‘Wholly original and captivating’
New York Times bestselling author BRIGID KEMMERER



CINDERELLA IS DEAD

KALYNN BAYRON

BLOOMSBURY

CINDERELLA IS DEAD

KALYNN BAYRON

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY YA
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK

BLOOMSBURY, BLOOMSBURY YA and the Diana logo
are trademarks of Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

First published in the United States of America in 2020 by Bloomsbury YA
First published in Great Britain in 2020 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Text copyright © Kalynn Bayron, 2020

Kalynn Bayron has asserted her right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as Author of this work

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: PB: 978-1-5266-2197-9; eBook: 978-1-5266-2195-5

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

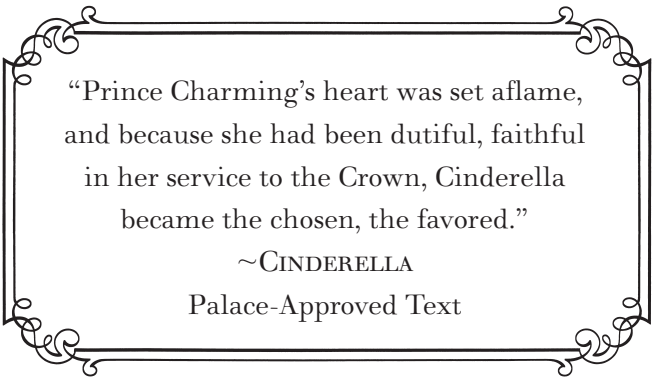
Typeset by Westchester Publishing Services

Printed and bound in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY



To find out more about our authors and books visit www.bloomsbury.com
and sign up for our newsletters.

For Amya, Nylah, Elijah, and Lyla


"Prince Charming's heart was set aflame,
and because she had been dutiful, faithful
in her service to the Crown, Cinderella
became the chosen, the favored."
~Cinderella
Palace-Approved Text

1

Cinderella has been dead for two hundred years.

I've been in love with Erin for the better part of three years.

And I am about two minutes away from certain death.

When the palace guards find me, and they will, I am going to die in the forest on Lille's eastern border. But I don't care. The only thing I'm focused on is Erin, who is pressed up against a tree directly across from me. The palace guards don't see her yet, but they are headed her way. They stop a few feet from where she's hiding. Her eyes grow wide in the shadowy confines of the forest. I meet her gaze across the wide swath of carriage pathway that separates us.

Don't move, Erin. Don't make a sound.

"I fell asleep in the tower last night," one of them says. "Someone woke me, but still. I was lucky. If the king found out, it'd be my head on a pike."

"You going to the ball?" one man asks.

"No," says another. "All work and no fun for me, I'm afraid."

"That's a shame. I'm hearing the girls in this year's group are the prettiest lot in a generation."

"In that case, is your wife going to have an *accident*? It'd be a shame if that first step down to your cellar suddenly came loose."

They laugh from the gut, hissing and sputtering, and from the sound of it, they are falling all over themselves. Their voices move away from us until I can't hear them anymore. I pull myself up and run to Erin, who is still cowering behind the tree.

"They're gone," I say. I take hold of her hand and try to calm her.

She peers around the tree, her face tight with anger, and jerks away from me. "Of all the impossible things you've ever convinced me to do, coming out here has to be the worst one. The guards almost spotted us."

"But they didn't," I remind her.

"You asked me to meet you here," she says, her eyes narrow and suspicious. "Why? What is so important?"

I've rehearsed what I'm going to say to her, practiced it over and over in my head, but as I stand in front of her I'm

lost. She's angry with me. That's not what I want. "I care about you more than anything. I want you to be happy. I want *us* to be happy."

She stays quiet as I stumble over my words, her hands clenched at her sides.

"Things feel hopeless so much of the time, but when I'm with you—"

"Stop," she says, her expression a mask of anger. "Is this what you brought me out here for? To tell me the same thing you've been telling me since forever?"

"It's not the same thing. The ball is so close now. This may be our last chance to leave."

Erin's brow shoots up in surprise. "Leave?" She comes closer, looking me dead in the eye. "There is no leaving, Sophia. Not for you, not for me, not for anyone. We are going to the ball because it is the law. It is our only hope for making some kind of life."

"Without each other," I say. The thought makes my chest ache.

Erin straightens up but casts her gaze to the ground. "It can be no other way."

I shake my head. "You don't mean that. If we run, if we try—"

Laughter in the distance cuts my plea short. The guards are circling back. Erin ducks behind the tree, and I dive into the brush.

"You don't get to work in the palace if you don't know

how to say yes and shut your mouth," says one of the guards as he comes to a stop directly in front of my hiding spot. "If you don't have the stomach to do some of the things he's asking for, you're better off here with us."

"You're probably right," says another man.

Through the branches, I see the tree Erin is hiding behind. The hem of her dress has caught on a rough patch of bark and is poking out. The guard looks in her direction.

"What's that?" he asks. He takes a step toward her, his hand on the hilt of his weapon.

I kick against the bush. The entire thing shakes, causing a cascade of rust-colored leaves to rain down on me.

"What was that?" one of the men asks.

They turn their attention back to me. I shut my eyes tight. *I'm dead.*

I think of Erin. I hope she'll run. I hope she'll make it back. This is all my fault. I only wanted to see her, to try to convince her one last time that we should leave Lille once and for all. Now I'll never see her face again.

I glance toward the tree line. I can make a run for it, draw the attention of the guards away from her. I might be able to lose them in the woods, but even if I can't, Erin can get away. My body tenses, and I pull my skirt between my legs, tucking it into my waistband and slipping off my shoes.

"There's something in there," a guard says, now only an arm's length from me.

The guards move closer, so close I can hear them breathing. I glance past them. There's a flash of baby blue between the trees. Erin's made a run for it. A clanking sound cuts through the air, metal on metal—a sword drawn from its scabbard. Over the rush of blood in my ears and the pounding of my own heart, a horn blasts three blaring notes.

"We've got a runner," a gruff voice says.

I freeze. If I'm caught this far into the woods, the guards will make an example of me. I picture myself being paraded through the streets in shackles, maybe even stuffed into a cage in the center of town where Lille's people are so often made to endure public humiliation as penance for stepping off the beaten path.

The men's voices and footsteps move away from me.

I'm not the runner they are talking about. I haven't even started running yet. My heart crashes in my chest. I hope they can't gain on Erin quickly enough.

The guards' voices trail off, and when they're far away from me, I tuck my shoes under my arm and run into the shadowy cover of the forest. Ducking behind a tree, I peer around the trunk as several more guards gather. They've got an older woman with them, already bound at the wrists. I breathe a sigh of relief and immediately feel a searing stab of guilt. This woman is now at the mercy of the king's men.

I turn and make a break for it. With my legs pumping

and lungs burning, I think I hear the snap and snarl of hounds, though I can't be sure. I don't dare look back. I trip and smash my knee on a rock, tearing the flesh. The pain is blinding, but I pull myself up and keep going until the trees start to thin.

At the path that leads back to the heart of town, I pause to catch my breath. Erin is nowhere to be found. She's safe.

But this is Lille.

No one is ever really safe.

2

As I trek home all I can think of is Erin. The forest is deep and dangerous and, most important, off-limits. I know she won't stay hidden. She'll make her way home, but I need to know she's safe.

The bell tower in the town square rings out the hour. Five loud clangs. I'm supposed to meet my mother at the seamstress's shop for a fitting, and she specifically told me to come there bathed, with my hair washed and a fresh face. I look down at myself. My dress is smudged with dirt and blood, and my bare feet are caked with mud. I escaped the king's men, but when my mother sees me, she'll probably end me herself. Guards patrol the streets. Many more than usual now that the ball is so close. I keep my head down as I pass by. They aren't too concerned with me.

They're on high alert because of what people in Lille are calling *the incident*.

It happened two weeks ago in the northern city of Chione. There were rumors that an explosion damaged the Colossus, a twenty-foot likeness of Mersailles's savior, Prince Charming, and that the people responsible were ferried into Lille under cover of night and taken into the palace to be questioned by the king himself. Whatever happened, the details he was able to pry from them sent him into a state of panic. For the first week after the incident, he ordered the mail stopped, our curfew was moved up two hours, and pamphlets were distributed that assured us the incident was nothing more than an attempt by a rogue band of marauders to vandalize the famous statue. It also stated that the perpetrators were put to death.

When I get home, the house is empty and silent. My father is still at work, and my mother is waiting for me at the seamstress's shop. For a moment, I stand in the center of the floor, looking up at the wall hangings over the door.

One is a portrait of King Stephan, haggard and gray; it shows him as he was before his death only a few years ago. Another is of King Manford, the current king of Mersailles, who wasted no time in pushing out his official royal portrait and requiring that it be hung in every house and public space in town. Our new king is young, only a few years older than I am, but his capacity for cruelty and his

lust for absolute control rivals his predecessor, and it is on full display in the third frame hanging over our door. The Lille Decrees.

1. A minimum of one pristine copy of *Cinderella* will be kept in every household.
2. The annual ball is a mandatory event. Three trips are permitted, after which attendees are considered forfeit.
3. Participants in unlawful, unsanctioned unions will be considered forfeit.
4. All members of households in Mersailles are required to designate one male, of legal age, to be head of household, and his name will be registered with the palace. All activities undertaken by any member of the household must be sanctioned by head of household.
5. For their protection, women and children must be in their permanent place of residence by the stroke of eight each night.
6. A copy of all applicable laws and decrees along with an approved portrait of His Majesty will be displayed in every household, at all times.

These are the hard and steadfast rules set forth by our king, and I know them by heart.

I go to my room and light a fire in the small hearth in the corner. I consider staying until my mother comes

looking for me, but I'm worried that she already thinks something terrible has happened. I'm not where I should be. I bandage my knee with a clean strip of cloth and wash my face in the basin.

My copy of Cinderella's tale, a beautifully illustrated version my grandmother gave me, sits on a small wooden pedestal in the corner. My mother has opened it to the page where Cinderella is preparing for the ball, the fairy godmother providing her with everything her heart desired. The beautiful gown, the horse and carriage, and the fabled glass slippers. Those attending the ball will reread this passage to remind themselves what is expected of them.

When I was small, I used to read it over and over again, hoping that a fairy godmother would bring me everything I needed when it was my turn to go to the ball. But as I got older, as the rumors of people being visited by a fairy godmother became fewer and farther between, I began to think the tale was nothing more than that. A story. I told my mother this exact thing once and she became distraught, telling me that now I certainly wouldn't be visited if I voiced so much doubt. I never said anything about it again. I haven't looked at the book in years, haven't read it aloud like my parents want me to.

But I still know every line.

An ivory-colored envelope sits on the mantel, my name scrawled across the front in billowing black script. I take it

down and pull out the folded letter from inside. The paper is thick, dyed the deepest onyx. I read the letter inside as I have done a million times since it arrived the morning of my sixteenth birthday.

Sophia Grimmins

King Manford requests the honor of
your presence at the annual ball.

• • •

This year marks the bicentennial of the first ball,
where our beloved Cinderella was chosen by
Prince Charming. The festivities will be grand,
and made all the more special by your attendance.

• • •

The ball begins promptly at eight o'clock
on the third of October.

• • •

The choosing ceremony will begin
at the stroke of midnight.

• • •

Please arrive on time.
We eagerly await your arrival.

Sincerely,
His Royal Highness King Manford

On its face, the invitation is beautiful. I know girls who dream of the day their invitation arrives, who think of little else. But as I turn it over in my hand, I read the part of the letter that so many of those eager young women miss. Along its outer edge, in a pattern that reminds me of ivy snaking its way up latticework, are words in white script that give a dire warning.

You are required to attend the annual ball. Failure to comply will result in imprisonment and seizure of all assets belonging to your immediate family.

It is the first of October. In two days, my fate will be decided for me. As terrible as the consequences will be if I'm not chosen, the danger in being selected might be worse. I push those thoughts away and shove the letter back in the envelope.

I leave the house and make my way to the dressmaker's shop, taking the long route and hoping I'll run into Erin. I'm worried to death about her, but I know my mother is worried about me too.

The shops along Market Street are lit up and bustling with people making last-minute preparations for the ball. A line winds out of the wigmaker's. I peer into his shop window. He's really outdone himself this year. Elaborately styled wigs crowd his shelves. They remind me of wedding

cakes, tiers upon tiers of hair in every shade, the ones on the top shelf featuring things like birds' nests with replicas of eggs tucked inside.

A young girl sits in the wigmaker's chair as he places a four-tiered piece atop her head. It's layered in fresh pink peonies, topped with a small model of Cinderella's enchanted carriage. It teeters precariously as her mother beams.

I hurry past, cutting through the throngs of people and ducking down a side street. The shops here aren't ones that my family and I have ever set foot in. They're for people with enough money to buy the most outrageous and unnecessary baubles. I'm not really in the mood to feel bad about what I can and can't afford, but this is the quickest way to the town square, where I can cut across and find Erin before I meet my mother.

In the window of one shoe store, Cinderella's glass slippers sit on a red velvet cushion, illuminated by candlelight. The little placard next to it reads, Palace-Approved Replica. I know if my father had the money, he'd snatch them up immediately, hoping they'd set me apart. But if they're not enchanted by the fairy godmother herself, I don't see the point. Shoes made of glass are an accident waiting to happen.

Farther down there is another line snaking out of a small shop with shuttered windows. The sign above the

door reads Helen's Wonderments. Another sign lists the names of tinctures and potions Helen can brew up: Find a Suitor, Banish an Enemy, Love Everlasting. My grandmother told me Helen was just some wannabe fairy godmother and that her potions were probably watered-down barley wine. But that didn't stop people from putting their trust in her.

As I pass by, a woman and her daughter—who looks about my age—hurry out of the shop. The woman has a heart-shaped glass vial in her hand. She pops the cork and pushes it to the girl's lips. She drinks the whole thing in one long gulp, tilting her head back and looking up at the evening sky. I hope the things my grandmother said weren't true, for that poor girl's sake.