

# THE *First* *Ball*

## PART ONE

PRINCE CHRISTOPHE DE L'Avigne, only son of King Leon, heir to the kingdom of Spinick, was having a ball.

More specifically, his father was throwing a ball for him, and Kit was obligated to attend.

The entire idea of dressing up in court robes for a dance he had no interest in, held less than little appeal for him. But 'you must find a wife,' his father said, and so Kit was obliged to do his best to obey the royal decree.

It wouldn't be so bad if he wasn't so young.

Yes, he was a prince. He knew he needed heirs. As an only child, he'd heard the same commands for years. He didn't even resent his father's wanting him to marry, but to think that three days of dancing would find him a love match was insane, and insulting. Not that the entire idea of a love match wasn't ludicrous in itself. Love did nothing but hurt the parties involved. Kit saw the pain in his father's gaze every time something struck a memory of Kit's mother. And not that his father was hoping for a love match. The eligible ladies invited received invitations because of their parentage and their diplomacy and all those princely habits instilled in a woman looking to someday be princess.

Kit didn't know what he was looking for in a partner, but he knew it was not to be found at a dance.

The problem was that every lady to attend, each private dossier his father had gifted Kit with, held the details and sketch of a woman far older than Kit, lovely, each of them, but old, and he was too young. He wanted to walk down the streets and enjoy the delights of a new discovery with someone as excited as himself. He wanted to know fun and adventure, not propriety and rules. For all the...the godsdamned rules were driving him mad. And what respectable lady of the court would consent to breaking them when they'd been tasked to wed him and honor him as heir? He wanted an equal. Not some politically advantageous partner.

From birth, he'd been trained to rule. Even at thirty he spent most of his days in the council chambers with his father, meting out what justice he could. So his words were whispered from

behind a screen and regurgitated from the king's mouth, it was still Kit's counsel that ran the kingdom in part. Not that anyone knew or cared about that, since, right, he was too young to rule but not to marry.

If any god, of the Light, the Dark, or whatever, cursed his child, Kit would find a way to kill the entire lot of them.

He slumped in his chair staring out over the balcony of his room to the gardens beyond, walled around by the great city his forefathers had built to shelter their people. Marius sat on the railing, ostensibly staring at the same nothing Kit focused on, though Kit knew the man was focused solely on him. Did the idiot think he would jump from the balcony to try and escape? He hadn't climbed down the damn trellis in years and despite the prophecy and his father's insanity, Kit wasn't suicidal. Technically, his father hadn't decreed that Kit had to pick a bride tonight, just that this would be the venue for such a date. Of course, the king's favorite threat at present was: you will find a bride at this ball, or at the one after. Kit had a feeling "the one after" was followed by a repetitive number of the same and he already felt his feet aching at the thought of dancing with shrews over the years.

"This is madness."

"This is the life of royalty, your highness."

Kit growled. "You can shove your 'your highness' where the sun doesn't shine, Marius."

"Come now, Kit. I highly doubt your future bride will tolerate such sentiment from you."

"I wasn't speaking to the—"

"Language."

"Go to hell."

The soldier laughed.

"A bloody ball." Kit slapped his open palm against the armrest, felt the sting of it reverberate up his arm. "If I were an assassin, I would choose a ball to make the kill in. Plenty of people to pass the blame to, enough to hide away in if the need arose. A mercy even, to the poor sod forced to endure the waltz."

Marius stood from his perch, the easy camaraderie between them gone as the soldier emerged and Kit felt heat flame in his cheeks at the dark scowl on his friend's face. "You don't ever talk about that lightly, Prince." He didn't say that too many people had already died trying to protect Kit for him to be so flippant about threats.

Kit didn't need the reminder. "Apologies, Captain. It's bitterness and stupidity that runs away with my tongue."

Kit watched the rigidity of the other man ease, tension in shoulders and back release until Marius was almost relaxed. Once there had been three of them, an older guardian to both Kit and Marius. Some days, Kit still felt the blood coating his hands from the gut wound Jaden took for him. He knew better than to joke at his life expectancy, knew the cost of his safety far more intimately than he wished. It was part of the reason he trained so hard with the sword, so that no one else needed to risk themselves for him.

"There won't be any assassins at the ball, Kit."

"There's no guarantee of that."

"There's me."

Which wasn't what Kit wanted to hear, even though he wouldn't say anything against the affirmation. He didn't know what he would do if he lost Marius. He'd rather the man far away from danger than Kit's first line of defense.

He looked back over the gardens, liveried servants lighting torches along the trellised paths, the first guests wandering out across the lawns, wasting time until the strains of music began to spill from the ballroom.

Soon he'd have to dress, if his manservant wasn't already inside the room waiting impatiently to hurry Kit along. He'd tried to refuse the appointment of the pompous little man, but Leon insisted, and Kit obliged to avoid another argument that he would lose. What did he care, in the end, if he was considered competent enough to dress himself or required a wet-nurse to get the job done? The peasants and nobles would think what they liked regardless.

A knock sounded on the glass behind him. "I suppose it would be terribly gauche to be late to my own ball."

"Terribly, my lord."

Kit tried a smile, felt his face crack with the expression.

"Buck up, Kit. At least the girls will be pretty."

Marius laughed at the sneer crossing Kit's face, turned and opened the door to the servant and Kit's fate.