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# WISTERIA

ADALYN GRACE



HODDER &  
STOUGHTON

# PROLOGUE



**O**N THE MORNING OF HER IMPENDING DEATH, LIFE LOUNGED BENEATH a wisteria tree.

Her magic had shaped the branches, twisting them into a canopy to shield her from the sun while she curled her feet in the grass, its dampness slick between her toes. Beside her, Fate was hunched over his latest work in progress. Life followed every twitch and pull of his deft fingers as they wove a lifetime into a tapestry. There was a glimmer in his eyes as he worked, one that Life wished to forever commit to memory.

Because soon Death would arrive to take all that she was. And once he came, there was no knowing what pieces of herself might be left. She could only hope to remember that Fate tended to bounce ever so slightly when he was particularly pleased with one of his creations, and that he had a dimple on his right cheek that looked as though someone had carved the tip of their fingernail into his flesh, forever marking him with a mischievous crescent moon. She

hoped she remembered the way all the light in the world seemed to pool toward him at any given moment, and how he would bask in it. Whether it was midafternoon or an hour when only the crickets sang, her husband was radiant.

Life hoped that she would remember his hands, too. Not just how clever they were—as precise with an instrument or a paintbrush as they were with thread and needle—but how they melded against her body. She had no awareness of how she came to exist, and often wondered whether she'd been one of Fate's sculptures magicked to life, for it was his hands alone that knew her every contour. Every touch between them was familiar, instinctual.

"Enjoying the view?" Fate didn't need to peer behind him to know that Life was spying, no less struck by his beauty now than the day she'd first laid eyes on him. Fate was her summer sun—too intense for most to bear, while she tipped toward him like a flower, craving his touch.

Life shifted to her knees, wrapping her arms around Fate's neck as she looked over his shoulder at the tapestry.

*Red.* There was always so much red.

She'd known Fate long enough to understand why—red symbolized passion, and there was nothing he loved more. Fate's favorite stories were always rife with the color, telling tales of those who would give up their very soul to have whatever it was they most yearned for. He was never choosy with what that passion was. It could be art, literature, invention, romance, cooking, gardening. . . . If there was passion to be found, Fate would weave the most glorious stories out of it. For he, too, was a man of great passion.

Fate's hunger for the world and all its treasures was the very trait that Life loved most about him. Yet while there wasn't anything inherently *wrong* with passion, Life had long since found that people too frequently lost themselves within it. Fate was no exception; too many times she'd found him hunched like a wolf before its feast, a bloodied maw replaced by unblinking, ravenous eyes as he crafted his tales.

Passion made people forget themselves. It kept them from feeling the change of seasons upon their skin or curling their toes into the grass. Passion stole their health. It made both time and families slip away as people lost themselves to their pursuits.

If Life had her way, she'd weave more blue into those tapestries. Red might have made for the most entertaining stories, but it was the calm of blue that made the happiest ones. And so Life slid her hand down her husband's arm, savoring the warmth of his skin as she whispered, "I know it's hard for you, but do remember to be kind."

His hand stilled midstitch, and Fate sighed at the familiar argument as he set his work on the grass. He stared at it for a long while, fingers twitching as he fought the urge to pick the tapestry back up. It took him longer than it should have to turn toward Life, capturing her by the waist and drawing her into his lap. "I'm kind to you. Is that not enough?"

Life slipped her fingers through the silk of his golden hair, wishing it could be the two of them here forever, rooted beneath the wisteria. She would sustain herself on his lips and would make her home within his voice, never tiring of his touch.

"I am not the only one in this world who matters, my love."

Fate's fingers curled against her waist. "You are to me."

Even knowing that this argument was futile, she should have pressed harder. Instead, the tension in her body eased as Fate laid her upon the grass. His weight was the most comforting warmth as he lowered himself onto her. His lips drew a path from her jaw to her collarbone, and Life angled her head back, eyes fluttering shut as she lingered on each sensation. She wanted to wrap his love around her. To bury herself in it. But as quickly as Fate was atop her, he was off again when someone cleared their throat from the opposite side of the wisteria.

"You're fighting a losing battle," Death said, his shadows slipping around the tree's roots, stretching along them until he stood before her. "You know it's not in Fate's nature to be kind." His voice was laced with an edge of sorrow that raised the hair on her arms. Life sneaked a sideways glance at Fate, wondering if her husband noticed.

"The next time you visit, do me a favor and bring a bell that I may fasten upon your shawl" was all Fate grumbled as he smoothed a hand over his shirt to readjust himself.

The tension in Life's chest eased. Perhaps it was cruel of her, but she was glad that Fate didn't know this was to be their final night together. He would only argue, demanding his brother save her when all Life wished was for her final hours to be spent with the sun's warmth against her skin and Fate as her companion.

Just as it was not in his nature to be kind, it wasn't in Fate's nature to understand why she needed to die. He wouldn't understand that, although she spent each morning fighting the deep lines in her skin

to appear as youthful as the day they'd met, her bones had grown weary. She no longer had the energy to journey with him to remote villages or bustling cities to check in on his favorite creations and sample their art. She could no longer travel the world just to taste the finest food or the richest wine, and though Fate had promised her that he was happy, she knew he yearned for everything she'd kept him from these past several years. Age had fatigued her, stripping away all pretenses and desires so that nothing in the world sounded nicer than feeling the pulse of the earth against her skin as she rested beneath her favorite tree with her favorite people.

Life had given up on fighting the inevitable. There could be no life without the experience of death, so what choice did she have but to let herself finally succumb?

Death presented his charges with three options once he claimed their life. The first was the least favorable: A soul could choose to remain on earth, stuck where they died until they were ready for the second option, which was to move into the Afterlife. The third choice he presented them with was reincarnation, which was Life's only option. Her soul would come back in a new vessel, and so long as she existed in some capacity, souls would continue to be made.

Life had long accepted a future where she would leave her body behind and come back anew. Though she'd never tell her husband, she was excited to discover what awaited her and to try out a new form as it journeyed through every stage of life. The only thing that frightened her was her memories, for while Death believed they could find a way for her to keep them, there was no guarantee.

"You know little of my nature these days," Fate told his brother.

"I've hardly seen you the past year. For all you know, I could be a changed man."

Life said nothing as the shadows melted from Death's skin, knowing full well the reason for his absence. Death could barely look at her without his emotion seeping through. Life had known she would die this year; she'd asked only that he wait until autumn so that she could enjoy the summer sun one last time. For who knew whether it would feel different in her next body? Perhaps the next one would prefer winter. Perhaps, in the future, she would hate to be warm.

"I'm glad to see you," Life whispered at last, standing to greet her brother by marriage.

"I wish you weren't." Death's whisper was a winter storm. "We don't have long. You need to tell him now, Mila, or I will."

Beside her, Fate went rigid. "Tell me what?"

Life turned to her husband, whose eyes dawned with an understanding that burned her soul. "I had hoped for one more night with you, my love, but it seems we do not have that luxury."

"No," he whispered, stepping forward to grab Life's hand. He wound his fingers through hers before she could peel back, his eyes twin flames that festered with a rage she could not turn from.

"No," Fate repeated, this time directed at his brother. "She's not going anywhere."

Only then did Death lift his eyes. "I have no say in where I am called, brother. As you cannot control your charges, neither can I." His whisper was as gentle as morning dew; never had Life heard him so quiet.

Her heart fractured when Fate's golden threads wound around her body, drawing her back so that he was positioned between her and Death. He held his hand before him as he spoke, as if to placate his brother. "There is no call." Life could not see then how Fate's expression softened. She could not see the eyes that pleaded with Death, nor his fragility. "She is my *wife*. You have taken from me everything that I've ever cherished, and I have never stood in your way. I have never asked you for anything. But I am asking you now, brother, to make an exception. You cannot take her from me."

Death's resolve splintered, and Life knew then that she would not be the one to come out ahead. There was nothing soft about his voice this time as he drew closer toward Fate, whose light dimmed before the reaper. "What, exactly, is her life worth to you?"

Life opened her mouth to speak, to argue, but Fate's golden threads wound around her tongue, holding it down as Fate promised, "She is worth everything."

Life jerked her head toward the reaper, pleading for eyes he would not show her. For a touch he would not provide. She fought Fate's restraints, reaching out a trembling hand, but Death turned his face into his cowl and drew away.

"For a life such as hers," he whispered, "*everything* may just be the cost."

Life clawed at the threads, wishing she could tell Fate that this was not their goodbye. That she wanted him to let her go in peace so that she could one day return to him. For in peace, Life hoped that she could remember all she'd left behind once she found her new body. But should the death be painful... should it be one that

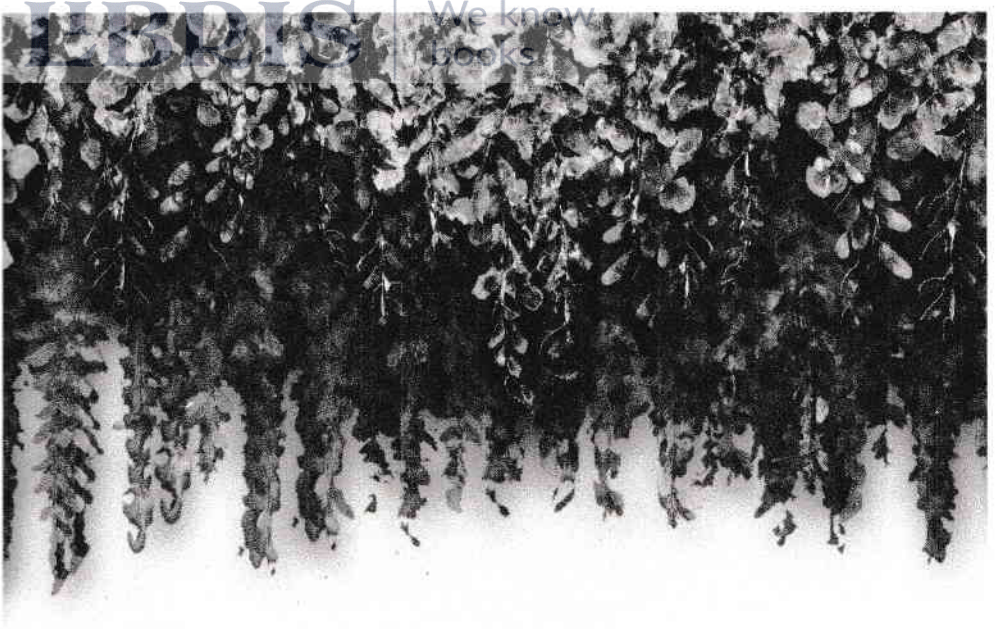
consumed her so thoroughly that she could think of nothing else...

Death had warned her that retaining her memories might be a challenge, and Life knew without a doubt that should such a death happen, she would lose everything. She would lose *him*.

And yet the threads upon her tongue were soon shackles on her wrists, holding Life back as she felt a terrible fate carve its place within her.

And as her husband sealed his bargain with Death, he turned toward Life and promised, "I will not lose you."

But he already had.



# PART ONE

# CHAPTER ONE



IT'S SAID THAT THE WISTERIA VINE IS A SYMBOL OF IMMORTALITY.

Blythe Hawthorne had often admired the flower—as deadly as it was beautiful, and resilient enough to thrive for centuries even if left forgotten. Yet as she crushed a petal between her fingers and let its color bleed onto her skin, she pitied the wisteria for the fate that she and the flower shared. How tragic that they were to forever remain rooted in Aris's garden, their splendor wasted on the likes of him.

Blythe, at least, had one advantage over the wisteria—she had thorns. And when it came to Aris Dryden, she had every intention of using them.

Blythe trailed a look across the garden to where dozens of guests stood in wait. Sunlight cut through the wisteria canopied above them, bathing the courtyard in a golden haze of light that had people squinting as they chatted, their breath pluming the air.

Blythe envied their fine coats. Her skin was chilled from

autumn's dampness, and the gossamer sleeves of her gown did little to stave it off. November was an unusual time for a wedding, though with Aris, she supposed she should always expect the unusual. If the alleged prince decided he wanted to get married on an autumn morning at an hour when the sun hadn't yet dried the dew on the moss, who was society to question him?

Aris Dryden was a man who got what he wanted. This day just happened to be a rare exception, for he was being forced to marry a woman he could not stand.

And to be fair, the feeling was mutual.

"You don't have to do this." It was Blythe's father, Elijah Hawthorne, who spoke. "Say the word, and I'll get you out of here."

In any other world, Blythe would have taken him up on the offer to flee Wisteria Gardens. But to secure Elijah's safety after he was falsely accused of murder, Blythe Hawthorne had spilled her blood upon a golden tapestry and bound herself to Aris—to *Fate*—for the remainder of her years. She even had a glowing band of light on her ring finger to show for it, the golden hue so faint that it was nearly invisible to the eye.

"I'll be all right," she told her father. It was no use to try to sway him with sweet words about how much she loved Aris or how happy she was to be marrying the brute. As it was, she was shivering in the damp air and itchy from what felt like a hundred layers of taffeta, and she had to keep fighting off a sneeze every time her veil brushed near her nose. She had no patience left within her to lie, and Elijah was no fool; he knew that Blythe had never intended to marry.

"You'll make a beautiful princess," he whispered, and Blythe

surely would have agreed, had Aris *actually* been royalty. “But I want you to remember that Thorn Grove will always be open to you. No matter the day or the hour, you can always return home.”

“I know that,” Blythe promised, for she understood that truth better than anything.

Only when Elijah seemed certain that there would be no talking her out of this wedding did he bend to kiss her head. He adjusted Blythe’s veil to shroud her face as he eased away. She scrunched her nose, turning to the side to sneeze.

When the lilting pings of a harp began a sauntering melody, Elijah extended his arm. “Are you ready?”

Never. A million years would need to pass before Blythe could even consider being *ready*. But instead of the truth, she told her father, “I am,” for if this was what it took to keep him from being hanged, it was more than worth the sacrifice.

As much as Blythe tried to focus, the world spun as she walked into the courtyard. The ground was a pathway of stepping stones with vibrant clovers that curved around each one; Elijah steadied her as she nearly slipped on them, her choice of shoe providing little grip.

Blythe’s heart beat against her chest like a torrent, drowning out the pinging of the harp, which slowed its tune to match her careful footsteps. She looked to the crowd, to faces that blurred into sharpened slivers of too-white teeth and hungry eyes that devoured her with every step, as if readying to pluck the skin from her bones. Blythe held her chin sharp even as her hands fought to tremble, refusing to let anyone scent her fear.