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HOLLY

A BELLADONNA NOVELLA

ADALYN GRACE

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY LOTUSBUBBLE





ONE



BLYTHE

IT'S SAID THAT THE HOLLY SPRIG HAS LONG been used to ward off evil spirits.

As Blythe Dryden stood with her hands on her hips, assessing the foyer of Wisteria Gardens, she pondered how much of the plant she'd need to decorate with to ensure the most magnificent holiday season. Then she added another bough over the entryway, just for good measure.

It was fortunate that she'd mastered her powers since learning she was the reincarnation of Life, as Blythe could now grow as much holly as it took to repel demons, spirits, or any other mischievous deities that decided to take a sudden interest in her family. She'd shove every bough down their throats if necessary, because this year, they were all going to have a perfect Christmas.

Wisteria had transformed since Aris's return. For years Blythe had missed the magic that once pulsed through the home's very essence. Now, with its owner returned, Wisteria's heart had resumed its proud beating. Giant statues of fantastical beasts loomed near the grand oak doors, welcoming all who entered into a spacious foyer adorned with intricately carved nutcrackers taller than she was, and well-decorated snowmen that never seemed

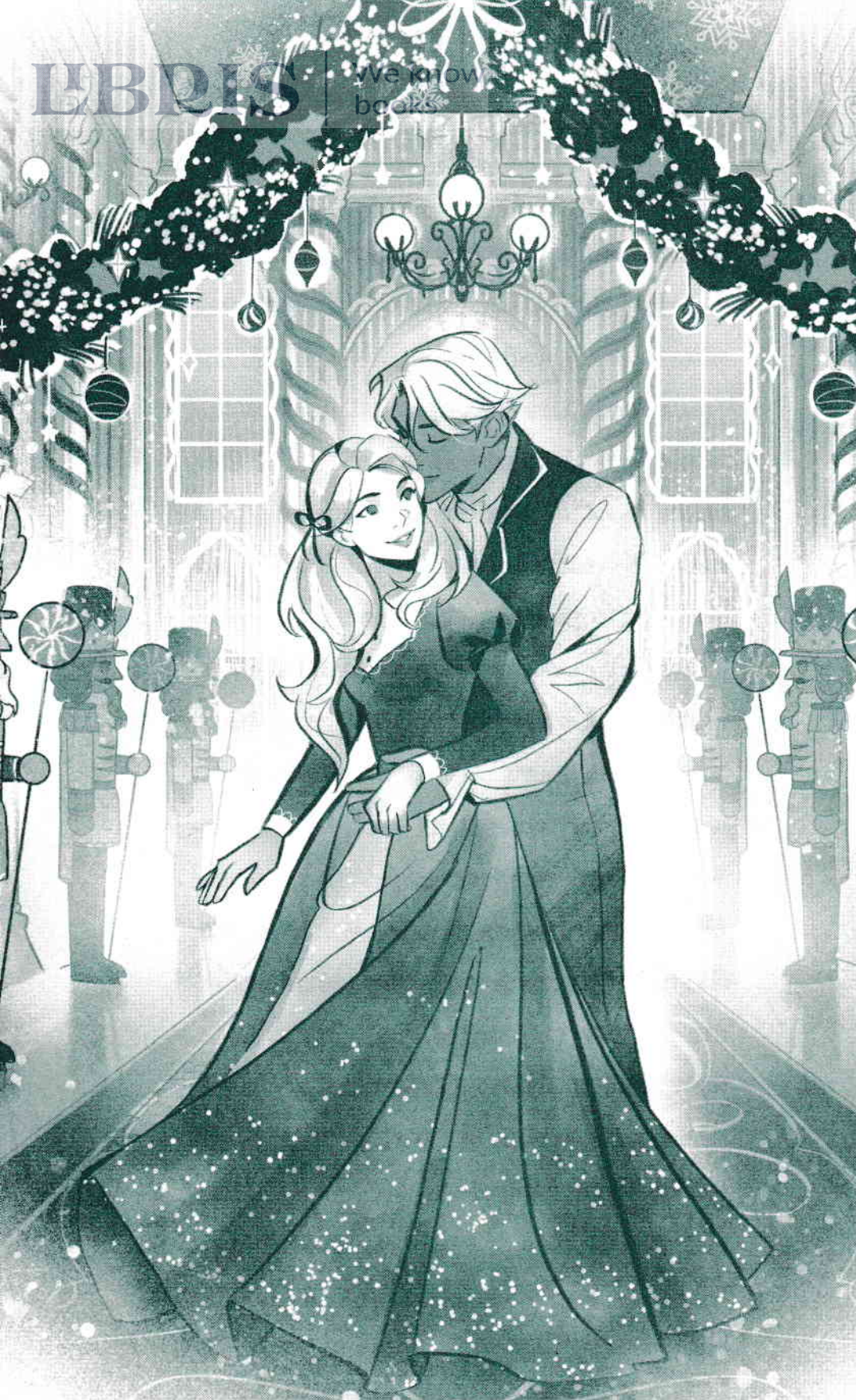


to melt. The gold-trimmed ceiling showcased a perfect wintry sky, painted with stars and snowflakes.

The hearth burned bright, its flames matching the warm pink glow of strange sconces that lit the room. One of them was shaped like a boar and matched the handle of Blythe's old bedroom from when she'd first arrived at the palace, betrothed to a man she despised. The memory had her smiling as she draped another bough of holly over its tusks, her heels clicking a familiar echo across the marble floors. Withdrawing several paces to admire her work, Blythe startled when she backed into a firm chest. Strong arms slipped around her, embracing her from behind, and Blythe relaxed into the warmth of the familiar touch. Into a comfort that she wished she could bottle up and carry with her forever.

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“You’ve outdone yourself,” Aris noted, pulling her closer. She folded into him, tipping her head to the side as he bent to kiss it. Her eyes fluttered shut as he peppered kisses down her neck, and she squealed when he ended one of them with a gentle nip.

“It’s not too much?” she asked, forced to finally take stock of her hard work. It was, admittedly, very green. But that was nothing some well-placed ornaments couldn’t fix.

“Nothing you do will ever be too much.” His lips curled devilishly as they sank down to her bodice.

“Liar.” Blythe snorted, slipping her fingers into his blond locks to keep him close. It’d been only four months since her husband had returned to her, and Blythe was still familiarizing herself with this new body of his—broader chested and a few inches taller

than his previous form. His jawline was squarer and more pronounced, his skin a shade darker, and while the changes were just enough to feel jarring, there was enough about Aris that had felt familiar from the moment she'd laid eyes on him. One look and she'd known that the missing piece of her soul had finally made its way home to her.

His eyes were the same, as were the deftness of his clever hands and the way that light always seemed to pull toward him. There were a few *other* differences as well, though certainly none that Blythe could complain about. In fact, she'd probably be continuing to familiarize herself with those differences now, if not for the fact that it was just days before Christmas and their family was in town to celebrate.

Family who did not seem to understand when to make themselves scarce.



“At least there will be no mistaking which holiday we’re celebrating,” Sylas noted from behind, announcing his arrival with a gentle clearing of his throat. Aris groaned against Blythe’s skin, begrudgingly peeling himself away, though he kept one arm slung around her hips.

“A bell, brother,” Aris declared. “I shall secure a bell to that cowl of yours before Christmas is through, I swear it.”

“I would love to see you try.” The cowl in question slipped from his figure alongside his shadows, revealing Death’s human form. Sylas was dressed in a dapper black suit with polished boots, and his bone-white hair was tied at the nape of his neck. The only bit of skin he showed was from the collar up, his hands obscured in leather gloves to prevent any unintended harm from his lethal touch.

Taunting seemed to be one of the reaper’s

favorite pastimes, and he sported a grin reminiscent of Blythe's father's whenever he had a particularly favorable hand at cards. Sylas crossed the foyer to stand beside his brother, head tipped back to admire the boughs of holly.

He arched a brow at her. "Are you feeling particularly festive this year, dear sister?"

Blythe shot the reaper a sour look, feeling foolish that she'd ever allowed herself to fear this ridiculous man. It'd taken her several months to breathe easy around Sylas after first meeting him, but now, years later, he was a comfort. A strange and curious man with an odd sense of playfulness she rather enjoyed in a brother. It was a nice change of pace, especially considering that the last one had tried to kill her. Twice.

"I'm no fool," she told him. "Our collective luck does not tend to hold up well on



Christmas. We need every bit of good fortune we can get if we're to make it through the holidays unscathed."

"It's only another day," Sylas told her. "You will find no better or worse luck because of it."

Perhaps, but history had Blythe unwilling to take that risk. Upon Aris's return, the two had made the decision to move Wisteria Gardens, which had drawn too much attention to remain safe where it was. They had finally decided on a new town—one right on the outskirts of Brude, a city Blythe had fallen in love with and whose very bones reminded her of falling in love with Aris. And with Elijah fully aware of the truths of his family and what they were, either Sylas or Aris could retrieve him from anywhere for a visit. Now Blythe had her father, a new brother, her dearest cousin, and the love of her life. And with them all, she was determined to make their very

first Christmas together as a true family positively perfect. Or else someone would pay.

For years she'd awaited this moment, remembering the single Christmas that she and Aris had spent together as a pair. It was during the holidays that she'd first realized she loved him. It was then that they had slept together for the first time. For twenty-seven years after that, Blythe's bed had remained cold and her heart was left aching. But this year, all would be perfect. They deserved that much.

He deserved that much, and she didn't want anyone to take this from them.

And speaking of Aris... Blythe disentangled herself from her husband's grasp, voice lowering as she approached Syllas. "How is that *thing* I asked for your help with?" she asked, choosing her words carefully. She could practically feel Aris's curiosity festering.



“I intend to take care of the present very soon,” Sylas offered with a smug grin that he turned decidedly toward Aris. “It’s quite a good one.”

“A present?” Aris echoed. Blythe hadn’t expected her husband to look so affronted. “But I don’t need anything.”

“You are my husband and this is to be our first Christmas together where neither of us is dead or dying,” Blythe said with the utmost sternness. “It’s a cause for celebration, Aris. Of *course* I’m going to get you something.” And for good measure she added, “Sylas has been instructed not to give you so much as a hint, so don’t even try.”

“I’m very good at keeping my word,” Sylas announced proudly, hands folded behind his back. “And secrets, for the most part. Tell me what you got for Blythe and I’ll keep yours, too.”