

“The declaration of love marks the transition from chance to destiny, and that’s why it is so perilous...”

—Alain Badiou

## ONE



### *Mishella*

“DEAR, SWEET CREATOR. That man’s ass needs its own web page.”  
“Right?”

“Maybe it already has one. Have we tried looking it up? What would that search string even be?”

“*Cassian Court’s Glorious Glutes?*”

“Sounds about right.”

I scowl at the exchange between my best friend and my princess of a boss. Debate adding a huff, though that might make them giggle harder. As it is, Vylet lifts her head, lets the wind blow her black waves as if she is shooting a scene for a movie, and slowly bats the thick lashes framing her huge lavender eyes.

“Is there an issue, Mistress Santelle?”

Her purposeful drawl on the s’s turns her query into a tease—though before I can properly purse my lips, she is answered by a long, snorting laugh. I add a groan to my own response, stabbed at the sound’s source. Brooke Cimarron, Princess of the Island of Arcadia, might have the loyalty and love of thousands across our land, but her royal in-laws are not in that legion—and outbursts like that are no help to her cause at all.

The groan might be forgotten but the sigh is not. Even after three months in her employ, my work is still clearly cut out for me. In my princess’s own words, I am to do everything in my power to “whip the

royal decorum into shape.” Some days, the task is easy. Some, like today—are entries in the *Sweet Creator Help Me* journal.

I have one of those. Literally. Though on the outside, as I observe right now, the book simply says *Action Items*.

Despite the lists taunting me from the pages of said journal, there are many more checks in Brooke’s “plus” column than not. Brooke has a good heart, a willing spirit, and a loyalty to Arcadia rivalling that of many native-born to the island. If I can only work out a way to keep Vy from enabling the woman’s snarky American side...

Not likely anytime soon.

Most certainly not during this week.

Cassian Court’s arrival in Arcadia has sealed that certainty solidly enough.

*Cassian Court.* Just rolling my mind over the man’s name jolts me with such intense heat, I wonder if the Earth has rolled too quickly on its axis, shifting my chair into the sun instead of beneath the table on the Palais Arcadia lawn. That only forms the start of how he has upended my world in just two days.

Two. Days.

*Cassian Court.*

I cannot help myself. The syllables are synonymous with so many other expressions. *Engineering genius. Corporate wizard. Billionaire icon. Consultant to kings.* Yes, that includes the leader of our land, Evrest Cimarron, who has invited his friend for a “modernization think tank” with Arcadia’s leaders. Yanking a kingdom forward by two hundred years in two days is no small feat.

Two. Days.

*World. Upended.*

Not to mention my thoughts. And my bloodstream. And the very wiring of my nervous system...

“Mishella?”

Vylet’s playful prompt is perfectly timed. “Hmm?” I am grateful to leave behind a memory that has been taunting, of the man in his formal wear from the party King Evrest threw for him last night. Out of respect for Arcadian tradition, he wore a doublet-style jacket with his tailored Tom Ford pants, everything flawlessly fitted to his tapered torso and long legs. The black garment had featured one modern touch: a moss green zipper instead of buttons, drawing out the same shade in his eyes.

Matching zippers had adorned his hip boots, making him look very much “at home” in the ballroom’s courtly crowd...

“You truly have no comment?” The edges of Vy’s lips curl up. Little wench. She knows I would sooner watch a storm come in over the sea than have to look at the body part they’ve referred to on Cassian Court’s incredible form.

Incredible.

And magnificent.

And breath-stealing.

And in just two days, has made me painfully aware of how small my island home truly is. The man and his magnetic pull have actually made me yearn for a land as big as his, though the expanse of America still does not seem big enough for all these new feelings he inspires—sensations that sweep in again, as I gaze upon him training at swords with Jagger Foxx on the palais lawn.

Dizzy.

Giddy.

Hot.

Needy.

No.

*I cannot. I will not.*

Instead, I compress my lips harder. Swing another censoring look at my friend. “I was being courteous, in deference to Her Highness.”

“Oh, here we go again,” Brooke mutters.

Vylet hides a laugh behind her elegant fingers. “But Mishella wants to practice her protocol, *Your Highness*.”

Brooke glowers. “Am I going to kick *your* ass about this now, too?”

“Not in that pretty tea frock, missie.”

“Oh, even *in* this rag, ho-bag.”

“Who you calling ho...*ho*?”

“Say it twice because I own that, baby.” Brooke swirls then stabs an index finger. “Especially after last night’s marathon under that man of mine.”

“Ohhh!” Vy roller coasters the syllable with knowing emphasis. “And I thought you were just walking funny from the platform pumps.”

“See how I did that? Gotta have a cover, girl.”

They snicker harder than before. I fume deeper than before. Attempt a prim glance down at my lap, but only get two seconds of the reprieve. A fresh punch of testosterone hits the air, swinging all our stares back up.

*By everything that is holy.*

The masculine energy is well supported. Even a hundred feet away, the two men are like gladiators of old, shirtless bodies lunging, gleaming muscles coiling. Jagger Foxx, the Arcadian court's lieutenant of military operations, does not give his American guest an inch of visitor's courtesy—a handicap Court would take as an insult anyway.

The result is...

Glorious.

Slanted forward, his body forty-five degrees from the lawn, Cassian Court is a breath-stealing study of sinew, strength, might, and motivation. His thighs, clearly etched beneath his white fencing pants, wield the force of a stallion. His torso, the color of a lion in the sun, coils with equal power.

Their blades clash. Metallic collisions *zing* the air. Jagger stumbles back. Again. Grunts hard—though not as deeply as the man besting him. Just like that, Cassian Court turns into an even more exhilarating sight. His beauty is meant for the glory of physical triumph.

All the heavens help me, I cannot stop staring. Or wondering. What would it feel like...to be held by those massive arms? What would it be like, to lie beneath that beautiful body? To spread my legs, allowing his hardness against my welcoming softness...my tight readiness...

My throat turns into the Sahara. I swallow, coughing softly as the moisture clashes with the dryness.

“Holy hell,” Brooke murmurs.

“Which has to be where I’m going, after what I just imagined about that man.”

Vy’s confession welcomes new knives of confusion. Logically, I should be reassured. My reaction to Court is not unique or special. But another part, new and foreign, fights the urge to think otherwise. To scratch her eyes out for sliding into my territory.

As Brooke would eloquently put it: *what the hell?*

Men are a complicated subject in my life—contradicted by their very simplicity. They are like clothing or cars or office tools: needed but not coveted, functional but not desirable. Yes, some exist in higher-end form, but I do not think of them longer than the time it takes to interact with

them. I do not dare. Father and Mother will eventually use me as a pawn to gain what they want from one. It might be the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but politics are politics—and world-changing decisions are still made by the heads between men’s legs, not the ones on their shoulders. I have to be grateful for reaching my twenty-second year without having to bother with it yet.

But I will.

And lingering lustings for Cassian Court will not make it any easier.

“*Pffft.*” Brooke flings the comeback at Vy while reaching across the glass table for her sun tea. At least Brooke *looks* like a princess today, the pale blue tea dress coaxing matching sparkles in her eyes, the daisy yellow sweater matching her platform pumps. Shockingly, she has listened to my suggestion of wearing a pearl necklace and earrings with the ensemble. “We’re mated, not entombed.” But looks can be deceiving. Her saucy smirk proves it. “Besides, neither of us is the treasure who’s caught Mr. Court’s eye—and likely some other body parts.”

Mortification. While I debate whether to let it curl me into a ball or send me under the table, Vy erupts in laughter. “True that, sistah!”

At least that helps with the decision. No shrinking now. I fire off a new glare. “Have you two gotten into the nectar?” I am half serious. Nipping at the Arcadian fruit wine, followed by sitting in today’s ruthless sun, would be a reasonable explanation for their giddy moods.

“Right.” Brooke leads on the response, laughing wryly. “We could only wish.”

Vy echoes the snicker. “Word to the princess.”

They collide fists in a punching motion, followed by fanning and wiggling their fingers, prompting my fresh fume. It is a joke. I *know* that. I also admit these are confusing times for everyone in Arcadia. Our country is emerging from two hundred years of self-imposed separation from the world into a reality where nearly everything has changed. The adjustment is unsettling at times, even to Brooke, who was born American but has lived here for the last seven years.

Now, she wears the gold band on her left hand declaring her legally married to Prince Samsyn—a detail Vy enjoys forgetting whenever they get together. That turns me into the reminder police.

“Do not forget your place, Vylet Hester. Brooke is your *princess.*”

I delete the part about Brooke having been the kingdom’s actual queen for a week—seven days she never wants to remember again, though they have brought one joyous result. At the time, she needed a *secran* as soon

as possible, so I entered her employ—and found a purpose I never thought possible for my life. For the first time, I am no longer Fortin Santelle’s pretty trinket of a daughter, or even a faceless Arcadian court clerk, filing and typing my days away. Brooke depends on me. Confides in me. Relies on me for input on everything from appropriate clothing choices to modern political issues from a native Arcadian’s point of view. It is a serious responsibility, and I never take it lightly—despite the fact that she sometimes does.

“Okay, listen up, missie.” The woman herself sets her drink down so hard, some of the tea sloshes out. “If you don’t loosen that caboose and relax a little, I’ll have to personally hunt up some nectar for *you*.”

And sometimes, she *completely* forgets. Like now.

“Yes! Do it!”

“No. *No.*”

My response overlaps with Vy’s, doubling our volumes into an outburst across the lawn—enough to freeze the men in mid-clash. But only one of them adds a concerned glance, giving his opponent a crucial second of advantage. It is the only second Jagger needs. With a shout, he plunges. With a grunt, Cassian goes down.

With a gasp, I lurch to my feet.

Just as swiftly, I sit back down. Too late. The damage is wrought. My chair has certainly sprung flames, since they waste no time climbing to my face. Vy and Brooke give me no mercy, either. They actually clap as I sit there, drowning in embarrassment, and continue the racket so long, the men obviously assume the praise is for them. Well, *Jagger* does. As soon as he helps Cassian up, turning both their bodies into gleaming masterpieces of sun-drenched muscle, he sweeps a gloating bow.

Brooke and Vy laugh even harder.

Shockingly, my lips twinge. Their joy *might* be a little contagious...and the day *is* perfect, with the breeze carrying salty moisture bites off the ocean, along with jasmine and orange from the trees. A little laughter cannot be such a crime. Perhaps it is...therapeutic. I am not a prude—I grew up in the back halls of the Arcadian Court, after all—but talking about lust and experiencing it firsthand are two separate things. *Entirely*. I have spent the last two days as skittish as a toddler at her first swimming lesson. Everyone has to get in and paddle sometime, though taking oneself too seriously can only be dangerous.

A perfect reassurance—

Until I swing my sights up, to watch Cassian Court approaching across the grass.

Striding like a king.

Rippling like an Olympian.

Staring like a hitman.

At me.

*Laughter, meet shredder. Throat, get back to the desert. Composure...*

Composure has gone rogue—doing whatever it bloody well wants. My mind is frozen but my sex is incinerated, cranking the intensity with every smooth, sure step with which the man dominates the lawn. By the time he and Jagger stop beneath the table's wide umbrella, my hands are a rigid ball in my lap, and my breaths are rapid pumps against my flower-print dress—which is suddenly, completely, too tight. Oh sweet Creator, how he makes my breasts throb...and ache.

And *tingle*?

“Oh...*my*.” I keep it to a whisper for my ears alone. *Miracle*. My hand flies up to assuage my racing heartbeat. I easily disguise the action by fiddling with the polished piece of Minos Reef coral suspended around my neck. Usually, the purple trinket lends me focus and strength. Not now. Not even close. Not with Cassian Court continuing with his unflinching stare at me...his unyielding *examination*. I cannot help but note every nuance of his gaze. Even in this blazing heat, it is the color of cool forests. I am drawn to thoughts of waterfalls and lagoons in those glades...and him swimming in them, drenched and naked.

*By the powers...*

When his features crunch, horror sets in. I've blurted it aloud. Can he read the thought that has prompted it too? Does he know the lewd turn of my mind—and his importance in it?

*Oh crap oh crap oh crap...*

And now, I am as guilty as Vy of borrowing the vulgar Americanism. But that is where I have descended. Where *he* has made me fall.

“Miss Santelle?”

And just like that, with just two words, has me flying once more. Takes me higher, as I lift my gaze to meet his. Shivering on a breeze of awakening, as I absorb the regal angles of his face, contrasted by the tumble of his dark gold hair and the contemplative indents of his dimples.

“Are you all right?”

I feel my mouth open. Know sound of some sort needs to follow. “I...”

“She is *fine*.” Vylet’s tone is playful but her gaze watchful, installing an invisible tether between Cassian and me with the back-and-forth concentration. As if one is not there already...

“At least she *will* be,” Brooke adds. “Forgive her, Cassian. It’s this thing called sunshine. New concept for my sweet little *secran*.” She tosses a huff at me then twirls a hand at the palais. “She’s always cooped in that place. Day and night, busy as Cinderella in those dark castle halls.”

Jagger snorts while shrugging into a black T-shirt. Tosses one to Cassian. “And what does that make you? The evil stepmother?”

“Dude, I’m a wicked stepsister—in all the best ways.”

Vylet masks a giggle behind a hand. The tiny nick in her front lip, betraying the cleft repaired when she was a babe, still makes her insecure when men are near—yes, even Alak, her completely smitten *betranli*. “Corrupting her prince, one day at a time.”

“Only when it comes to attending his royal balls.”

Jagger and Vy fill the air with their laughs. Yes, I fume again. How can I caution the princess about making comments like that when our friends *reward* her for them? Jagger, now Prince Samsyn’s key aide in running the security forces of the kingdom, cannot be expected to know better—but I need more support from Vy.

And maybe I am simply being a toddler at the pool again.

I drop my head, wrestling with the thought.

Until muscled thighs in white pants kneel in front of me. And a hand, powerful and long-fingered, slips over my knee. And another hand, warm and firm, tilts up my chin.

And that stare, dark and majestic, wraps around me again. Into me.

“Out of the cinders, Ella.” His murmur is formed of the same perfect velvet. “It’s time to live in the light.”

Survival mode. Now.

*Lungs, inflate.*

*Heart, keep going.*

Survival may be overrated. Extremely. Dear sweet Creator, all I want is the blissful release of giving in to his sensual hunt...

*Ugh.*

Can I get any stupider? Princes like him do *not* chase backward bumpkins like me. They might pretend to...for a little while. Toy with them. Are perhaps amused by them, until the island novelty wears off and

they return to the heights of Mount Olympus—also known as New York City—to bed nymphs and marry goddesses.

And despite that entire diatribe, I bear my gaze just as deeply into his—before rasping ridiculous bumpkin words.

“Maybe I like the dark better.”

*Stupid. Stupid. Stupid.*

I expect more giggles from the girls—but they are busy bantering with Jagger, leaving room for the bubble around Cassian and me to thicken. For the world around us to fall away...

For his nostrils to flare, as if catching my scent.

For his lips to part, as if anticipating a bite into his prey.

For my whole body to quiver, as if wanting to let him...

Through one exquisite moment.

Another.

Before being ripped from our reverie by a hand at my elbow. Twisting in, issuing a silent command to get on my feet. I obey before looking, for that grip belongs to just one person in my world—the sole person I expect least right now, and dread most.

“*Paipanne.*” My dutiful murmur is a thread of disguise. Surely he can see every illicit thought that has been possessing my mind and body.

“Mishella,” he levels, from between tight teeth.

Once more this afternoon, my throat convulses on a dry gulp. *He has seen.* Creator help me.

“High Councilman Santelle.” Cassian’s tone comes as a surreal interjection. He is not a stupid man. Surely he sees how Father’s quiet fury wrings the joy from the air, though he smiles as if exchanging niceties about the weather. “What a pleasant surprise. Thought I’d have to wait for the pleasure of greetings until this evening.”

My nerves flee. No. *Wrong.* They double. Ice in one’s veins is tricky that way. “Th-this evening?” I dare a glance up at him, forcing my features to neutrality—not an easy task when the wind plays with the edges of his hair, and molds his T-shirt against the steely planes of his pectorals.

“Yes.” Father’s tone modulates to match Cassian’s—on the surface. Likely, nobody but Vy and I detect its lingering tension. “It is Mr. Court’s last evening on the island, and your *maimanne* thought he might be tiring of the rich palais food. He and his retinue shall be dining with us at seven.”

“I—I did not know.”

“Because you were dressed and out the door before we could tell you this morning.”

“And you must be so proud.” Vylet slices out the statement before Father can issue another accusation. If I am not tempted to kiss her feet for that, her finishing look is the decider. Few are experts at sweet-but-deadly like my rule-breaking friend.

“I’ll back that up,” Brooke adjoins. “Your daughter works harder than anyone I know, High Councilman. My life would be a mess without her.”

*Paipanne* colors. A little. “You are too kind, Highness.” Dips his head with a thin smile. It assures me little, for his initial agenda, whatever that is, lingers in his steel gray eyes. “Her *maimanne* and I are certainly proud of her. On that note, I must have needs to ‘borrow’ her for a moment. About tonight, you know.”

“Of course.” The distrust in Brooke’s eyes cannot be missed from a hundred feet away, but I sneak a reassuring nod in her direction. Father will not be able to wreak too much damage right here, without all of them watching and noticing. He will restrict the blows to verbal form only; I am sure of it.

And to that, I am well accustomed by now.



*Cassian*

THE CRAVING IS as shocking as it is sudden.

But sure enough, I long to smash in every inch of Fortin Santelle’s self-righteous face.

Why not? He’s an ass.

*But you’ve known that from the beginning.*

Still, he’s the ass willing to vouch for *my* ass with the decision-makers about Arcadia’s new infrastructure needs. So yes, I’m conflicted. But—perhaps this has nothing to do with Mishella. Not really. I’m just trying to reconcile doing business with a rung-grabbing bastard. Replacing my discomfort about a future in professional bed with the man by breaking—translation: snapping in half—one of my own hard-and-fast rules. Pushing my nose into his personal affairs. Actually caring about the fact that he treats his own daughter like a puppy to be disciplined.

*Stay out of it. Personal ties become business pigsties. Didn't you learn that the hard way? And you haven't dealt with thousands like him before? Even the man you once called father-in-law?*

A huff escapes me, thick with relief. At least now I have an explanation. *Displaced emotions, courtesy of the shit storm known as old baggage.* It makes sense—meaning now I can compartmentalize and cope.

Until I look once again at her.

Mishella.

*My little Ella.*

The words embed into my psyche like diamonds stirred into concrete. She has changed the structure of my being. But how the *hell*? I've seen her exactly six times in the last three days, including what was supposed to be a “casual” welcome reception at the palais but turned into the cataclysm of my first sight of her—and I remember every moment of every encounter since. Even just passing *hellos* with her make it happen all over again—the world fading away, the senses captivated by her—and just like that, my interest is amplified in the island girl with hair like spun gold and eyes like a toy store collector doll.

*Interest?*

No. I'm not “interested” in her.

I'm fascinated by her. Entranced. Maybe a little obsessed. Maybe a lot more than that. Worse, I have no idea how to explain it—which should scare the living fuck out of me, but doesn't.

She feels...right. Secure. Even safe. Yet she's the most exhilarating adventure of my life, a high-wire walk with a view of the entire world.

*Just don't look down.*

“Christ.” I grit it to myself while bending down, retying a perfectly secure shoelace. It's a quick fix; I can keep eyes locked on Fortin and her, but hide the growing erection she has inspired.

Yeah. *Inspired.*

What was the word Samsyn used with me last night after dinner, when describing how he'd felt the moment he met his Brooke? It was an Arcadian phrase, unique in its blend of Turkish and French influences...

*Soursedias.*

Yeah. That. It's goddamn perfect, coming close enough to even the English word for what that woman has done to me.

*Sorcery.*

Yeah. That has to be it. She's an island enchantress, empowered by the Arcadian spirits to wrap my mind, soul, and body in a searing, clinging erotic spell. And fuck, is it working. I want to give in to the rest of it, just to know how high and hot she'd take me...

And how far I'd take her. Claim her.

*How greatly would her gorgeous innocence change...transformed by lust? How much wider could I make those big blue eyes? What would her pretty bow lips look like, formed into an O of raw desire? What would her refined voice sound like, panting in the spasms of a mindless orgasm?*

I break a shoelace.

Snap back to reality.

*I have to get off this damn island.*

It will happen—first thing tomorrow morning. I'll wrap up the talks with Santelle tonight—not *looking* in his daughter's direction while doing so—then tell Mark and his crew I want the plane ready by daybreak. That'll allow time to check numbers in the foreign markets, call my key project managers in New York, then get out of here before Mishella Santelle can weave any more wonderful witchery into my willing soul.

*Witchery.*

Who the fuck am I kidding?

She's not a witch. Fairy, maybe. Perhaps an angel, or a mermaid given legs. The certainty hits harder as I stare at her again. She holds herself as regally as any of those, even as her father continues quietly berating her—I cannot label it anything else, if the expression on his face is to be believed—and even in how she sways after he pivots, heading back inside.

But only one sway.

After that, she returns to the queenly stance, holding it despite the wounds Fortin has inflicted. Not physical cuts, but damage just as torturous to bear. Somehow she does, returning to the table with astounding composure. Keeping her shit together even while Brooke and Vylet peal with laughter at some joke from Jagger.

For a moment, I am incensed. How can her two closest friends not see her pain?

Realization. Massive. Maybe *she* doesn't want to see it.

An answer I'll likely never have—and shouldn't want to. Rescuing knight, I sure as hell am not. Repulsive giant in the clouds? *There's* the fit.

And it is well past time for me to climb back up the beanstalk. To remember that counting beans is the only magic left in my life now. No more turns at sorcery. I've had my turn at that shit already. Sucked up my life's ration of magic. Neither of them exist for me anymore.

There's only tonight's dinner to get through first. With the sorceress and her family.

God fucking help me.