

Momentarily, Scarlett entertained the idea of experiencing not only a little happiness, but magic. She thought of what it would be like to enjoy Caraval just for a day, to explore Legend's private isle, before closing the door on her fantasies completely.

There was one week until Scarlett's wedding. This was not the time to embark on a foolhardy adventure. Tella had plundered Scarlett's room, and Julian said she'd also left a ransom note, but Scarlett's father would eventually figure out it was all a hoax. Staying here was the worst idea possible.

But if Scarlett and Tella stayed only for the first day of Caraval, they could make it back in time for Scarlett's wedding. Scarlett doubted her father would figure out the truth about where they'd been that soon. They'd be safe, as long as she and Tella remained for only the first twenty-four hours, and their father never found out where they'd really been.

"Time's almost up, Crimson."

The cloud encasing them thinned, and the rim of the isle came into view. Scarlett saw sand so fluffy and white, from the distance, it looked like icing on a cake. She could almost picture Tella running her fingers along it—and coaxing Scarlett to join her—to see if the sand tasted as sugary as it looked.

"If I go with you, do you promise there will be no more kidnapping attempts if I try to return to Trisda with Tella tomorrow?"

Julian put a hand to his heart. "On my honor."

Scarlett wasn't sure she believed Julian had much honor. But once they all made it inside Caraval, he'd probably abandon them anyway.

"You can start your rowing back up again. Just be careful with the splashing."

The corner of Julian's lips curved as he dipped his oars back in the water, this time soaking Scarlett's slippers with cold.

"I told you to stop splashing me."

"That wasn't me." Julian rowed again, more carefully this time, but water still soaked her feet. It was colder than even Trisda's crisp coast.

"I think there's a hole in the boat."

Julian cursed as water moved up to their ankles. "You know how to swim?"

"I live on an island. Of course I know how to swim."

Julian shucked his coat and tossed it over the side of the boat. "If you take off your clothes it will be easier. You're wearing some sort of undergarment, right?"

"Are you sure we can't just row to shore?" Scarlett argued. Although cold drenched her feet, her hands were sweating. Isla de los Sueños appeared to be about one hundred yards away; it was farther than she'd ever swum.

"We can give it a go, but this boat is not going to make it." Julian removed his boots. "We're better off using the time we have to undress. The water's cold; it'll be impossible to make it fully clothed."

Scarlett scanned the cloud-covered water for another sign of a boat or raft. "But what will we wear when we're on the island?"

"I think we just need to worry about making it to the island. And by 'we,' I mean you." Julian unbuttoned his shirt, revealing a row of brown muscles that made it clear he'd have no problems in the water.

Then without another word, he dove into the ocean.

He didn't look back. His strong arms cut through the icy current with ease, while arctic water rose around Scarlett until the bottom half of her dress floated about her calves. She attempted to row, but only succeeded in sinking the boat deeper.

She had no choice but to jump.

The air rushed out of her lungs, something cold and unbreathable taking its place. All she could see was the color white. Everything was white. Even the tones of the water had shifted from swirls of pink and turquoise to frightening shades of icy white. Scarlett bobbed her head to the surface, gasping for air that seared as it went down.

She tried to push against the current with the same ease as Julian, but he'd been right. The corset binding her chest was too tight; the heavy fabric around her legs kept tangling. She frantically kicked, but it did no good. The more Scarlett fought, the more the ocean battled back. She could barely keep above the surface. A wave of cold splashed over her head, dragging her all the way down. So cold and heavy. Her lungs burned as she battled to reach the surface again. This must have been how Felipe felt when her father drowned him. *You deserve this*, said a part of her. Like hands, the water pressed her down

down

down. . . .

"I thought you could swim." Julian wrenched Scarlett up until her head broke the surface of the water.

"Breathe. Slowly," he coaxed. "Don't try to take in too much at once."

The air still burned, but Scarlett managed the words: "You left me."

"Because I thought you could swim."

"It's my dress—" Scarlett broke off as she felt it dragging her down once more.

Julian took a sharp breath. "You think you can stay afloat for a minute without my help?"

He brandished a knife with his free hand, and before Scarlett could agree or protest, he darted under the water.

Scarlett felt as if forever went by before she felt the pressure of Julian's arm wrapping around her waist. Then, the tip of his knife pressed against her breasts. Scarlett's breath caught as the sailor cut away her corset, drawing a decisive line down her stomach to the center of her hips. The arm around her waist tightened, and so did something in Scarlett's chest. She'd never been in such a position with a boy. She tried not to think about what Julian was seeing or feeling as he finished slicing the heavy dress and pulled it off her body, leaving only her wet chemise clinging to her skin.

Julian gasped as he resurfaced, splashing Scarlett's face with water.

"Can you swim now?" His words were more labored than before.

"Can you?" Scarlett asked hoarsely, her ability to speak strained as well. It felt as if something very intimate had just happened, or

maybe it was intense only for her. She imagined the sailor had seen lots of girls in various states of undress.

“We’re wasting our energy with talk.” Julian started swimming, this time staying close to her side, though she couldn’t tell if it was because he worried about her safety, or if he was weak from helping her.

Scarlett could still feel the ocean working to drag her under, but without her heavy gown, she could fight it. She neared Sueños’s gleaming white shore at the same time as Julian. Up close the sand looked fluffier. Fluffier, and now that she thought about it, much more like snow. More than she’d ever seen on Trisda. Resting clouds of magical white, a cold carpet stretched across the entire shore.

All eerily untouched.

“Don’t give up on me now.” Julian grabbed Scarlett’s hand, tugging her toward the perfect tufts of white. “Come on, we need to keep moving.”

“Wait—” Scarlett scanned the crisp snow a second time. Again it reminded her of a frosted cake. The kind she’d seen in bakery windows, perfect and smooth, without so much as a Tella-size footprint in the snow.

“Where’s my sister?”