from #1 NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING author Stephanie Garber.

Snowflakes are falling.

Invitations are arriving.

And holiday magic is swirling in the capital city of the Meridian Empire.

It's Great Holiday Eve Eve. Scarlett Dragna is planning a spectacular Holiday celebration for the city. Donatella is searching for the perfect gift. Julian is looking ridiculously handsome in green. And Legend . . .

Well, sadly, Legend is not fond of the Great Holiday. Tella is hoping her perfect gift will change his mind. Unfortunately, she hasn't found this perfect gift just yet. But it is Great Holiday Eve Eve. Surely there's some holiday magic swirling around.

Set after Stephanie Garber's #1 New York Times bestselling Caraval series, this delightful novella will take readers on the ultimate holiday adventure full of clockwork boys, poisoned candy, impish snow globes, merriment, and—if Tella gets her way—love.

Gorgeously illustrated by Rosie Fowinkle, Spectacular is the perfect edition for collectors, readers, dreamers, and lovers of holiday magic.

Total Pages (Source): 19

Snow Globes and Granny's Cookies

Later, it would be obvious that uncanny things were afoot in the city of Valenda. Most people inside the famed city couldn't see what was happening. But, as with many things in life, those watching from the outside could see it all perfectly.

After the Great Holiday was over, ship captains who had been at sea would say, "It looked as if a great glass cloche had been placed over the whole of the city, turning it into an enormous swirling snow globe. I swear it on my grandpappy's teeth!"

The swearing wouldn't be necessary.

Even before the Great Holiday began, ships had already stopped arriving at Valenda's port. Although few people noticed this amid all the holiday fuss and merriment.

There was only one young sailor at the docks who thought himself too sensible for holiday cheer. He was only seventeen, but he wore a smart navy hat that made him a full two inches taller.

Unlike the rest in the city, who all seemed to have their heads stuck in candy cane clouds, this sensible sailor had noticed the missing ships, and he'd gone off to find another levelheaded person to tell. He'd marched importantly through the disturbingly festive port with a list of ships that had failed to arrive.

He wasn't going to be distracted by all the larger-than-life candy canes that now lined

the streets, the spiced cider carts that seemed to be everywhere, or the people spontaneously breaking into song.

But then he saw it. Sitting in the middle of the street was an enormous gingerbread house piping cinnamon smoke out of a chimney covered in delicate curves of intricate white icing.

The sailor stopped in his tracks.

It was just like the cookie houses his granny used to make—though his granny’s didn’t have the magical cinnamon smoke, and her gingerbread houses were always far too small to step inside of. But every other detail was there. The pastel gumdrops covering the gigantic roof, the sparkling silver sugar sprinkles dusting the large windows, the swirling red-and-white peppermint candies lining the oversize door.

For a full minute, he couldn’t move.

It had been two Holidays ago that his granny had passed. And it was easier to pretend that the Great Holiday wasn’t happening than to celebrate without her.

The sailor finally shook himself. He reminded himself of what he needed to do. He needed to report the missing ships. But then the gingerbread door cracked open and he swore he heard his granny’s voice: “Come in out of the snow, Pierre. I’ve made some fresh hot chocolate and your favorite cookies.”

The scent of butterspice stars with nutmeg icing wafted through the air.

Could she really be here? thought Pierre. It was not a sensible thing to think. But Pierre was starting to think that being sensible during the Great Holiday was actually quite foolish.

“Come inside, sweet boy,” Granny called.

What else was there for Pierre to do?

He couldn’t resist seeing Granny once more. And he really didn’t want to say no to his favorite cookies.

He also might have been just a little bit bewitched.

Pierre’s was one of many peculiar stories that would spread after the Great Holiday ended.

But the most popular story, of course, would be that of Princess Donatella Dragna.

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Great Holiday Eve Eve

D onatella Dragna was unaware that she was living underneath the dome of a giant snow globe.

All Tella knew was that it was Great Holiday Eve Eve and...

It was snowing inside her sister's palace?

Tella briefly stopped walking. Her frost-blue skirts swished around the toes of her shoes as the air around her swirled with glittering silver shimmer and snow.

This falling snow inside the palace was new. Not that Tella was surprised. Every day for the past few weeks, Tella had woken up to find that her sister had added some new and elaborate decoration to her palace. Each wall and hearth and doorway was decked with strings of golden bells, candied cranberry sprigs, wreaths of Unicorn Holly imported from the Magnificent North, and now there were enchanted snowflakes that fell, fell, fell... yet never quite touched the ground or Tella's perfectly curled hair.

"Watch out!" someone cried.

Tella ducked just in time for a snowball to fly over her head.

A stable boy dressed like a gingerbread man bolted past, followed by a pair of maids

dressed like snow angels. Their felted shoes softly pitter-pattered as they scurried by.

“Sorry, Your Highness!” both maids cried breathlessly. But they didn’t stop chasing the gingerbread boy, who threw balls of snow over his shoulder as he continued to run.

As someone who appreciated theatrics, Tella was the last person to accuse anyone of going over the top. But she felt as if her sister was creeping close.

This was Scarlett’s first Great Holiday as empress, and she had commenced preparations at the start of the Cold Season. It had begun when she renamed her palace Nutcracker Castle. Then she’d gone on to change the names of everything inside the castle as well.

The Holiday monikers were only supposed to be temporary. But Tella wondered if that would be the case as she reached the pair of double red doors that would lead her to the royal gardens.

Two guards, dressed up in Holiday uniforms as shiny as candy-red apples, stood a little straighter as she arrived at their post, and then they quickly opened the doors.

Out here, in the palace gardens, the snowflakes weren’t enchanted. They didn’t stop before they reached Tella’s hair and dampened the shoulders of her winter-blue cloak.

She’d been told it didn’t snow much in Valenda, and yet for the past two weeks, the snow never seemed to stop. It fell quietly as Tella passed a row of shimmering ice sculptures.

There were frozen ballerinas in snow flake skirts. Carved ice trees full of frosted ornaments. A fluffle of luck bunnies in frozen crowns. A dazzling pair of horses

attached to a bejeweled sled driven by a snowman. Then there was the enormous Holiday clock, which actually appeared to be ticking, counting down the minutes until tomorrow night.

Tella shivered with nerves as she hurried up the steps to pass the final outdoor sculpture: a shimmering statue of the Merry Queen: Monarch of the Great Holiday.

The Merry Queen wore a cloak of stars, a crown of sunbeams, and in her hand she held her wand of wishes. The statue appeared to be positioned mid-wave, but the real Merry Queen was said to wave her wand only once, at exactly midnight on Great Holiday Eve.

The story went that anyone who was pure of heart and made a wish at the exact moment the Merry Queen waved her wand would find their wish come true.

Tella had never had a wish come true, which was fine with her, since Tella preferred not to be too pure of heart.

Nevertheless, as she passed the Merry Queen ice sculpture, Tella quietly made a wish—just in case the Holiday queen was more real than myth and was also in the mood to grant a wish to a girl who probably didn't deserve it.

After passing the Merry Queen, Tella finally entered the Holly Jolly Holiday Ballroom. Or was it the Jolly Holly Holiday Ballroom?

Tella couldn't quite get it straight. There were too many Holiday name changes, and she swore half the names had the words jolly or holly.

Once inside, Tella carefully wove her way around snowmen made of marshmallow fluff and ladders with servants hanging bunting formed of glittering leaves, crimson berries, and fragrant cinnamon sticks wrapped in golden ribbon.

A minstrel was singing the classic “Dancing Gingerbread” song as everyone worked, making it seem like the party had already begun. Tella could hear laughter trip down from the mezzanine level as she reached the center of the ballroom, where finally she found her sister.

“It looks absolutely wonderful!” Scarlett exclaimed, clapping happily as she watched an ice sculptor finish carving a rose on the great ice carousel that Scarlett had commissioned for tomorrow’s ball.

The carousel was nearly two stories tall, covered in jumping horses and unicorns, great fluffy wolves, proud stags with star-strewn antlers, mermaids and mermen, bears wearing bells, and a handful of snow sleds large enough for entire families to ride, and lots and lots of roses. The entire carousel was sparkling white and red ice, and lined in a gorgeous row of elegant ice roses that glittered like diamonds when the carousel spun. They crowned the top of the carousel, and the poles of the carousel, and the steps leading up to the platform of the carousel.

Carousels weren’t typically part of the Great Holiday, but Scarlett had insisted on having one. She said the carousel was for the children who’d be attending the Spectacular.

But Tella wasn’t certain she believed her sister.

The Great Holiday had always been Scarlett’s favorite day of the year. As a child, she had preferred it to her own birthday, the Hot Season Fair, the Growing Season Festival, and the Harvest Night Market. For weeks, Scarlett would make paper ornaments to decorate her room and paper chains to count down the days.

Tella used to think the Great Holiday was Scarlett’s favorite because their father always traveled during that time. But now, looking at all her sister’s preparations, it was clear that Scarlett truly loved the Holiday for itself. In addition to the ice

carousel, the ballroom was filled with stations set up for fishing presents out of ponds with large candy canes, huts for crafting Holiday crowns and necklace garlands, and booths for topping hot chocolate with every confection a person might think of, from dollops of caramel cream to sticks of fluffy red cotton candy.

It wasn't so much an empress's dream as it was a child's dream—the child that Scarlett had never quite gotten to be while living under the same roof as their father.

Tella was happy to see her sister finally bring one of her childhood fantasies to life. And she really hated to spoil it.

Tella did not want to be the destroyer of dreams or the wrecker of holidays.

But there was no other choice.

If Scarlett did not change the date of the Great Holiday, then Tella's life would be ruined. Over. Ended. It would be a catastrophic, disastrous, earth-shattering mess.

“Ahem.” Tella cleared her throat.

Scarlett jumped and clutched her chest as she turned in a swirl of magical skirts. Today her gown was pure Holiday white with a sprinkle of slowly falling red snowflakes.

“Tella, you surprised me,” she said breathlessly. “What are you doing here? And—” Scarlett darted a look over Tella's shoulder. “Where are your guards?”

“Don't worry about them. They're perfectly safe. I took one of the passages out of my room. I imagine the guards are probably still standing outside my door, thinking that I spend far too much time sleeping or primping, or doing whatever silly things they imagine princesses do.”

Scarlett frowned. "I thought we talked about this."

"We did," Tella said brightly. "And I still don't agree that I need to be watched every second. No one who has ever tried to kill me has succeeded, and I'm far too much trouble to kidnap." Tella waggled her brows.

Scarlett didn't scowl, but the red snowflakes on her white gown fell a little faster and turned a heated shade that Tella would have described as particularly frustrated.

"Being a ridiculous amount of trouble is not the same as being invincible," Scarlett said. "Tomorrow is Great Holiday Eve. Think of what a gift you could be if some group of bandits found you tromping about alone and decided to take you hostage and bring you back to their leader."

"One could only wish that something exciting like that would happen." Tella sighed.

Scarlett pursed her lips. Again, it wasn't exactly a scowl. But for just a second, Tella thought her sister looked a little nervous. Her cheeks were pink, but her lips were nearly white.

"Be careful what you wish for," Scarlett warned. "Holiday magic is a real thing." Her eyes darted up toward a nearby tree crowned with a doll that resembled the Merry Queen.

"The Merry Queen is just a myth," Tella said.

Scarlett made a delicate snort. "I've heard people say the same thing about you."

Tella grinned widely. "See what I mean? I am basically invincible. You don't need to worry about bandits running off with me. However..." Tella softened her voice. She really didn't want her sister to worry too much. But she needed her to worry a little.

“I might be in a small stitch of trouble.”

“What kind of trouble?” Scarlett asked.

“Nothing that my big sister, who is the empress of an extremely powerful empire, can’t fix.”

Scarlett narrowed her eyes. “Does this have anything to do with that card game from last week?”

“Which one?”

“The one where you bet one of the head guards a half dozen baby dragons from the Magnificent North?”

“Oh, no,” Tella said. “I already got that sorted. I don’t need any dragons.” Although she actually would have liked a tiny one for a pet, but this was not the time to ask. Tella took a deep breath and looked up at her sister hopefully. “I just need you to change the date of the Great Holiday.”

It's Really Not the Thought That Counts

The ballroom shook. An ornament broke. Tella heard the glass shatter above her, followed by the servants' sharp exhales, and the quick scurrying sounds of cleaning up.

A flicker of something like worry creased Scarlett's forehead.

The snow globe had been tilted.

A flurry of snowflakes blew into the Holly Jolly Holiday Ballroom and danced around the ice carousel as Tella held her breath.

She was unaware the world had just briefly tipped to the side. As far as Tella was concerned, her entire world was about to fall apart, so it didn't seem strange to her in the least that she'd briefly lose her footing as she waited for her sister to answer.

Scarlett replied diplomatically, "I can't change the date of a holiday."

"Of course you can," Tella said. "You're the empress of the Meridian Empire. You can do whatever you like. It's just a holiday. If another royal created the holiday, then you can surely move it a few measly days as a favor for your sweet baby sister."

Scarlett's expression tightened. It was subtle—a slow intake of breath, a quiet press of her lips. Scarlett wasn't moved to anger often. But just now Tella could see that

she'd struck an unexpected chord.

"I know a lot of people don't think holidays matter, but they do," Scarlett said. "People need holidays. They need happiness, they need joy, and they need reasons to give and to love. You know I would do most anything for you, Donatella, but I can't do this to everyone else. The Great Holiday is only two days away. Everyone in the Empire is preparing for it. Tonight, little children all over won't be able to sleep, because they'll be so excited for Great Holiday Eve. Don't you remember when you were a child, you'd spend all night singing songs to the Merry Queen about what you planned on wishing for?"

"I only did that once," Tella grumbled.

"Well, maybe you should try doing it again this year, because I'm not changing the date."

"Please," Tella begged, clasping both hands together as she pleaded. "You're right. It's not just a holiday. I know that, and I also know this is a large request. But I wouldn't ask if it wasn't absolutely vital to my survival."

"I thought you said you were only in a small stitch of trouble?" Scarlett's eyebrows slowly drew together. She looked as if she wasn't sure whether she should be genuinely frightened that her sister was in trouble, or frustrated because of the extreme nature of the request.

Both were arguably valid responses. Although Tella doubted her sister would see it that way once she heard her full story.

Scarlett hadn't even heard part of the story and already she was looking more skeptical than concerned. The white of her dress turned an unhappy shade of gray as she asked, "What's wrong, Tella?"

Nervously, Tella reached toward a nearby Holiday tree festooned with small white candles and dotted with colorful sugar cookie ornaments. She stole a smallish ornament shaped like a mitten and nibbled one corner before she admitted, “I haven’t found a gift for Legend yet.”

“You... need a gift for Legend?” Scarlett looked immediately disappointed. For a minute she didn’t say another word.

Tella could easily imagine some of the words that her older sister was thinking—selfish, careless, inconsiderate.

But Scarlett would be wrong.

Tella had considered other people, and it wasn’t that she believed she was more important or more deserving than all these others. But she did imagine that she wanted things more than them. So many people seemed content to sit in their homes and wait for things to happen—for knocks to pound on doors, for letters to arrive, for magic to swirl down through chimneys and turn cottages into castles.

Tella believed these things could happen—anything could happen. But in her opinion, truly wonderful things were also far more likely to happen if they were given a nudge or a healthy shove. She believed if people wanted things as much as she did, they wouldn’t simply sit by and wait for a chance. They would knock down doors and crash through windows. They would battle their fears as if they were dragons. They would do more than they’d believed they were capable of in pursuit of their dreams.

Tella wasn’t being selfish. She was being passionate and proactive.

“Tella,” Scarlett said calmly. “I know this is the first Great Holiday that you and Legend are celebrating together, but what you get him really doesn’t matter. It’s the thought that counts.”

“If you think that, then you don’t know my brother,” said a familiar voice. Julian’s voice. The love of Scarlett’s life.

Scarlett’s eyes filled with hearts as he swaggered closer, a dark green cape fluttering around his shoulders as his mouth tilted into a smirk. “Everything is a game with Legend, including gifts.”

“See?” Tella said. “Julian agrees with me. I need to get Legend the best gift that anyone has ever given him.”

Scarlett grimaced at her sister. “I feel as if you’re missing the entire point of this holiday. It’s not about winning or giving the best gift. It’s really about love.”

So is this, Tella wanted to say. It’s all about love!

Stupid, stupid love.

Tella watched the way that Julian and Scarlett swayed closer to each other without even seeming to realize it. Their knuckles brushed and then suddenly they were holding hands.

Tella and Legend had been like that, too. After Legend had first said he loved her, he’d been unable to keep his hands off her, always touching her, holding her, kissing her. But now...

Now Tella didn’t even know where Legend was. As the Great Holiday had drawn closer, he had grown more distant. Legend spent far more time working than he did with her now. He’d told her he was busy preparing for the next Caraval. But she had a difficult time believing that was all that he was doing, especially since he never talked about any of his plans for this alleged future Caraval.

Legend was pulling away. Closing off his heart.

When Legend had fallen in love with Tella, he'd given up his full immortality. He possessed magic—he could still weave his flawless illusions—but he could also die. And if one of his players died during Caraval, Legend could no longer bring them back from the dead.

Loving her had cost him, and Tella feared that Legend was regretting it now. This was the true reason why her gift mattered so much, why the entire Great Holiday mattered.

Tella needed to prove to Legend that love was worth more than anything else in the entire world. She needed to make sure that he didn't regret his choice. Therefore, she needed to find a gift that would show him how very much she loved him and knew him.

The problem was that a part of her feared she perhaps didn't truly know him, after all. If she really knew him, then shouldn't she have already found him the perfect gift?

"There's still time," Scarlett said reasonably. "You have a day and a half before everyone exchanges gifts at midnight tomorrow."

Julian snickered. "That's not nearly enough time."

Scarlett turned toward him. They were already close, but now they were mere inches apart as she tilted her head and gave him a smile that was full of both sugar and spice. "If you don't think my sister can do this on her own, then maybe we should help her?"

Julian looked as if he'd rather eat a handful of broken ornaments, but of course he would never say that to Scarlett. He smiled down at her adoringly. He never gazed at

anyone but her like this. His brown eyes looked as soft as they could for a scoundrel like Julian, as he calmly replied, “That would be cheating, Crimson.”

“It’s not as if Legend plays fair,” argued Scarlett.

“Exactly!” Tella agreed.

Although her true fear was less that Legend was going to win this particular game, but that he wasn’t playing at all, regardless of what Julian said.

Legend had told Tella he didn’t really much care for the Great Holiday, and despite her best snooping efforts, Tella had not found a single gift.

This was why love was stupid. It made her worry about things she’d never worried about before.

And yet, she couldn’t stop herself. Tella wondered if this was how it felt to be Scarlett, who worried all the time.

Another flutter of snow blew into the ballroom. This time it was dusted with silver that sounded like bells as it swirled around Scarlett’s arms and dusted Julian’s cape.

“Have you tried all the Holiday fairs?” asked Scarlett.

“Every single one. I’ve also visited Candy Cane Court, Sugarplum Way, and Snow Angel Lane.”

“You’ll never find a gift at those places,” said Julian, his cape still fluttering because of a pair of snowflakes that were a little more spirited than the rest. He swatted them quickly before saying, “If a vendor is selling dozens of them from a pushcart, it’s not a gift for my brother.”

“Have you tried Garland Street?” asked Scarlett.

“Is that the one where they sell all the eggnog?” asked Tella.

“I think that’s Nutmeg Alley,” said Julian with a frown.

“Garland Street is a little out of the way,” said Scarlett. “And its most famous shop is only open for one day.”

“If it’s famous, why have I never heard of it?” asked Tella.

“The street has fallen a bit out of fashion as of late,” said Scarlett. “I haven’t been there myself, but Aiko * told me about it when I was first trying to think of a gift for you. She said that a hundred years ago, Garland Street was the only street where anyone shopped. It had the best candies, the prettiest hats and gowns and stockings, and the greenest Holiday trees. But it was really known for Mr. Garland’s Toy Chest.”

“This sounds like a children’s story.”

“It probably is,” said Scarlett. “Every year, Mr. Garland’s Toy Chest opened for one day only on Great Holiday Eve Eve. Aiko said that people would start lining up the week before, turning Garland Street into one of the merriest places in all of Valenda as they waited for the Toy Chest to unlock its doors.

“It’s said that no two toys inside were alike. Mr. Garland spent all year creating them, and when the shop opened each year on Great Holiday Eve Eve, people were let in one at a time and given the chance to buy one gift, and one gift only, from Mr. Garland’s collection.”

“That doesn’t sound like a smart way to do business,” Tella said under her breath.

“And yet it worked,” Scarlett chimed. “Every year, before the sun would go down on Great Holiday Eve Eve, all of the items were sold.”

“So then why did it stop being popular?” Tella asked. “Did Mr. Garland kill someone with one of his dolls?”

“Oh no, Mr. Garland never hurt anyone.” Scarlett’s expression turned somber. “But eventually, he died. No one knows for sure how, or even exactly when. The story goes that about fifty years ago, the week before Great Holiday Eve Eve, just as people were beginning to line up in front of the shop, a new sign appeared that said Under New Management. Then just beneath it was a framed letter from Mr. Garland. He had died and left the shop to his toys.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about this.” Tella grimaced.

“You’re not alone in that,” said Julian. With a smirk, he reached toward the Holiday tree and stole a sugar cookie ornament that looked like a jester-in-a-box painted with red and gold icing. “The Toy Chest still opens up every year,” he said, “and every year it’s supposedly full of new magnificent creations. But many people are too afraid to buy them. They worry about where the toys all come from, and what they might do if taken home.”

“Would Legend be afraid of one of these toys?” asked Tella.

Julian snorted. “If my brother is ever afraid of a toy, then he no longer deserves to be called Legend.”

“Well then,” Tella said. “I suppose I’m going to Garland Street.”

“Just make sure you take your guards!” called Scarlett.

But Tella was already walking away.

If Only...

Once Tella was halfway across the ballroom, Scarlett and Julian shared a look. They did this a lot. Julian, in particular, could never seem to take his eyes off Scarlett. He'd often watch her from across the room, just waiting for her to look back. Then he would wink or smile, or give her a look that said, Can we please slip away from everyone else?

But this was not one of those looks.

This was a look that might have changed things for Donatella Dragna, if only she had taken a moment to turn around and see it.

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Welcome to Garland Street

When the snowflakes start to taste like sugar

And when the carolers begin their Holiday songs

Look for gingerbread men dancing down the merriest lane

And you'll know the Great Holiday has begun...

The sound of carolers singing in harmony greeted Tella as soon as she stepped onto Garland Street. The sidewalks were covered in the sort of snow she thought would crunch beneath her boots, but it was so soft she could feel her feet slowly sinking.

Every shop was a lustrous white with rows of cheery red rosebushes that lined the snow-dotted paths leading to doors with perky welcome signs and gleaming golden handles.

The windows were all trimmed in garnet-red bunting or bright green garland that filled the air with the fresh, crisp scent of Holiday trees.

It was perfectly lovely.

But it didn't actually feel perfect.

As Tella took a few more steps over snow that still didn't crunch beneath her boots, she sensed a peculiar air of otherness to the street, as if the shops weren't really shops but pieces of a porcelain town that had been plucked from a giant's window display and used for decoration.

Scarlett had said Mr. Garland's Toy Chest was open for only one day out of the year. But Tella wouldn't have been surprised to learn that the entire street only existed for this one day. That before this moment, Garland Street hadn't been here at all, and that after tonight, it would disappear once more. The shop, the street, the carolers— poof! In the morning, they would all be gone, leaving nothing but a few errant snowdrifts.

Tella imagined that if she returned tomorrow, this picturesque scene would be replaced with crowded streets lined in narrow shops packed as close as matches in a box and crawling with pushcart vendors crying out the prices of their wares.

There were no pushcart vendors here today, no street children tossing snowballs at shoppers. Tella didn't even spy so much as a stray cat.

This is wrong, said a tiny voice inside her head. You shouldn't be here, it added.

But warnings like this only made Donatella Dragna more curious.

The first shops she passed all sold sweets.

The Gumdrop Palace had displays of enormous apothecary jars full of brightly wrapped candies. They were all topped with gold-dusted lids that had delicate labels attached to each one.

Tella wanted the labels to promise that the candies did magical things, like turn your eyes into stars as you ate them, or make everything you said sound a little bit sweeter.

She didn't want to give Legend candy for the Holiday. But if the candies in the shops were magical, then it would, at least, have made her feel as if she were headed in the right direction.

Tragically, the labels promised ordinary things, such as peppermint candies and red-flavored licorice. Although, Tella didn't think red was actually a flavor.

She hoped that Mr. Garland's Toy Chest would have more inspired offerings.

Tella took a cold breath as she neared the end of the street. The toy store was smaller than she had expected. Unlike the other shops on the lane, which all looked as if they might not have existed until today, Mr. Garland's Toy Chest looked as if it had always been here.

Tella imagined the little store sprouting up at the beginning of time. She pictured the cranberry-red door growing up slowly like a tree and then forming windows and walls and a quaint little roof. Everything was red and white and green and gold.

The gold tinsel hanging across the windows made her think of leaves that grew in winter and would fall away in the spring.

Behind one tall window stood the greenest Holiday tree Tella had ever seen, with perfect white packages sitting beneath, tied up in crisp red bows. The other window had packages as well, but instead of sitting at the base of a tree, they circled the feet of a life-size porcelain ballerina.

The ballerina wore a sparkling white tutu with Holiday bells lining the skirt. One arm was posed above her head, the other was curved around her waist, and both were covered in red gloves and attached to golden strings that went up, up, up to a marionette's cross.

There was no one holding the cross. Yet Tella watched the ballerina slowly turn on the tips of her toes as the golden marionette strings began to move.

There must have been some clockwork in her.

Or maybe she wasn't a toy at all?

Tella had assumed the ballerina was a toy because she was standing in a window. But the longer Tella watched her, the more lifelike the ballerina looked. Her skin and her hair and the graceful way she held herself, all of it looked human, except for her wide unblinking eyes.

Another passerby ooh ed before entering the shop. But Tella felt vaguely disappointed.

She had seen much stranger things than a lifelike doll, or a very doll-like person.

Tella had battled ghosts and death; she'd seen people trapped inside playing cards. This realistic toy was less impressive than it should have been.

But maybe there would be more exciting things inside the shop.

Tella started toward the door, until she saw something else in the window—

A reflection of a black top hat.

Immediately, she spun around, blond curls whipped across her face as her heart began to race.

How Not to Lose the Love of Your Life

It was silly how just the sight of a top hat had the power to make Tella's heart pound.

She both loved and hated the effect that Legend had on her. She had never wanted anyone to have power over her like this.

Tella could still remember how Legend had looked the morning after their first kiss. They had both fallen asleep on the forest floor, but not even a blade of grass had clung to his polished boots the next day. Dressed in inky shades of black, without even so much as a loose cravat, Legend had looked like a dark wingless angel that had been tossed from the heavens and landed on his feet.

She had thought that at some point her impression of him would change, that eventually he'd seem less perfect, less untouchable—less like an ephemeral dark dream that you weren't supposed to fall in love with, the kind of dangerous dream that easily could break her if he wished—now that she had let down her guard and opened up her heart.

She didn't believe Legend planned to break her today.

Yet Tella felt incredibly fragile as they stood in front of Mr. Garland's Toy Chest. She was on the crisp sidewalk and he was in the cobbled street. She told herself not to look at his hands, not to check if he had any packages.

But she couldn't help herself.

She looked at his hands.

Empty and empty.

Quickly she snuck a look in the direction of his pockets, to see if she detected the outline of a small box.

There was nothing.

There was only Legend, dressed in all black, from the silk cravat around his neck to the tips of his polished black boots. Tella had a fleeting thought that the phrase tall, dark, and handsome needed to be changed to tall, dark, and Legend.

Once again, her heartbeat pattered, fast and hard.

Her lips ached as she waited for him to lean in....

Glittering snowflakes swirled around them, making it the perfect moment for kissing. Although, Tella genuinely believed that almost every moment was perfect for kissing.

Kisses were perfect ways to say hello and goodbye.

Kisses were perfect for thank-yous.

Kisses were excellent for celebrating, and they were even better for taking away pain.

Speaking of pain, Tella's lips continued to ache as she waited for Legend to kiss her hello.

He smiled at her slowly, one corner of his mouth leisurely hitching up. But he didn't move any closer to her. And after a few aching seconds, Tella felt that it was too late for her to move closer to him.

Legend hadn't outright rejected her attempt to kiss him, since she hadn't actually made a true attempt at a kiss. But the most perfect moment for kissing had passed and he hadn't tried to kiss her... which made her feel as if she should not try to kiss him now.

Tella told herself she was being utterly ridiculous. She told herself just to kiss him already, if that's what she wanted. He had given up immortality for her.

But was it just her imagination, or was Legend looking a little more immortal now?

Legend was the stupid kind of handsome that usually made girls—and a number of boys—lose their senses just a little bit if they got too close. He had one of those jaws that was perfectly sharp and strong. A jaw that said, Hello there, I know you want to touch me. I know you want to trace me with your finger and then maybe with your lips.

Which Tella had done before.

She knew Legend well enough to know there was definitely extra magic clinging to him now.

She thought she might have been imagining it before, because of his handsomeness and his Legendness, and the way his bronze skin always seemed to shimmer. But those were things that were always there.

There was something else there now... something Tella couldn't quite put her finger on. Possibly, in part, because her fingers were growing numb as she and Legend

stood there in the snow not kissing.

And so, Tella did what she always did when she felt nervous or scared or any other emotion that she didn't particularly want to deal with.

She decided to flee.

"As glad as I am to see you, my love, I'm afraid that I don't have time to dally on the street." She turned to go.

Legend grabbed her wrist and spun her back around to face him. Her blood rushed from the combination of his touch and the spinning and the consuming sudden nearness as he asked, "Where are you going off to so fast?"

I'm leaving because you didn't kiss me, she thought.

But she said, "None of your business."

"You are always my business, Donatella." Legend's hand slowly moved up her arm and under her cloak, sparking as he traced the bare skin between her glove and her sleeve.

She might have thought he was trying to torment her. But he always had this effect on her.

Tella used to think that kisses were like copper coins, things to be used for quick bits of fun. Then she had kissed Legend.

Kissing Legend hadn't been fun. It had felt essential. Before that night, Tella's basic needs had consisted of eating and breathing and sleeping. Then the list had changed to eating and breathing and sleeping and kissing Legend's lips.

Even now, although they weren't kissing at all, she was melting under his touch.

Yet he remained perfectly cool as he said, "Are you running away to buy me a gift?"

Tella smoothed her features into something that she hoped was fetchingly demure and collected. "You really think everything is about you."

"Only because it usually is." He smirked.

It was an unfairly beautiful smirk. The kind of smirk that would have made a glorious smile if he had been just a little less cocky.

Tella shook her head. "You think far too highly of yourself."

The look in Legend's dark eyes changed. If it were anyone else, Tella would have said there was a twinkle. But twinkles weren't supposed to make people nervous, and this glimmering, magical look made her quite anxious.

"I find that amusing coming from the girl who begged her sister to change the date of a holiday because she was afraid she couldn't get me a nice enough gift."

Tella felt her cheeks burn red. Silently she cursed Julian, knowing he must have been the one who told Legend of her dilemma.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she lied.

She told herself to pull away from his hand. But he looked as if he suddenly had something important to tell her.

"You don't have to get me a gift, Donatella. I'm not really much for the Great Holiday." Legend turned down his mouth as a horse jingled past pulling a sleigh full

of carolers singing about a runaway present. “I thought I told you that,” he said softly.

“I know you said that,” Tella said. “But I still wanted to get you something. I—”

This might have been an excellent time for her to tell Legend that she loved him and she wanted to show it to him with a perfect gift.

But one of the many mistakes Tella had recently made was to purchase and read a booklet titled *How Not to Lose the Love of Your Life*.

The book was full of terrible advice.

Tella knew this, even as she read it. But that didn’t stop her from reading it cover to cover and then latching on to some of the author’s “wisdoms.”

Beware of saying “I love you.”

Don’t say it too soon.

Don’t say it first.

Don’t say it at the wrong time.

And suddenly this felt like the wrong time.

And so instead of telling Legend she loved him, Tella found herself hastily saying, “Your brother told me everything was a game with you, including gifts.”

“Julian says a lot of things.” Legend’s frown deepened.

He didn’t say anything else about gifts.

But as Tella watched him, she was fairly certain she knew what he was thinking.

Legend hadn't gotten her any type of gift at all. When he'd told her that he wasn't much for the Great Holiday, he'd really been saying that he didn't like it all, and he hoped she didn't expect him to celebrate with her.

It was just what she'd feared.

Tella could feel her heart sinking as she stood there on the snowy sidewalk. She tried not to let it show. She didn't want him to go out now and get her a gift out of pity or fear. She wanted one given to her out of love. She didn't even care what it was, as long as it was from Legend's heart.

But standing there now, watching as his expression continued to shutter, Tella feared he'd done something to his heart. That he'd locked it in an iron box as if it were a maiden in a tower whom he didn't want anyone to touch.

"I should leave." Legend dropped her hand. His face was unreadable as he pulled away.

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"I have work to do for the next Caraval."

"But it's Great Holiday Eve Eve. Do you really need to work today?" she asked. Then, of course, she felt immediately foolish.

In *How Not to Lose the Love of Your Life*, it said, You should never have to ask for anything. Men should be able to read your mind.

Again, she knew in her heart it was bad advice. But the little booklet was currently in

her pocket. Another one of her bad decisions was to carry it around with her, and maybe she couldn't help but think that maybe its words were a little bit true....

If Legend was truly her true love, wouldn't he know that she wanted him to choose her over Caraval? And that she wanted a Holiday gift? Despite the fact he wasn't much for the Holiday?

"I'm very sorry, Tella, but there are some urgent things I need to take care of outside of the city. I only came to find you here to tell you that I'll try to make it back in time for your sister's ball tomorrow."

Never Take Candy from a Clockwork Boy

T ella felt the world quake beneath her boots as Legend walked away. Snow kicked up from the ground and swirled in a frantic whirl, as if it agreed that it would be a terrible mistake to let him leave.

Don't let him walk away.

Don't let him walk away.

Don't let him walk away, Tella told herself.

She pictured chasing after him. She imagined tossing a snowball at the back of his head and starting a fight that would end with both of them rolling in the snow and kissing, and then kissing even more as they lay there until the sky turned dark and her limbs turned so cold that he had to give her his jacket. Then, of course, he would grow cold too, and they'd probably have to stop at an abandoned cottage, where there just happened to be a fire crackling in the fireplace and thick quilts piled on the floor.

She'd help him with taking off his damp shirt.

He'd take off her cloak, and they'd keep each other warm until Great Holiday Eve.

They'd kiss and cuddle and when the clock struck midnight, Legend would decide he liked holidays after all. In fact, he loved them, just as he loved her.

And all would be right in the world.

Tella picked up the hem of her skirt, ready to run after him, but then she remembered a passage she'd read in *How Not to Lose the Love of Your Life*.

Never chase after a man. Men like to feel as if they have won a prize, as if they have something no one else can get. Instead of throwing yourself at a man, make yourself difficult to hold on to and he will try even harder to keep you.

Suddenly Tella was frozen, too scared to give chase, and soon Legend was lost in the swirl of snow.

A second later, the flurry of snow settled down. The graceful white flakes returned to the ground and to the roofs of all the porcelain shops, turning everything picture-perfect once again.

Carolers still strolled down the streets.

Horses trotted along the road, pulling sleighs full of laughing children.

Bells jingled as shop doors opened and smiling people carried out packages.

The only thing missing from this magical Holiday picture was Legend. He'd left, and Tella couldn't see where he'd gone.

"Candy stars! Get your candy stars!" a vendor cried as he pushed a shimmering red cart shaped like a treasure chest.

Snow lightly dusted the top of the cart, but the rest gleamed with sparkling berry red as it stopped in front of Tella.

The young vendor who owned the cart looked more boy than man, with a flop of brown hair and round youthful cheeks. He couldn't have been more than fifteen, but he was dressed in a surprisingly fashionable pinstripe suit, complete with a pocket full of candy canes.

“Would the pretty young miss like a candy star?” The boy waved a hand toward the shiny red chest.

Tella heard a bit of clockwork creak. For a second, she would have sworn the noise came from the boy's arm. But then she watched as the lid of the treasure chest slowly tilted open.

A ballerina, a miniature of the one inside Mr. Garland's store window, popped up in the center. The tiny bells on her tulle skirt gently tinkled as she twirled in a circle. Only instead of presents at her feet, there were sparkling sweets. The sweets were the shape of stars and covered in glittering red and white stripes.

The boy took a candy cane from the pocket of his vest.

Tella heard another creak of clockwork as he bent down toward the chest. And this time she was certain the noise came from his shoulder.

Could it be possible that this young man was actually a toy? Perhaps one of the toys that Mr. Garland had bequeathed his Toy Chest to?

She had been less than impressed when she saw the lifelike ballerina in the window. But the ballerina hadn't spoken, she'd just twirled in a circle. She also hadn't looked quite this human. Upon first seeing her, Tella had thought Toy. But when Tella first saw this young vendor, she'd thought Boy.

The boy—who might have been a toy—straightened with another creak, followed by

a tinny whirling that made Tella fairly certain he actually was a toy.

He held out his candy cane, which now had a sparkling candy star stuck on the end of it.

“Thank you,” Tella said, “but I’m not really hungry.” And she wasn’t sure how she felt about taking food from animated dolls.

“Are you sure?” The clockwork boy’s eyes twinkled—a real twinkle, the kind that made him look quite kind—as he continued to hold out the treat.

“These aren’t just regular sweets. They are quite special.” The clockwork boy twirled the candy cane in his hand, making the red-and-white-striped star shine even brighter as it spun. “If you take one bite of this candy star, I promise that you will find your one true love by the time the clock strikes midnight on Great Holiday Eve.”

“Again, thank you for the offer, but I already have a true love,” Tella said.

“Are you talking about the fellow in the top hat who walked away just now without even giving you a kiss?” The clockwork boy made a sound that could have been a snort or just the whirling of more clockwork. It was oddly difficult to tell. “That didn’t look like true love to me.”

“You only saw us for a minute!”

“Sometimes that’s all it takes.” The boy twirled the candy star in his hand, making the red stripes shimmer even brighter. “What are you afraid of? If that fellow in the top hat is your true love, this sweet will lead you back to him.” He gave the candy another twirl, filling the air with the scent of hot cinnamon and sugar. “If he’s not your one true love... well then, you can thank me next Holiday Eve Eve.”

Suddenly the candy cane with the star on top was in Tella's hand. Or perhaps it wasn't so sudden. Perhaps she'd actually taken it as soon as the clockwork boy said it could lead her back to Legend.

If this candy led her to Legend, then she wouldn't have to worry about rules from *How Not to Lose the Love of Your Life* or finding him the perfect gift. She would know that he was her true love and she could go back to not worrying at all or standing on the street talking to disturbingly lifelike toys.

It was only after she'd taken the star that she thought about asking what it would cost. She reached for her coin purse.

"I have no need for money. Consider it a Holiday gift," said the clockwork boy as he waved an arm and the lid to his treasure chest closed with a crisp click.

Tella brought the candy star to her mouth and took a tiny bite.

At first, it tasted just like it smelled, like hot cinnamon and sugar. But then there was another taste, a third taste that coated her tongue in sticky cotton. And then everything felt like cotton. Her throat, her eyelids, her head—all of it went fuzzy.

Her vision blurred and then the world turned white.

Except for the clockwork boy. She could still see him in his pinstripe suit, grinning as she fell....

"Happy Great Holiday, Princess."

You Look Like an Elf

Julian Santos loved the Great Holiday. What wasn't to love? Everywhere he went, people were either abnormally cheerful or tipsy; kissing was one of the traditional ways to celebrate; and Julian looked outrageously good in green.

His brother was missing out by always acting like a lump of coal. Every year it was like this. Legend always said he didn't like the Great Holiday. But Julian suspected that his older brother was actually just jealous of Holiday magic and the way it made people feel.

Caraval had never before taken place around the Great Holiday, and Julian had always suspected that it was because Legend feared that the magic of the Holiday rivaled his own.

Legend grimaced as he watched a group of children build a snowman outside the window and then place a top hat on its round head.

"Are you upset because it doesn't look like you? Because I think it kind of does."

Legend scowled. "I'm not upset about a snowman."

"Then what are you upset about?" Julian asked.

When Julian had returned to his royal suite to change for dinner, he'd found Legend

there, sitting on a chair in a corner, drumming his fingers and brooding. Legend brooded a lot. But usually he did so in front of an audience, where he could get attention, as if he were hoping to someday garner an award.

“I’m not upset,” Legend grumbled.

“Then why are you skulking about in here?” Julian asked. “I thought you had somewhere to be. Or...” Julian placed two fingers on his chin and made a show of thinking. “Are you, the Great Caraval Master Legend, nervous?”

Legend pierced him with a glare that would have scared a small child.

“I’m just saying you look nervous,” Julian needled.

“And you look like an elf.”

“Well, it’s better than...” Julian trailed off as he looked over Legend’s black suit with a scowl.

“What is it now?” Legend asked darkly.

“Nothing.” Julian shrugged. “It’s just... it’s Great Holiday Eve Eve and you sort of look like you’re attending a funeral.”

“I’m not going to dress like an elf.”

“Good, because you would look ridiculous. Secondly, I’m not dressed like an elf. I’m just wearing green and I happen to look absurdly good in green. Your mind only goes to elves because elves are magical, and for once, I happen to be the more magical brother.”

“Only in Scarlett’s opinion,” Legend muttered.

“Her opinion is the only one that matters to me. You know, you should actually write those words down. Maybe tattoo it on your chest, or better yet, the back of your hand.”

Legend groaned. “I’m leaving.”

He shoved up from the chair and stalked all the way to the door.

“Good luck!” Julian called. “I think you’re about to need it.”

Green Was Not Tella's Color

T ella woke up in a pile of cold hard snow. The icy kind that was a little gray. It crunched beneath her as she shoved herself upright.

God's teeth, it was cold.

She wiped the snow off her arms before she hugged them to her chest. "How could I have been so naive?" Her cloak was gone, along with her coin purse and her favorite ring. "Creaking! Toy! Bastard!"

The clockwork boy had tricked her, drugged her, and robbed her. And she'd been foolish enough to let him.

Tella angrily shook the rest of the snow off her person as she stood and attempted to find her bearings.

On either side of her, crooked buildings towered over the narrow road, making it impossible to tell what time of day it was. The only light came from flickering gas lamps. Although Tella imagined it must have been later, based on the plunge in temperature.

The scent of crisp, clean Holiday trees had been replaced with damp sidewalks and the heavy aroma of foreign spices. Red cloves. White pepper. Black coriander. It was the type of pungent air that could breathe a person in rather than the other way

around.

Tella coughed as a passerby in a garish purple coat blew out a cloud of smoke from her cigar.

There were no carolers here, nor any laughing children, and not a single candy cane. But there were lots of gaudy walking sticks, exposed corsets, and unnerving storefront signs.

With a sinking feeling, Tella knew exactly where she was: Valenda's newest Spice Quarter * , where anything and everything could be purchased—for a price. Though usually the items sold here were of a darker nature: contacts for assassins, recipes for poisons, people. Then there were the gambling pits, the drug dens, and the brothels. None of which was legal in Valenda.

If Scarlett ever found out about any of this, she would probably permanently shackle Tella to one of her guards.

Tella needed to get out of here.

“Don't be nervous,” said a girl.

Tella froze, but the voice was not directed at her. It sounded as if it were coming from just around the corner.

“I know you want to do this,” replied another, younger-sounding girl, “but I'm not sure—”

“It's just an audition,” said the first girl. “There's nothing dangerous about it. Although I also don't really believe half the horror stories about Caraval.”

Tella's attention sharpened at the word Caraval.

She quickly looked around the corner and discovered a pair of girls about her age. Their cheeks were pink, and their hair was curled and done up with ribbons. Their red coats were neatly pressed, and their white patent leather shoes looked freshly shined. They didn't fit into the Spice Quarter at all, but they did look as if they were trying to fit into Caraval.

Tella felt something uncomfortable twist inside her. Legend hadn't told her he was holding auditions for Caraval. He had told her he had work outside the city.

Why would he have lied to her?

Somewhere in the distance, a church bell struck nine times. It was definitely late.

But Tella wasn't ready to return to the palace. Not yet. Not until she'd solved this mystery.

There didn't appear to be royal guards, or anyone else, on the street at the moment.

And thus, no one saw Donatella as she followed the girls in the pretty red coats to find out exactly where these Caraval tryouts were allegedly being held.

The girls stopped at a narrow shop called the Green Bottle.

Tella waited to approach until they had both stepped inside.

Her breath came out in fragile white streams as she took in the shabby storefront. The sign was crooked. It swayed from a lone nail that made Tella think it might fall at any moment and shatter into bits of broken letters. It was wood, but its green paint was streaked with glasslike cracks, and the word bottle was missing one of its T s.

This didn't feel right.

This didn't feel like Legend.

Legend could be sinister, but he was never shabby.

She cautiously stepped into the Green Bottle, hoping her instincts were right, that this wasn't Legend, and that perhaps the girls she had followed had been deceived.

The shop was small and just as ramshackle on the inside as it had looked from the outside. The shelves were half-empty, and the bottles that were on them were covered in dust—and most weren't even green, all but one was just ordinary glass.

This definitely wasn't Legend. Except...

The girls she'd followed inside had vanished.

It was a tiny shop, more like an entryway than a proper shop, but there were no girls, and there was no back door or side door that Tella could see. And for a second Tella wondered if maybe she was wrong. Maybe she just didn't want to accept that Legend had lied to her.

There was only one other person inside of the shop: an old lady with eyes lined in too much kohl and cheeks covered in dark rouge. The woman looked Tella over dismissively, unimpressed by her damp and disheveled state. "Are you here for the audition as well?"

"Of course," Tella said. "I was just wondering—"

"No time for questions, girl, you're late." The woman reached toward a shelf and pulled on the lone green bottle. At the same moment a trapdoor opened, and before

Tella could even curse—the floor disappeared beneath her.

Tella fell.

It was a short fall, but long enough to knock the air from her lungs and leave her gasping as she landed onto a heap of scratchy pillows.

“God’s teeth.” Tella shook the hair from her face and looked up to see a tall young man with a short black beard.

He greeted her with a grunt that sounded like, “Get up and get moving.”

As soon as she was on her feet, he handed her a pair of strappy heeled shoes and a pile of something feathery.

Tella eyed the feathers narrowly. “What’s this for?”

“That’s your costume.”

Tella gingerly examined the pile. Underneath the bright red feathers was a lurid green velvet corset with gold ribbons lacing the front of it, and a shimmery scrap of silky red fabric that had two tiny straps and a very short, very frilly little skirt.

The horrid costume sparkled with glitter, but not with magic.

This was definitely not Legend.

Nothing about this situation, or place, or costume felt like Legend.

Tella might have wondered if this was the doing of the clockwork boy and his windup friends. But the bearded young man did not creak with any clockwork as he

led her down a sloping hallway.

“Actually,” Tella said, “I’d just like to speak to the man holding the auditions.”

“So does every other girl here. But if you want to talk to him, you’ll have to get through an audition first.”

The young man finally stopped at the end of a poorly lit hall and opened a door to a long rectangle of a room with peeling red wallpaper, heavy perfume, and girls all working to put on assorted green and red costumes.

“You have two minutes!” the man shouted. “Then I’ll take you bunch out onto the stage.” He shut the door, and Tella swore she heard him turn the lock with a grinding click.

She took another look at the red-and-green monstrosity in her hands. Whatever this audition was for, it was not for the real Caraval. Tella was certain.

Legend was exquisite red velvet curtains and finely tailored clothes, not peeling green wallpaper and cheap costumes.

She might have felt relieved he hadn’t lied to her. Except now she was locked in this room with a bunch of hapless girls who looked just as young and innocent as the ones she’d followed in here.

Why were they all here instead of outside, basking in Holiday magic? How had the imposter Legend lured them in?

Tella had felt irritated curiosity before, but now she felt determined to figure out what was truly going on and who exactly was behind this.

A shorter girl approached Tella. “Oh, darling, do you need help getting dressed?” She had a friendly face, red feathers in her hair, and an awful green costume. It had a lot more fabric than the costume in Tella’s hands, but it looked more like a discarded curtain than a gown.

“I’m Yasmine,” the girl said. “Has anyone ever told you that you look like the Fate Slayer?”

“No, but thank you. I’ve heard she’s quite beautiful,” Tella said, and then quickly she tried to think of a name. “I’m Daniella. It’s lovely to meet you. But I think I’ve made an error. I’m not sure I’m in the correct place.”

“If you’re here for the Caraval audition, then you’ve found the right spot. Though if you want to be chosen, you’re going to need to put that costume on fast.” Yasmine cringed. “Looks as if they gave you the leftovers.”

“I think I was the last to arrive.” Tella tried to sound cheerful as she took off her sodden gown and wriggled into the tiny red slip. The fabric was surprisingly silky against her skin, but that was the only thing good about it.

The top of the slip was too tight and the frilly little skirt was far too short. It barely covered anything, which Tella might not have minded, except this felt like the sort of seedy place that made her want to cover everything so that none of the cheapness and grime clung to her.

Tella imagined all she had to do was say the words I am actually the Fate-Slaying Princess and she could get out of the room.

But if she did that, she doubted she would ever find out who was behind all of this.

And she wanted to find out. She needed to find out. Caraval was Legend’s life.

Caraval was the reason he wasn't with her now. If there was an imposter Legend holding fake Caraval tryouts and trying to steal his identity, Legend would want to know about it.

But Tella wanted to do better. She wanted to figure out who this imposter was so that she could tell Legend what was going on and who exactly was behind it.

That could be the perfect Holiday gift.

"Oh, the feathers aren't to cover you up down there, they're for your hair." Yasmine pointed to her own thick pile of dark hair.

A couple of the other girls snickered as Tella removed the red feathers from her backside and then shoved them into her curls after quickly pinning them into a messy knot at the top of her head.

"Don't look so nervous, you look smashing now!" Yasmine said. "With your golden curls and your pretty face, I'm sure you'll have no trouble catching Legend's attention."

"But don't get your hopes up," another girl interjected. "I've heard no one gets a look at his face. Though they do say when you're on the stage you can feel his magic, like champagne bubbles coating your skin." The girl rubbed her arms as her eyelashes fluttered coquettishly.

Tella felt a sharp prickle of jealousy. She reminded herself that this girl wasn't talking about the real Legend. But Tella was the only one who knew this, based on all the other girls' dreamy expressions.

"We just need to tighten your corset a little more," said Yasmine.

Thankfully the young man with the black beard arrived before that particular torture could take place.

“Move in a single file, but not too close together,” he ordered, speaking with the bored disinterest of a boy who’d repeated the same thing many times.

Again, Tella wondered what exactly this imposter Legend was after. What did he want with all these girls? Was he trying to hurt Legend? Or was he trying to gain something for himself?

Tella and the other girls followed the bearded young man out of the dressing room, back into the poorly lit hall, and then down another narrow hall, until they reached what looked like the back of a stage.

The floors were scuffed wood with a greenish tint. There did appear to be a slightly shimmering gold symbol of Caraval—a sun with a star inside and a teardrop inside the star—but the image was cut off by a heavy red velvet curtain that fell from the ceiling to the floor.

“You’ll walk through the curtain onto the stage one at a time. Once you’re on the other side, do not speak. You stand there, until you’re either asked to leave or you’re asked for more.”

“What kind of more?” asked one girl breathlessly.

“Whatever more that Master Legend wants.”

A couple girls giggled at the mention of Legend’s name.

“I’ve heard if he really fancies someone, he asks for a private audience,” another girl whispered in a scandalous tone.

Several girls tittered and the conversation took a turn that Tella wished it hadn't.

Heat traveled up her neck as she listened to speculation as to what happened in these private chambers.

They're just silly girls in silly costumes, repeating silly rumors about a fake Legend, Tella told herself. The real Legend isn't here.

And yet Tella had to fight the urge to rip the red feathers from the hair of every girl here.

Minutes ticked by slowly as one by one, the girls went through the red curtain.

Somewhere outside, a church bell clanged ten bells.

Time had passed more quickly than Tella realized, but she knew her sister well. Scarlett would be nervous, but she wouldn't start properly worrying until it was after midnight. That gave Tella two more hours to find the imposter Legend and then get back to the palace.

"You need to start smiling," Yasmine hissed. "You're about to go out there."

Yasmine slipped through the curtain then.

And Tella was alone. The final girl to audition.

Her heartbeat quickened. Beads of sweat ran down the back of her neck. She couldn't see the stage on the other side of the dark red curtain, but she could hear the click of Yasmine's heels and a muted male voice telling her to turn around so he could see her backside.

Tella's cheeks burned with a fresh surge of anger.

Not the real Legend. Not the real Legend, she repeated to herself.

"You're up," the young man with the beard grunted.

Tella gritted her teeth, she took an uneven breath, and then she stepped through a crack in the curtain.

Some Legends Are Better Than Others

The auditorium on the other side smelled of stale smoke and shattered dreams.

Tella told herself to smile. To make a good impression. To find out who the imposter was.

But the stage lanterns were unnaturally bright. They blinded her eyes and seared her skin until fresh sweat pooled across her chest. She could see as far as the edge of the dull green stage floor, but it was too hard to see who was in the audience.

“Now turn around and show us your backside.” It was the same voice she’d heard before, only now that she was on the other side of the curtain, she was sure that the voice was too low and gravelly to be Legend’s.

She felt a little relief knowing for certain that she was right, and that Legend truly wasn’t behind this. But then what was this imposter doing? What was he after? How long had he been pretending to be Legend? Tella squinted, trying to discern who addressed her and to see if anyone else was with him.

“Your backside,” the voice repeated.

“Actually.” Tella took a bold step forward, her tiny green heels clicking against the scuffed stage floor. “I’m only here to see Legend.”

Gasps fluttered Tella's way from the girls standing at the side of the stage.

"Throw her out of here!" commanded the gravelly voice.

"No. Leave her." A new voice filled the theater, smooth as silk against bare skin.

Tella felt her own flesh prickle, but not with bubbles of sparkling wine. This feeling was the opposite of light; it doused the heat of the theater's lanterns and coated her exposed limbs in dark colors that came in shades of broken promises and moonless nights.

This was not Legend.

But this imposter felt like someone.

"You must be Legend," Tella said.

"Did I say that you could speak?" The imposter's dark voice was no longer silky, but it still held heavy notes of magic.

Tella had a creeping fear that this imposter was far more sophisticated than she'd first assumed. She might not have known who he was, but she could feel that he was magical, and she feared he was also powerful.

"Escort her to my private chambers," he said.

The young man with the black beard stepped out from behind the heavy red curtain and grabbed hold of Tella's upper arm. "Looks as if you're getting your wish."

"Your grip is a little rough," she said.

“Oh, sorry, is this better?” The bearded man snorted out a laugh as he tightened his fingers and yanked her back through the stage’s curtains.

Tella’s elbow itched to bury itself in this young man’s stomach, and her legs desperately wanted to kick. She had to remind herself she wasn’t a captive.

She had chosen this.

She wanted to meet the imposter Legend.

But if this was her choice, if she wasn’t truly a prisoner, then why was this young man gripping her arm so hard?

Tella tensed at the sight of two more young men waiting behind the stage with grinning nutcracker * masks covering their faces and lengths of red ropes in their hands.

Suddenly all Tella could hear were her sister’s words from earlier: Tomorrow is Great Holiday Eve. Think of what a gift you could be if some group of bandits found you tromping about alone, and decided to take you hostage and bring you back to their leader.

Tella decided it might be a good idea to struggle after all. She whirled on the bearded man who held her captive, hoping to punch him with her free hand.

But the men in the nutcracker masks moved quicker.

“Let me go!” She kicked wildly as the blackguards grabbed her wrists and tied them behind her back with the rope.

“I have very powerful friends, and if you don’t release me, you’ll all be dead!”

“But, Your Highness, I thought you wanted to meet Legend,” said one of the nutcrackers.

The bearded young man laughed, and then he smiled, sharklike, as he held up a length of red fabric and tied it over Tella’s eyes.

The Perfect Holiday Gift

“L et me go!” Cold swirled around the back of the stage as Tella kicked her legs in an effort to break free. “You have me mistaken for someone else—”

Her plea was cut off as a gag was tied over her mouth. She continued to struggle and reminded herself that she’d been in worse positions than this. She’d once died. It had not been a very long death. But it was still death, and she’d come back from it. She’d get out of this as well.

If all these thugs wanted was ransom, then her sister would willingly pay it.

But Tella really didn’t want her sister to find out about this. She would much rather escape on her own, without the involvement of Scarlett, or Legend, and preferably without any scandal sheets finding out about her slightly reckless behavior today.

She didn’t want to ruin her sister’s Holiday, or to be shackled to palace guards for the rest of her life.

And she really didn’t want to be rescued by Legend.

Well—a part of her did.

Legend was quite dashing when he was angry, and she could picture him bursting in like a storm to save her, and then lifting her into his strong arms, holding her close as

he carried her out into the snow.

But then her newest nemesis—fear—crept back in. Tella imagined that right after saving her, Legend might still be angry and he might also convince himself that her kidnapping was another reason immortality was more important than love. Immortality meant you could always protect the people you cared about, even if it also meant you would care about them a little less because you could never quite love them.

Tella couldn't let that happen.

She couldn't risk Legend falling out of love with her. Which meant merely escaping wasn't enough. She needed to follow through with her original plan. She needed to figure out who was behind this and then turn the imposter in to Legend.

This no longer felt like just a Holiday gift. This felt like something she desperately needed to do. She couldn't let someone ruin Legend's name, or what he'd built, or the magic of Caraval.

Tella forced herself to stop struggling. Instead, she tried to pay attention as the men ushered her down a hallway. It was difficult with the blindfold. Tella couldn't see a thing. But now that she was walking instead of kicking violently, she could feel a difference in the floor. The wood had changed to soft plush carpet. She could feel her tiny heels sinking into it with every step.

The air had changed as well. It was cooler and smelled of sweet cloves and cinnamon spice.

She heard a door handle turn, and then a second later, the man who'd been handling her changed his grip. He dropped her arm, pressed a hand against her back, and shoved her forward.

The door slammed shut behind her.

Tella tried to call for help but the gag in her mouth allowed for only a few pathetic noises. The ropes at her wrists were too tight to slip out of. But perhaps she could wriggle out of the blindfold?

Tella put her back to the door and arched against it, rubbing her head up along the wood in an effort to dislodge the blindfold. She imagined that she looked a bit like a cat as she rolled her shoulders back.

A low laugh moved through the chamber, cool and dark, and Tella immediately recognized the intoxicating sound of it.

Every inch of her tingled from the magic, dark dangerous magic that felt like candlelight dancing over her skin, ready to singe her if it lingered too long.

Tella froze against the door, back arched, head tilted back, breathing suddenly ragged.

Moments ago, the door at her back had felt cool. But suddenly she felt hot all over.

Her cheeks flushed as she imagined what she must have looked like to her captor, trussed up with rope and dressed in shimmering scraps of red and green.

They'd delivered her to him like a Holiday present.

12

The Imposter

Her captor took a step forward. His footfalls sounded heavy against the floor.

Nerves fluttered across Tella's chest. She still couldn't see him. Everything was dark beneath the blindfold. But she could somehow feel his long shadow falling over her, coating her in the same kind of dark magic he'd used in the theater.

She knew how to resist falling under the spell of magic. Legend had taught her several tricks. But then she felt her captor's knuckles, warm against her cheek. They grazed a confident line down to her jaw and every thought in her mind went blank.

"I was told you wanted to see me." His deep voice was laced with mocking.

"I can't see you with a blindfold on," Tella said tartly. At least, that's what she attempted to say. It came out more like Mmmmmggglelelemmm as she tried to speak through the gag tied over her mouth.

"What was that?" Her captor's deft fingers moved to her lips. She felt the pressure of them over the gag. Slow and deliberate, he dragged his fingers across the seam of her mouth.

Then she felt his other hand boldly wrap around her waist and toy with the edge of her corset.

“You want me to take this off?” he murmured.

Tella froze. She wasn't sure if he was talking about the gag or the corset. He definitely wasn't talking about the blindfold. But she was almost painfully aware of the hand on the bottom of her corset.

His fingers tugged at the ribbons holding it together.

Pull away, she told herself. But she had nowhere to go. Her back was pressed against the door, and his fingers were now dipping under the corset, sending dangerous sparks across her skin.

She shook her head, reminding him it was the blindfold she wanted removed.

“You sure about that?” He stroked her stomach once.

Tella sucked in a sharp breath.

He chuckled. Then he pulled away abruptly. Seconds later, both of his hands reached around the back of her head and easily untied the gag.

The fabric fell away from her lips.

“Better?” he asked.

“I'd prefer it if you removed the blindfold, too.”

“You think I let just anyone see who I am?”

She felt him lean in closer until his lips were brushing the shell of her ear.

“I think you’re not the real Legend,” she taunted, or she tried to sound taunting. Her voice might have cracked when she felt his teeth gently bite her earlobe.

Her stomach tumbled.

“I’m in love with someone else,” she blurted.

“I think I can change your mind about that.” His soft mouth skated lower, skimming along her jaw.

Tella’s breathing turned shallow. With her hands still tied, there was little she could do—except snap her teeth at him. Clack.

He laughed and pulled his treacherous mouth away.

“You’re cute.” He pressed a quick finger to the center of her lips in a gesture that seemed to mimic a brief kiss. “But if a girl wants me to take off her blindfold, then she has to be more than cute.”

“So, you bring lots of blindfolded girls back here?” she asked sharply.

“Do you really want to talk about other girls right now?” he purred.

She could still feel his magic.

It moved across her skin in tiny fireworks that intensified when he put a hand on the curve of her hip.

“What are you doing?” she breathed.

“I thought it was a tradition to unwrap presents?” His hand slid lower.

Tella gasped and darted to the side.

“Nice try.” Her kidnapper grabbed the ribbons of her corset, spun her around, and pulled her to him.

Her back pressed against his chest.

He smelled deliciously good. Like cold nights with hints of trees and of rain.

Not that she inhaled. Much.

She tried to wriggle free, but one of his arms banded around her torso, keeping her pressed against him. His shirt was soft where it touched her skin. Although she wasn’t intentionally leaning in. He held her so close it was impossible not to feel his chest and his arms and the hand he was now sliding into her hair.

“What are you doing?”

His fingers moved through her curls. She felt him pulling out feathers and pins until her curls cascaded down her back.

“Much better,” he murmured.

“I didn’t give you permission to do that.”

“I don’t think you understand how being a captive works, love. You don’t have to give me permission for anything.” His knuckles skated across her cheek before he brought his hand around the back of her head and tightened the blindfold.

“What do I have to do to get you to remove the blindfold?” she asked.

He made a sound too dark to be a proper laugh. “If you want it off, you’ll have to earn it.”

“How do I earn it?”

“I’ll give you one guess.”

Tella tried to think. It was difficult with the way that she was tangled up in the arms of her kidnapper. But when she finally forced herself to clear her mind, it really didn’t take much thought. If the Legendary Master of Caraval had kidnapped her, then she knew exactly what he would want. “You want to play a game?”

“If you win, I’ll remove the blindfold.”

“And you’ll untie me,” she added.

“That wasn’t part of the original bargain.”

“We haven’t finished bargaining.”

“You’re lucky I’m bargaining with you at all.”

“You can’t leave me tied up,” Tella protested.

“Given our present situation, I think that I can do whatever I like with you.” One of his hands dropped to her leg.

A soft, nervous sound escaped her lips.

“However,” he added, his tone turning playful, “since it is almost a holiday, if you win, I promise to untie you. But if you lose, the ropes stay on, and so does the

blindfold. I think that a captive princess would make a great Caraval attraction, don't you agree?"

"Oh no," Tella said. "I think you're mistaken. I'm not really a princess."

This earned her another low laugh. "If you're not truly a princess, then I'm not really Legend." He spoke against her jaw, lips brushing the delicate skin as the hand on her leg—

A loud knock rattled the door. "Master, sir!" called an unfamiliar voice.

Her captor made an irritated sound.

"This better be important," he grumbled.

"It's something I think you'll want to see," said the voice.

"Too bad for us." Her captor pressed his lips to Tella's cheek and gave her a quick kiss. "I'll see you tomorrow, princess."

13

Happy Great Holiday Eve to Everyone (Except Donatella)

T ella's heart pounded as the villain released her. The heat of his hands, his lips, and his body all disappeared in a second.

The room where he was keeping her prisoner went suddenly cool and quiet, save for the blood rushing to her ears.

He'd left her.

She didn't need to see to know that he was gone. The magic that had pressed against her skin had vanished. All she felt was cold and alone.

"Bastard!"

He couldn't leave her tied up and blindfolded until tomorrow.

Of course, she knew that she was wrong.

He'd taken her captive on Great Holiday Eve Eve. And as she'd thought back over the events of the day, he'd clearly gone to some trouble to do this. He would, without a doubt, keep her tied up and blindfolded for however long he wished.

"Come back here and untie me, you bastard!" she shouted. "How am I supposed to..." She trailed off. She didn't want to shout the rest of the sentence.

Instead, she pounded on the door with her shoulder.

As Donatella continued to beat up her unfortunate shoulder, a clock far in the distance chimed twelve times, ringing in Great Holiday Eve with the bright sound of bells.

Ding-dong.

Ding-dong.

Ding-dong.

Ding-dong.

Ding-dong.

Ding-dong.

Ding-dong.

Ding-dong.

Ding-dong.

Ding-dong.

Ding-dong.

Ding-dong.

Hearts all over the city felt happier and lighter and full of expectation as the final bell

chimed—and the snow globe tilted again. It shook back and forth, stirring up swirls of beautiful glittering snow that snuck in through cracked windows and doors, turning sleepy mouths into drowsy smiles as people were gently rocked in their beds.

It was a magical start to a magical day for everyone. Except Donatella Dragna. She lost her balance when the snow globe tilted and promptly flopped to the ground.

14

All's Fair in Love and Kidnapping

Donatella's captor had made it clear that he was not to be disturbed.

It's not terribly difficult to kidnap someone. Most people walk around the streets so unaware of their surroundings, it's as if they wish to get plucked from their ordinary lives.

But Donatella Dragna wasn't just anyone, and her life was far from ordinary. She might have joked about wishing to be kidnapped, but she would fight like a hellion if she actually thought someone were trying to take her or take control of her.

For this kidnapping to work, it had to be executed perfectly. Even now, her captor could hear her down the hall, battling against her door. She would hurt herself before she hurt the door. But he didn't imagine that would stop her from trying to escape.

"I hope this is important," he growled at the performer who had summoned him.

"I'm not sure if important is the word I would use... but I do think you'll find this interesting."

The performer held out a palm-size booklet with a cloth cover and gilded print. "Yasmine found this among the princess's things."

Tella's captor could see that the spine of the booklet was worn and the cover was

wrinkled, making it clear this was something the princess had read multiple times.

He flipped through some of the pages quickly, surprised and slightly disturbed by the content. “And Yasmine is certain this was among the princess’s things?”

The performer nodded.

Donatella’s captor closed the book. If he’d found the booklet under other circumstances, he would have simply tossed the thing in the fire.

But considering the current situation, this was something he could use.

15

Does This Mean I'm Not Getting Any Cookies?

T ella gave up on pounding against the door with her shoulder after falling with a thud on her bottom.

Her little costume did not provide nearly enough cushioning. Now she was sore on top of being tied up and blindfolded. But at least the floor of her cell was smooth, like polished wood. It was a little hard, but thankfully it felt clean to the touch.

She wondered how long her captor planned on leaving her here. It seemed as if an hour had passed, maybe two.

"Could I at least get something to eat?" she called from her position on the ground. "Some snowflake cookies or hot chocolate? Surely, kidnappers celebrate holidays, too!"

"You really don't understand how being a captive works, do you?"

Her insides cartwheeled at the sound of her kidnapper's dark voice.

He was back.

But where had he come from? Clearly, he hadn't used the door, which she was still leaning against. Was it possible that he'd just materialized? Did he have that much magic?

She wished she could see where he stood in the room. His deep voice sounded farther away than before. But that could have just been more of his magic, playing tricks on her. He could have been right in front of her, looking down on her with dark unreadable eyes.

Tella sat up a little straighter and lifted her chin imperiously. She might have been in a rather helpless position, but that didn't mean she had to act that way.

"Does this mean I'm not getting any cookies?" she asked.

"Maybe, if you're well-behaved." His tone turned amused. "But for now, I have a little something else for you."

"Did you get me a Holiday present?"

"Depends on your definition of present. "

She listened to his steps move farther away, toward what she imagined was the other side of the room. She had supposed he'd locked her up in a small room or cell, but the number of steps he took made it seem as if the chamber was actually much larger.

"My performers found an interesting little booklet among your things." His words were followed by the soft flutter of paper pages.

Tella's stomach dropped.

"Oh no." She knew exactly what he'd found.

Before she could protest and say the booklet wasn't hers, or abruptly fake her own death, she heard her captor's mocking voice read the words, "'How Not to Lose the Love of Your Life by Pandora Loveless. Brimming with advice guaranteed to change

your love life!””

Tella felt her face drain of color.

Briefly, she reconsidered pretending to be dead.

“Don’t read that,” she urged.

“Why not? It was the only thing you had in your pockets. Clearly, it’s important to you.”

“It’s not!” Tella squeaked, and shoved up to her feet, which was more than a little difficult given that her wrists were still bound behind her back.

But Tella had to get up. She had to find him, take the book, and then throw it into the fire.

There had to be a fire in this chamber, because the room was suddenly very hot.

There was another rustle of pages. She imagined him opening the booklet and seeing the table of contents.

The panic in her chest swelled.

“For something that’s not important to you, it looks as if you read it quite a few times,” he said. “You even drew little stars by some of these chapter titles.”

“Those aren’t mine,” she lied. “The booklet came like that!”

Once again, she desperately wished that she wasn’t still wearing the wretched blindfold.

She wanted to see his face, to read his expression, to have some idea of what he was thinking as he turned the pages of the book that she'd foolishly carried around.

Tella took an unsteady step forward. But now that he had gone quiet, she had no idea where he was. And yet... she felt him looking at her again. It started like a tiny spark that slowly grew into something hotter.

“Tell me, princess.” His voice was quiet. “How long have you been afraid of losing the love of your life?”

She felt his gaze intensify as if he wasn't just looking at her but trying to see into her. To read the thoughts frantically swirling in her head.

A bead of sweat dripped down the back of Tella's neck.

“The booklet was a gift,” she lied.

“The person who gave it to you must not have liked you very much. The advice in this is awful. Let's take a look at this section, which you starred in the table of contents—”

Tella rushed forward on wobbling heels. “Don't read that!” she cried.

Which was exactly the wrong thing to say.

Everyone knows that a lot of people sadly don't like to read, but as soon as you tell them not to read something, they are suddenly rabidly curious. This was true for Tella's captor.

From the irritated sound of his voice, he obviously disliked this book, and yet it didn't stop him from reading out loud.

“Holidays can either make a relationship or destroy it. What your lover gets you—or doesn’t get you—as a gift can tell you everything you need to know about your relationship and how your lover truly feels about you.

“Therefore, if you have found the love of your life and you wish to keep him, you must buy him a perfect gift. A gift that makes him feel loved and known and important.

“However, if you cannot find the perfect gift, all is not necessarily lost. I recommend simply spending more money than you can afford. This way, even if your lover does not love your gift, at least he will know how much you love him by the amount you’ve been willing to spend.”

“Please—stop—” Tella’s legs smacked hard into something.

“Oof—” She started to stumble.

Her captor’s arm snaked around her waist, and her feet were lifted off the ground.

She flailed—or she tried to. With her arms still bound behind her back, she had nothing to reach for.

Then seconds later, he was setting her down on his lap.

If the room had been hot before, it was suddenly on fire. Her captor positioned her so that her legs were straddling him.

She tried to wriggle free.

His arm tensed and tightened around her waist. “There’s nowhere for you to go, love.”

“You don’t get to call me love, ” she protested.

This earned her half a laugh. “Why not? According to the title of this book, it seems as if you’re having a difficult time keeping your current love. ”

“That book is rubbish!”

“Then why are bits of it underlined? Like this: ‘If you have doubts about whether or not he loves you, then he doesn’t. If he truly loved you, then you would have no doubts.’ Do you believe that?”

Yes! No! Maybe! Tella thought, but she wasn’t about to say any of those things out loud.

“I don’t have to answer you.”

“It’s really cute how you think you still have any power right now.” Her kidnapper put a hand on her hip, and then the villain slipped his fingers brazenly under her skirt and rubbed her bare skin.

She tried to scoot away. That’s what a captive would do. But the hand on her leg was warm and soft and possessive in a way that shouldn’t have felt as good as it did.

For just a second, Tella decided to give in.

Given all the doubts she’d been having and all the touching she’d been missing, this felt like exactly what she wanted. It felt a little bit like falling even though he held her tight.

Before she knew it, the hand at her waist was traveling up her spine and back into her hair. She could feel his fingers weaving through her curls as he began to pull her

closer.

She imagined his lips.

She knew they were close.

Too close.

Her heartbeat raced. Her blood rushed. Her lips parted.

“I think you should let me go,” she breathed.

“You’re the one who threw yourself onto my lap.” He brushed his mouth across hers.

Her head, the world, everything spun.

It wasn’t even a real kiss and Tella was already unraveling. If he touched her lips again, he’d need to keep her tied up because she would come completely undone, and then she would certainly lose whatever game it was that they were playing.

“I need you to untie me,” she said. “I won’t kiss you unless you unbind my hands.”

“That’s too bad.” He gently kissed her jaw.

“What are you doing?” she gasped.

He angled her head to the side and then he pressed another kiss to her neck. “You said you wouldn’t kiss me. You didn’t say I couldn’t kiss you.”

His teeth grazed her pulse.

Gooseflesh broke out across her skin.

Then he kissed her again. His lips pressed against the sensitive hollow of her throat. And then he kept going, down, down, down, trailing kiss after kiss across her skin.

Tella tried not to sigh or moan or beg him to never stop kissing her, but he was so very good with his mouth.

“Are you sure you don’t want to kiss me back?” he whispered.

“I don’t kiss kidnappers.”

“You just let them kiss you?”

She felt his lips move lower, until they were just above the low neckline of her costume, and for a second Tella couldn’t remember why she was resisting him. She couldn’t remember anything. If she’d been asked her name, she would have said it was Kissing, or Touching, or His Hands—which were doing things she probably shouldn’t have allowed them to do in this situation.

Kidnapper. Captive, she reminded herself. But the words were starting to take on a very different meaning.

She felt his deft fingers at the top of her corset, tugging at the ribbon that tied it together.

“What about the game?” she squeaked.

“Maybe this is part of it?”

“Is it?” she asked.

“It could be.”

He toyed with the ribbon of her corset. She could feel his fingertips ghosting over her skin just above it. Then she could feel him pulling her closer, until she could taste his lips as he brushed her mouth. “Kiss me and I’ll untie you.”

“Untie me and then I’ll kiss you.”

“Done.”

He tore the rope off her wrists. Then he took her mouth captive with his. He kissed her the way he’d kidnapped her, wickedly and possessively, as if he had no intention of ever letting her go.

And in that delirious moment, she didn’t want him to release her. She wanted to stay his captive forever, as long as this was the method he chose to torture her.

She parted her lips; his tongue slipped between them, and then he was untying the ribbon holding together the top of her corset.

It should have been easier for her to breathe now, but she couldn’t remember how. All she knew how to do was find his lips in the dark. For a nervous second, she had a fleeting thought: with the blindfold still covering her eyes, she couldn’t be entirely certain whose mouth was kissing hers, whose teeth were taking her lower lip and gently tugging and nipping.

Her fingers could feel the soft hair at the nape of his neck. She thought it felt like Legend. He kissed like Legend. But what if this wasn’t the real Legend?

He was using his teeth more than Legend usually did.

Tella's heart raced faster. What if she was wrong about the game they were playing?

She quickly reached for the fabric tied around her eyes and pulled it off with one firm tug.

She opened her eyes....

She still couldn't see.

Everything was black.

She knew he was there. She was sitting on his lap. She could feel his chest pressed to hers. But his lips no longer kissed hers.

"You shouldn't have done that."

His voice was hoarse. No longer smooth or magical. It sounded rough and strange to her ear as he took her by the waist and pushed her off of his lap and set her back down on the ground.

Tella felt a tidal wave of panic.

Had she made a terrible mistake? Could she have really been wrong about him? What if he wasn't who she had thought and he had used his magic to trick her? The final thought made her sick to her stomach.

"Where are you?" she asked.

He didn't answer.

She couldn't hear him anymore. Couldn't feel him anymore. She couldn't sense his

eyes on her as she stood and spun around in the dark.

She cried out other questions. But he didn't answer any of them.

He'd left.

She was alone.

In the dark.

"Happy Holiday to me," she whispered.

16

The One Night of the Year That Dreams Escape

Donatella Dragna did not mean to fall asleep. She had intended to escape her dark prison and then find whoever had truly kidnapped her and left her all alone on Great Holiday Eve.

But despite some of the rumors that claimed otherwise, Tella was very much human. And she was exhausted. Regardless of her best efforts, she could not stay up all night. She'd been drugged, and kidnapped.

Tella couldn't stop herself from replaying the kiss or the hoarse words her captor had said when she took off the blindfold.

You shouldn't have done that.

Why had he said that?

What did he mean?

What exactly had she done?

She tried to cling to the idea it was all just a game, but what if it wasn't? What if it really was an imposter who had kidnapped her and not the real Legend?

As she slept, Tella hoped the real Legend would visit her in her dreams. But no one

dreams on Great Holiday Eve. It's the one day each year that dreams escape.

It's said that they play on the rooftops, that they dance on the chimneys and have tea parties atop the shingles. If you wake to a pitter-patter above you on Great Holiday Eve, don't worry. It's not anything nefarious, just dreams making merry.

Holidays are not just for humans, after all.

Drink Some Eggnog, It Should Help

Time passed the way that time passes on holidays. It moved impossibly slow at first, as if the day would never come, and then suddenly, hours flew by like minutes.

The sunset looked like melted candy canes.

The sky above Nutcracker Castle was a swirl of red and pink and white, while inside, everything was merry and bright and bright and merry.

Scarlett's Great Holiday ball felt like the sort of party children imagine experiencing when they become adults.

Every guest was dressed up in exquisite Holiday suits and gowns. There were lots of red cravats, long white gloves, dresses with trains lined with fur or sparkles, and suit coats with velvet lapels in all sorts of merry colors.

The Holly Jolly Holiday Ballroom was full of light that might actually have been magic. There were long red candles on banquet tables and filling chandeliers, but they never seemed to burn down. There were no drops of wax or plumes of smoke, just sweet-smelling light that made everything sparkle.

Parts of the ballroom tasted like frosted peppermint and others like gingerbread. It was all warm and delicious and slightly intoxicating. Guests were drunk on laughter and smiles and the lighthearted feeling of being entirely without a care.

Worries and fears were not allowed in the ballroom, thank you very much.

Joy, wonder, and peace were being served in crystalclear glasses with striped red-and-white handles.

The Royal Potion Master, Poison, oversaw the punch bowls. His fingers glittered with rings as the Fate garnished drinks with sprigs of Holiday trees, gingerbread men, candy canes, and snowflake-shaped marshmallows that Poison promised could make some minor wishes come true.

In addition to the Fate, a number of Legend's performers were there.

Jovan was positioned at the door. She sat on a reindeer that had red ribbons adorning her antlers. The reindeer's name was Harmony, according to the ribbon hanging around her neck, and to the dismay of many children, Harmony the reindeer did not talk.

But Jovan more than made up for it by wishing all sorts of things to everyone who entered:

"I wish you a heartwarming Holiday!" she said to some.

"I wish you discover new dreams and that they come true," she said to others.

"I wish you a night full of surprises!"

"I wish you much love!"

"I wish you find something hidden and wondrous!"

And for those hopeful people who chose to believe in them, all of Jovan's wishes

came true.

Amid the finely dressed crowd were a number of guests in top hats.

One of them was Aiko, who wore a red top hat and a smart white suit with red heeled shoes tipped in bows.

She sat in a sleigh near the center of the room, looking pretty and picturesque as she swished a brush tipped in red over pages of white paper.

Aiko hummed as she painted and people around her started to sway. Then they smiled when she handed them her art. A few of the pieces were for the adults, who thought they were merely cute keepsakes. But the children all seemed to know better.

“Are these pictures of the future?” the children asked.

“They could be,” Aiko replied, sly and mischievous, with a smile to match.

And then the children ran off in search of things like milk-white kittens, delectable sweet treats, hidden presents, and friendships that would turn out to last for a lifetime.

Scarlett smiled as she tried to take it all in. It was just how she’d dreamed.

Although one guest managed to surpass all of her dreams.

Everyone at the party looked lovely, but Scarlett thought Julian Santos was the most dashing of all.

Julian usually looked like the piratical rogue she’d met on the Isle of Trisda, but tonight he looked like a perfect gentleman in his dark green velvet coat and vest. His cravat was black silk, his shirt was pure white, his pants were tailored black—and just

looking at him made her feel as if she was falling in love with him all over again.

He was standing just to the side of the ice carousel, appearing to check the time on a gold pocket watch, although Scarlett had a sneaking red feeling that he was giving her time to appreciate his appearance.

“You look quite dashing, my love.” She pressed a kiss to his cheek as she reached him.

But Julian turned quickly enough that her lips found his instead.

His arm snaked around her waist, holding her tight and kissing her back until her cheeks were redder than a candy cane.

“You scoundrel,” she murmured.

“It’s not my fault you look so pretty when you blush.”

He looked her over and Scarlett could feel her dress practically preen under his gaze. Tonight she wore a flowing strapless gown with ruby-red ribbons that crisscrossed over its snow-white corset before tying into a bow at her back. Moments ago, the skirt had been as white as the corset and very full. But now it was turning red and fitting to her curves.

“You look devastating, Crimson.”

Scarlett smiled wider.

Snow fluttered throughout the Holly Jolly Holiday Ballroom, dusting the shoulders of guests who had decided it would be a good idea to kiss each other as well.

For a second, everything was perfect.

The crisp air smelled of spiced cider and trees and something that could only be described as Holiday joy.

And then, Scarlett felt a familiar flutter of bloodred nerves. She looked away from Julian toward the door of the ballroom. “Do you think Tella is all right?”

“Depends on your definition of all right. ” Julian stopped a passing servant to take a glass of spiked eggnog from a tray. “If you’re really worried, just drink this.”

Scarlett took the glass but she didn’t sip. She was probably worrying for nothing.

Tella was probably exactly where she wanted to be. Scarlett might have tried to imagine where that was, but she’d learned a long time ago that it was best not to try to imagine what her sister might be doing.

18

Ready to Play?

The snow globe was feeling impatient, or perhaps its master was. It shook so hard a few snowflakes fluttered into Tella's darkened room.

She tumbled off her bed with a curse.

"Why did you do that?" she said groggily, expecting to find that someone had pushed her to the floor, which was not the same floor as she remembered. She also didn't remember getting into a bed. Her captor must have moved her while she'd slept.

The floor was soft against her cheek.

Her eyes immediately flew open.

Tella looked around quickly, as if someone might appear and blindfold her again, or suddenly douse the lights. Although even at a glance, this room looked like the bright sort of place that the darkness could never leave so much as a fingerprint on.

Everything was sparkling white and gold with hints of Holiday red. The carpet she'd fallen onto was purer than snow. So was the bed she'd fallen from. It, too, was sparkling white. All marshmallow-fluff bedding, white wooden posts, and a pale gold canopy that glowed with light.

Tella's stomach tied itself into a knot. Had her captor returned her to Scarlett's

palace? But why? Did this mean the game was over? Or had it never been a game at all?

Tella looked carefully around the room.

There were fresh white flowers on the nightstand, and the fireplace mantel was lined with more flowers. Candy-red roses in full bloom dripped down the hearth, making a flowering curtain that veiled a crackling fire.

Tella pushed up to her feet, and her stomach growled. She hadn't eaten anything since that poisoned candy star.

Thankfully there appeared to be a delicate golden tray piled high with all sorts of Holiday fare: cakes and meats, fruits and sweets, savory pies, glittering hard-boiled eggs, pastry nests full of cream custard, and a beautiful mountain of shimmering snowflake cookies.

Tella picked up a sugary cookie and took a wide bite. Her stomach was full of nervous butterflies, but the cookie was delicious.

Everything on the tray looked magnificent. She reached for a pastry nest, followed by a biscuit filled with jam and bacon, and that's when she saw the note.

Thick, crisp black paper with elegant gold writing.

Tella briefly thought that it could not have been there before. Everything else on the tray was glitter and gold and bright Holiday colors. She would have noticed this black note straightaway. But she hadn't, because she'd been correct to assume that it had not appeared until after she'd eaten enough to be full.

There were only three words in the message:

As soon as Tella read the word play, her heart made a tiny leap.

The game wasn't over after all. Maybe she hadn't been wrong.

Tella glanced about the room once again, taking particular notice of the roses hanging over the fireplace, which should have made it obvious. This looked like her sister's palace, but it wasn't. She had been taken somewhere else.

Next to the fireplace were three packages, each wrapped in pearly white paper and a pretty red bow.

One was small. One was medium. One was large.

On top of the medium gift in the middle was another black note with more golden writing.

Tella opened up the medium box first. She tore off the wrapping, ripped off the lid, and inside she found a golden shield and a matching golden helm with little red butterflies on the side. There was a butterfly on top of the shield as well. It made her think of a dress that Legend had once gifted her. The skirt had been covered in periwinkle butterflies that he had brought to life with his magic.

She looked at the shield and the helm. But none of these butterflies moved, and once again Tella felt nervous that she might be wrong about this game.

She turned to the large box. It was an enormous rectangle, and it took both her hands to open the lid. The gown inside looked as if it were made from roses and liquid gold.

At the shoulders were two thin red straps so small that Tella imagined there wouldn't appear to be straps at all if she put the gown on.

Tella blushed as she imagined Legend picking out this gown for her. Just below the barely there straps were clusters of red flowers that didn't quite meet in the center, giving the dress a neckline that would dip daringly to the middle of her rib cage. There were a few more red flowers just below, and then the dress flowed out into a waterfall of golden fabric that had a provocatively high slit up the side.

Tella would have immediately chosen it for her armor, but she didn't want to wear this dress unless it was for Legend—the real Legend. And there was one more box left to open.

The third box sat quietly to the side of the others. It was too small for clothes. She wondered if it contained a piece of jewelry. Eagerly she opened the lid, but the contents of this box did not sparkle with jewels.

Inside was a booklet.

HOW NOT TO LOSE THE LOVE OF YOUR LIFE BY PANDORA LOVELESS

Tella felt a knot twist up inside her. She really hated this book. And the awful little thing was already open to the page where she had thoughtlessly underlined:

If you have doubts about whether or not he loves you, then he doesn't. If he truly loved you, then you would have no doubts.

They were the same words her captor had read aloud to her earlier. If he were there now, she might have tossed the booklet at him. Although, it wasn't his fault she'd been foolish enough to believe such bad advice.

Tella picked up the booklet and then did something that she should have done as soon as she'd read the first page. She tossed the volume into the fire and watched it burn.

Tella imagined that she would always be able to find a reason to have doubts about Legend's love as long as she kept looking for them. She was quite excellent at finding what she was looking for. But now it was time to look for something else.

She picked up the red and gold dress.

After using the attached bathing room to quickly clean up and fix her atrocious hair, Tella returned to the luminous bedroom, feeling like a goddess in her golden gown as its shimmering skirts fanned out around her. A mirror hung over the fireplace, and as Tella gazed at her reflection, she had to admit, she looked spectacular. She hoped Legend thought so too. She hoped he was behind this.

"My armor is on!" she called.

The large white door to her room swung open.

She waited for Legend to step through. She gave him about two seconds, then she stepped through the doorway instead. "I'm ready to play."

Source Creation Date: July 28, 2025, 10:11 am

The room on the other side of the door was pure glass.

A large crystal-clear dome arched above, giving Tella a magnificent view of the stars. She watched several of them shoot across the dark night sky, leaving trails of sparks that transformed into snow as they fell.

Once the snowflakes touched the glass dome above her, they transmuted again to glittering pieces of sparkle that magically floated through the glass, filling it with a brilliant shimmer that made Tella feel as if it were raining moonlight. This magic felt like Legend. But he wasn't there.

Tella was alone in the glass globe. It was empty save for the bright, glittering lights and a single red pedestal.

The pedestal in the center of the dome came up to Tella's waist. There were two more presents wrapped in white on top of it, and then there was another black card with more gold writing.

"I am a weapon," Tella muttered.

In her peripheral vision, she saw something move.

Tella abruptly turned.

On the other side of the glass, the world was made of nighttime, but there was just enough light from within for Tella to see the outline of someone who looked a lot like Legend. Tall, broad-shouldered, top hat on a head that was tilted at an arrogant angle.

Her breath quickened and she suddenly became very aware of her racing heartbeat. It could have been him, but the blackguard's face was obscured by the dark.

Leaving the pedestal behind, Tella walked toward the glass.

The shadowy young man who might have been Legend appeared to be watching her. But she couldn't tell for sure with the darkness outside still obscuring his face.

He pointed behind her, toward the pedestal with the boxes, motioning for her to open them.

"Let me out of here first."

He shook his head.

More moonlight snow began to fall.

Tella cocked her hip and put a hand on it. She wasn't quite sure what this pose said to him, but it made her feel rather powerful as she said, "You can't keep me here forever."

He tilted his head as if to say, Are you sure about that?

She turned toward the door she'd just come through, but it had disappeared. Something fluttered in her chest, too nervous to be butterflies. She was trapped in the snow globe like a doll inside a cloche.

Tella looked back at her captor, who was still standing on the other side of the glass. His head remained tilted to the side, and although she still couldn't see his face, she had the feeling he was smiling as he watched her realize that she was trapped by him again.

Well played, Tella thought. But she said, “I’m only looking because I’m curious.”

She turned back to the pedestal with a swish of her golden skirts.

Moonlight snow covered the boxes and formed a border across the bottom of the note—which had changed.

Tella was certain it had been black before, but now the notecard was red. The writing was still gold, but the words had also shifted.

Tella melted at the word love, which was suddenly her favorite four-letter word. Love, love, love, love, love, love, love!

As Tella stood there under the glass, rereading the word love, it might have been the sappiest moment of her life. And Tella didn’t care if this moment was sentimental, or sappy. In fact, if this was how it felt to be sappy, then she wanted to feel it more often.

She opened the lid of the first box as soft snow dusted her shoulders.

And she found another blindfold.

Tella’s heart and hope fell like a stone.

“I’m not putting this on.”

“You haven’t even taken it out of the box.” His voice was right behind her now. Soft and smooth and so, so close.

She suddenly felt dizzy at the sound of it. It had to be him. It had to be Legend. No one else made her feel like this.

But she didn't allow herself to move. If she turned around and the world went black or he disappeared again, she wasn't sure her heart could handle it.

"I could stand here all night," he said gently, "but I think there are better ways to enjoy the Holiday."

He put his warm wide hand on top of hers and guided it toward the blindfold. As soon as she touched fabric, the cloth dissolved, leaving nothing but a well-worn piece of folded paper.

"What is this?" She opened it carefully.

Her letter. She'd forgotten about this letter, but he'd clearly remembered. He was the most wonderful scoundrel she'd ever met. Tella spun around before she'd even finished reading.

It was him.

Her Legend.

The real Legend.

The only Legend.

She knew it would be him. And it was still the most exquisite relief to finally see his handsome face. His dark eyes, his strong jaw, his amused smile. He was even wearing a Holiday red tailcoat, and he looked absolutely magnificent in it.

Snow and moonlight fell all around him, but none of it seemed to touch him. The shadows seemed to like him more than the starlight. But Tella liked him most of all.

"Happy Great Holiday, Tella."

“I knew it was you! You’re a scoundrel and a rogue and a blackguard and—”

She broke off. Tella threw her arms around his neck and kissed him the way she’d wanted to back when they were on Garland Street. Although she didn’t like to think about Garland Street, because then she’d remember how silly she’d been, afraid he didn’t love her, afraid he hadn’t gotten her a gift.

Afraid. Afraid. Afraid.

Legend could definitely still break her if he wanted to. But Tella couldn’t believe she had feared that he actually would.

She knew Legend truly loved her and that he would keep loving her. And she didn’t believe this just because he’d gone to such elaborate lengths to give her this most wondrous Holiday gift, or even because he’d said it to her, but because it was simply the truth.

“When did you figure it out?” Legend asked later.

It was sometime after the kissing had ended.

His arms were still around her, and hers were still around him, only now they were lying in the moonlight snow, which felt more like feathers and less like snow. Their legs were tangled and her head was on his chest.

“Well”—Tella half shrugged against him—“that letter of mine in the box sort of gave it away.”

Legend stiffened beneath her.

She laughed and reached up to cup his cheek. “Who knew that the famous Master Legend was so gullible?” Tella pressed a quick kiss to his lips. “I knew it was you all

along.”

He arched a brow.

All right, so maybe that wasn’t entirely true, either.

Tella didn’t want to admit it, but Legend had actually tricked her at first. She hadn’t known Legend was behind all of her recent escapades during her audition.

She hadn’t figured it out until after she’d been tied up, blindfolded, and then locked up in the room. She really had believed there was an imposter Legend until the moment she’d had her back arched up against the door, trying to dislodge the blindfold.

Then she had heard Legend’s low laugh move through the chamber, and she immediately recognized the intoxicating sound of it. That was when she’d finally figured it out. But he didn’t need to know that it had taken her that long or that she had briefly doubted herself after figuring it out.

“I just have one question now,” Tella said. “Were Scarlett and Julian involved?”

Legend grinned. “Your sister insisted on having a role this time.”

“I should have known,” Tella grumbled.

“But I thought you knew everything all along?” Legend curled the corner of his lip.

“I knew enough.” Tella pressed another kiss to his cheek.

Outside the glass, little lights were appearing in the trees, snow was falling on the ground, bunnies were hopping, and in the distance, she thought she heard the jingle of bells. “Does this mean you actually love the Great Holiday after all?”

Legend's perfect smile appeared again.

“No, Donatella. I just love you.”