

MARY MECHAM



BLUEBEARD'S BRIDE



A DISPLACED FAIRYTALE

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SAMPLE CHAPTER



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CHAPTER 1

(NOTE: STILL UNEDITED)



*T*he click of my bridal chamber's door closing sounded like a coffin being latched shut. The handmaidens left, and I caught sight of myself in the mirror, wondering how long it would be until crimson blood stained my white wedding dress a deep, permanent, scarlet.

Don't think about that, I instructed myself firmly. You won't die. You marry him, free Nadia, and get out. Nothing more.

To distract myself, I tilted my head, considering my appearance. The handmaidens my future husband Rahil had hired to dress me up had done their work well. I had never even dreamed of such finery on my wedding day.

The gown itself was a masterpiece of silk and silver thread, so soft against my skin that I barely even felt it. Tiny pearls traced my bodice in thin, delicate lines, pale as moonlight. My light brown hair was curled into glossy waves and pinned up with gold combs that were each more valuable than all my personal possessions put together. There wasn't much a street rat like me owned, anyway. I could scarcely believe that this time yesterday, I was still on the streets with

Nadia and today I was getting married to the man responsible for my sister's imprisonment.

There was a faint clanking noise as the guards outside the chamber adjusted their position and I glared at the door. They had already taken my sister to prison; did Rahil truly think I was so cowardly that I would leave her so I could run free?

My shoulders tensed. I could still see her fearful, terrified face as they had dragged her away at Rahil's command.

It was all so unsettling. No man in his right mind would trade a prisoner's freedom for her sister as a bride. Rahil was richer than any man I knew. If it weren't for the rumors of his long line of vanished brides, women would have been lining up to marry him. There were so many heavily jeweled necklaces around my neck that it felt like it would snap and I couldn't prevent my jaw from locking. Once Rahil married a woman, no one ever saw or heard from her again. Was that to be my same fate? It would be worth it, as long as Nadia went free.

I gripped the edge of the vanity. Samira, one of the women who occasionally hired me to make potions, had married Rahil three years ago, but then after months of a seemingly happy marriage, she vanished without a trace. Rahil had her pronounced dead, but was no body to bury. The magistrate had claimed it was a drowning while Rahil and Samira were vacationing near Coronis together.

What lies.

Samira had hated the water. She didn't even like my bubbling cauldrons. She never would have vacationed there.

Rahil had killed her; I was sure of it. I was just as sure that he had killed the four wives previous to Samira, and now, I

was to be his sixth. As least my sister would be spared from my same fate.

There was another jostling of the guards' weapons and armor as they adjusted position.

"Alia?" Rahil knocked at the door. "The magistrate is ready for us."

I straightened and held my chin high.

"May I come in?" he asked from behind the door. His voice was a deep, melodious one that could have fooled anyone into believing he was a gentleman.

"You may as well. I clearly can't stop you from doing anything."

He turned the handle and entered. For a man in his early forties, he still looked fit and young, but there were the early hints of gray streaking through his dark hair. His thick beard, however, was so intensely black that with the sunlight streaming through the window, it looked like the deepest shade of blue. *Bluebeard*, I kept calling him in my mind.

"Ah, you got my gift." He trailed his hand across the necklaces, and I had a momentary stab of panic. Would he choke me with them? "They look stunning on you."

My lips curled upward. "You chose well. They're beautiful."

"Perfect to match their wearer." He placed one of his hands on my elbow. "Are you ready?"

"I don't have a choice in the matter, do I?"

He looked slightly hurt. "Alia, I know you don't love me and that we barely know each other. But you needn't be hostile. As my wife, you're welcome to anything I own. You don't have to love me to have a life of comfort."

My cold smile didn't quite reach my eyes. "Your generosity knows no bounds."

The sensation of his hand against my skin made me want to cringe away. That was the hand that had commanded guards to drag my sister to prison. That was likely the hand that had taken Samira's life. I may not know the exact reason he was so eager to rush to the altar, but I could withstand anything if it meant freeing Nadia.

The door creaked open. "It's time," the guard outside informed us. "Are you ready?"

The magistrate was waiting in the parlor, robes pooled around him. His thin, liver-spotted hands trembled as he fumbled with the extensive marriage contract. The candles on the table flickered, throwing long, skeletal shadows across his face and his lips pinched together as though he'd swallowed something bitter. He was the only one there besides the two guards posted at the door.

"This is a blessed day," the magistrate said, his voice thin and reedy, though he did not look at me when he spoke. His gaze darted to Rahil instead, and then quickly away.

Rahil's hand tightened on mine as though to anchor me in place. "Say the words, magistrate. No need for ceremony."

The magistrate cleared his throat and lifted the parchment. His eyes slid toward me at last, and I saw something flicker there, something that sent a chill crawling along my spine. Was it regret? A silent warning? Perhaps it was both.

"Alia, daughter of Brisden," he said, his voice faltering, "do you...do you enter this union freely?"

There was a long pause. His words seemed to hang in the still air, heavy and binding. His hand shook as he held the contract out, and I realized this was not the first time he had spoken them in this very building. I was just one of Rahil's

many brides, and I couldn't be the only one who suspected that Rahil had done away with his former wives.

"She enters this union freely," Rahil said, his deep voice velvet-smooth.

"I need to hear it from her," the magistrate said. His eyes bored into mine, silently pleading, *Say no. Save yourself.*

My lips curved into a smile I didn't feel. "Yes," I said, my voice confident. "I enter this union freely."

Rahil smiled through his bushy beard.

The magistrate swallowed, shoulders sagging as though he'd just personally sealed my coffin shut. "Rahil, do you—"

Rahil didn't even give him time to finish. "Yes, I enter this union freely."

The magistrate nodded so that his tall hat bobbed back and forth then continued, "Do you have vows to exchange?"

"I did," Rahil said. "It isn't every day I get to marry a beautiful woman."

"And yet this is the sixth time I've performed this ceremony for you within ten years," the magistrate murmured quietly.

"And I've paid you handsomely each time," Rahil responded smoothly, then turned his attention back to me. "To my new bride, I promise you a life without hunger or want as long as you remain by my side. I pledge to give you silks, riches, and every luxury your heart desires. You'll be the crown jewel of my house, Alia, and I will keep you polished, perfect, and treasured forever."

Yes, I would be treasured until I lost his interest and was murdered.

Rahil raised his thick eyebrows expectantly. What, did he expect me to pronounce my undying love to him the day after he'd thrown my sister in prison? Did he think that, simply

because he was offering to feed and clothe me that I would fall into his arms? Was I supposed to be grateful that the only price he was willing to accept to free my sister was my hand in marriage?

“I appreciate your vows, but I didn’t prepare anything in return,” I said coolly.

Rahil’s facial expression didn’t change. “No matter.”

The magistrate’s frail shoulders slumped in defeat. “Then I now pronounce you husband and wife.”

Rahil bent to kiss me, his breath hot against my face, and I barely registered the perfunctory peck on the lips that was more beard than mouth. He then pulled me into his arms and the magistrate muttered a tremulous blessing that neither Rahil nor I paid attention to. No words could bless a marriage that was doomed to end with one of us as a murdered victim. Finally, the magistrate handed over the signed and sealed document.

It was official.

I was married to a monster.