

MARY MEHAM

BLUEBEARD'S
BRIDE

A DISPLACED FAIRYTALE

CHAPTER 1



Nadia came bolting through the crowd, terror in her eyes and hands clutching something so hard her knuckles had turned white.

“Thief!” a voice behind her thundered. “Stop that woman!”

Scales, what had she done now? Her long hair was tangled and dirty and I immediately suspected she’d been involved in some sort of scuffle before escaping.

“Quick! Hide me,” Nadia gasped. “They’re coming.”

“Again?” I hissed. I snatched her wrist and dragged her sideways into the thick crowd bustling around the market. Barkers called customers toward their stalls, their items positioned to catch the light and sparkle invitingly.

“Walk, don’t run,” I told her. “Slow your breathing.” With a cautious look over my shoulder, I pulled off my shawl and threw it around Nadia’s shoulders.

“They’ll still recognize me,” she fretted.

“What did you take?”

She opened her hand to reveal a perfectly circular, glittering amethyst.

“Shoals,” I cursed. “You’ll be in huge trouble.”

Guards had entered the market, the feathers on their helmets easily visible through the crowd. We’d never make it to the worship center in time, and my shawl haphazardly thrown around Nadia’s shoulders wouldn’t be nearly enough of a disguise.

“Give it to me,” I snapped at my sister. She handed over the gemstone and I turned to one of the shopkeepers. “I’ll give this to you right now if I can have that dress behind you and use your changing room.”

The shopkeeper’s eyes widened and he held out his hand for the jewel. “Deal.”

I shoved Nadia behind the changing curtain and threw the dress in after her.

“Tell me about your wares,” I told the shopkeeper, angling my body so any guards that came searching wouldn’t see the jewel.

“Fine stitches for even finer ladies,” he said, raising his voice so the other women nearby would hear. “Dresses that turn heads and steal hearts!”

“You have such beautiful craftsmanship,” I told him, placing my hand over his when he tried to hold the jewel up to the light, forcing his arm back down. “How long did it take to learn to make dresses like these?”

“You, there!” a deep voice rumbled behind me.

The shopkeeper and I both froze, but I didn’t turn around. The shopkeeper looked over my shoulder and cleared his throat. “May I help you?”

“We’re looking for a young woman who stole a jewel.

About this tall with long brown hair. She was wearing a dirty blue dress. Have you seen her?"

The shopkeeper glanced fearfully at me, and I gave my head the tiniest shake from side to side. Please, please, please, I prayed. We'd made it this far.

"Yes," the man said, and my insides seized. But then he continued, "She ran that way." He pointed to the other side of the market. The guards hurried away and I was able to breathe again.

"Thank you," I whispered once they had gone.

"Always glad to help my customers," he said with a smile.

Right. More like he was always glad to help himself. At least the gemstone was his problem now. I ducked behind the privacy curtain and found Nadia finishing the last buttons on the dress.

"You aren't finished yet," I told her grimly, then pulled out my short knife, preparing to cut her hair short.

"Alia!" she shrieked, but I clapped my hand over her mouth.

"It's too recognizable."

"Then hide it under a scarf," she said, wriggling away.

"Flames alive, Nadia, we don't have time to argue. The guards are certain to come back."

"Then let's go. But you aren't cutting my hair."

Why did my sister have to be so difficult? I poked my head out then pulled Nadia back into the street.

"It would've made you less recognizable," I told her in an undertone.

"It would've made me uglier," she said. "I like my hair long."

The guards were interrogating more shopkeepers several stalls down and questioning passersby, so I set my feet the

opposite direction. Nadia kept acting like she was going to break into a run, and I kept my hand locked on her wrist.

“Walk,” I told her again. “They’ll notice if you run.”

“They’re looking for me,” she said, her voice tight and tense.

“They’re looking for abnormal behavior and a woman in a blue dress with long hair. You have a red dress and you should have had short hair if you had just listened to me.”

“I’m growing it out,” she muttered.

“You can grow it as long as you want in prison if you get caught,” I told her through gritted teeth. “Now stop and look at some merchandise.” I stopped to look at some small mirrors at a sorcerer’s booth before continuing on.

Nadia rolled her eyes and jerked her hand away. “I can walk by myself.”

“As long as you act natural. Now, what made you take a jewel like that? It would be too easily traceable. There’s no way you could sell that without people knowing it was stolen,” I scolded her. “How many times have I told you that if you’re going to steal, only take a few coins or an item that isn’t unique?”

“Sorry,” she grumbled. “That old codger looked rich enough that I didn’t think he’d notice. I just wanted to help us move up in the world.”

“I know. But you don’t need to. I have enough clients now that we don’t need to steal. You could get arrested.”

Nadia shot me a withering look. “You could get arrested for making and selling illegal potions on the black market.”

“I told you I sell health remedies,” I said evasively.

“I’m not a child anymore,” Nadia snapped. “You don’t have to pretend. I know what you’ve been doing. I’ll be of age next month—”

“Which is all the more reason that you should be extra careful,” I interrupted. “Adult prisons aren’t the same as juvenile detention centers. Now keep your head down.”

More guards were coming toward us. We moved to the side, heads bowed respectfully and let them pass.

“Almost there,” I murmured. “Once we’re out of the square, we can make it to the worship center. Father Eldridge will be—”

“Halt right there!” The barked order came from behind us.

“Don’t turn,” I told Nadia, and I pivoted with a wide-eyed, naïve expression on my face that shifted to horror when I saw the dress shopkeeper pointing at us.

“They’re the ones you want!”

Nadia didn’t hesitate to bolt. Immediately, guards followed, tackling her within seconds. She fought against them, but to no avail. She was no match for them. They pulled her to her feet and a man with a dark, bushy beard approached her.

“Let her go!” I said, starting to run to her, but another guard caught me from behind. “Nadia!”

“Rahil, is that the woman?” The guard holding Nadia had addressed the bearded man.

Rahil...I knew that name. My eyes widened as dread stole over me. I’d heard rumors about Rahil, a fantastically wealthy man who had an unexplained trail of vanished wives, including one of my former clients.

“Yes. It looks like she changed her dress, but it’s her,” he said, running a finger down her face. “She has a scar on her cheek in the same place.”

Nadia jerked her head away and kicked the guard nearest her.

“She stole the dress from me,” the shopkeeper said promptly.

“We bought that dress!” I shouted at him.

“Bought it with this, you mean.” The shopkeeper lifted the gemstone up and it twinkled innocently in the sunlight. “I’m returning it to its proper owner.”

“And I thank you for your integrity,” Rahil told him. “You shall be rewarded.” He kept a firm grasp on Nadia as he dug out a fistful of gold coins from his pocket. I couldn’t help my jaw from dropping. No wonder Nadia had assumed that he was rich enough not to miss a few jewels. If only she knew the rest of his story.

The greedy shopkeeper leapt forward to take the gold and exchange it for the jewel. “Many thanks for your generosity,” he said, bowing over and over before vanishing into the crowd.

“There’s some paperwork needed to press charges,” the guard told Rahil.

Rahil held up a finger. “One moment,” he said, turning to face Nadia. “You stole from me, but I’m a forgiving man. In fact, I have a proposal for you.”

“What?” Nadia said nervously, leaning away from him.

“Marriage in exchange for not pressing charges.”

Nadia’s mouth fell open in horror, and the horrific stories I’d heard of his other wives went rattling around in my head until I thought I would explode.

“You can’t!” I burst out. “She isn’t even of age yet.”

Rahil frowned. “Ah, that does present a slight problem.” He tilted his head, considering Nadia. “I suppose I’ll have to press charges after all.”

“We can send her to an adult prison even if she is underage,” one of the guards said.

"It wasn't her! It was me. I stole it," I blurted out. The whine of panic in my head wouldn't go away. I had to protect Nadia. I couldn't let her go to prison.

Rahil shifted his gaze to me. "Oh, really?"

The guards laughed. "Don't let her fool you, Rahil. These two are street rats who've lived in the gutters most of their lives. The older one has been in plenty of trouble before. They deserve what's coming to them."

An odd expression settled on Rahil's face. "What will happen to them?"

"Prison, likely for many years. It'll be good to get them off the streets."

"Wait," Rahil said, holding up a finger. His eyes were darting back and forth between me and Nadia. "If I don't press charges, what would happen?"

"The younger one would still serve a minimum of a month for resisting arrest. I'd have to look up the former charges against her sister—"

Rahil pressed a gold coin into the guard's hand. "Shame those records were lost."

The guard grinned and tapped a finger to the side of his nose. "Such a pity."

"What is the maximum penalty this one could be assigned if I press charges?" Rahil asked, looking back at Nadia.

The guard shrugged. "Probably a minimum of five years or up to ten years, depending on the value of the item she stole from you."

"Definitively ten years, then," Rahil said, then turned to me. "Do you want to keep her out of prison long-term?"

I clenched my jaw and slowly nodded.

“Then I’ll make the same offer to you. Marry me and I’ll drop the charges against her.”

My vision narrowed so I could only see Nadia’s panicked face.

“When would this wedding take place?” I asked.

“Tomorrow, first thing in the morning.”

“Fine.” It didn’t matter if the rumors were true and the man was a murderer. The only thing that mattered was that my sister was in danger and I had an opportunity to save her. I would agree to anything if it would make them release Nadia. Then she and I could disappear tonight and never return.

“Take them both into custody, then,” Rahil said, and the arms of the guards tightened around me.

“No! I agreed! Let us go!” I shouted.

“I’m sure you can understand I need to keep you in custody until you hold up your end of the bargain. And she will have to remain in prison for a month for resisting arrest.”

The guards began to drag both of us away, Nadia toward prison and me toward the courthouse.

“I’ll get you out, Nadia!” I shouted after her. “I promise!”

CHAPTER 2



The 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 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 had hired to dress me up had done their work well. 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, and there were so many heavily jeweled necklaces around my neck that it felt like it would snap. My light brown hair was curled into glossy waves, 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 at this time yesterday, I was still on the streets with Nadia, scolding her about her sloppy pickpocketing, and today I was marrying 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 and I momentarily closed my eyes, but all I could see was Nadia's terrified face as they had dragged her away at Rahil's command.

It still didn't make sense.

No man in his right mind would trade a prisoner's freedom for 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. But once Rahil married a woman, no one ever saw or heard from her again. Was that to be my same fate? If so, 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 two years ago, but then she vanished without a trace. Rahil had had her pronounced dead, but there had been no body to bury and no service had been held. The magistrate claimed it was a drowning while Rahil and Samira were vacationing near Coronis together.

What lies.

Samira had hated the water. 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 the next. At least Nadia would be spared from that same fate.

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

"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 hints of gray streaked 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 received my gift." He reached around me to trail his hand across the necklaces at my throat, and my skin crawled. "They look stunning on you."

My lips curled into a cold smile. "You chose well. They're beautiful."

"Perfect to match their wearer. 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."

I remained stiff as a board. "Your generosity knows no bounds."

The sensation of his hand moving up to cradle my neck

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. One month. I only had to survive for a month, then I would escape and take my sister with me.

A guard poked his head in through the open door. "It's time," he informed us. "Are you ready?"



The magistrate was waiting in the parlor, robes pooled around him, his thin, liver-spotted hands trembling 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. His gaze darted to Rahil then quickly away, avoiding looking at me all the while.

Rahil's hand tightened on mine across the altar 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 running up my spine. Was it regret? A silent warning? Perhaps it was both.

“Alia, daughter of the kingdom 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. This couldn't be the first time he'd spoken those same words in this very building to yet another woman kneeling across from Rahil.

“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.

I set my jaw. “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, causing his tall hat to bobble back and forth, then continued, “Do you have vows to exchange?”

“I do,” 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.

He slid an opulent, diamond-studded ring onto my finger, but it failed to catch the light or bring any of the happiness a bride should feel on her wedding day.

Rahil raised his thick eyebrows expectantly. What, did he expect me to pronounce my undying love to him after everything he'd done? Did he think that simply because he was offering to feed and clothe me, I'd fall into his arms? Was I supposed to be grateful that the only price he was willing to accept to free my sister was a forced marriage?

“I appreciate your vows, but I didn't prepare anything in return,” I said coolly. “Nor do I have a ring for you.”

Rahil's facial expression didn't change. “No matter. I don't need vows or another ring.” He held up his hand, where a heavy gold band encircled his finger and a fat ruby gleamed near his knuckle. “My first wife gave me one that I promised I'd never take off.”

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

Rahil leaned across 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 stood and pulled me into his arms while 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.